

“The Long Meander to Tales of My Own”

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Today affords two kinds of pleasure: a return to native ground for me and a most gratifying reception of my novel. That little book has had more than its share of welcome here in the United States, and in Great Britain too. Let me be churlish nonetheless, beginning with a private bit of spite, just so I work it the rest of the way out of my system.

Here's my bewilderment, not to say my gripe, and I promise to brighten up after registering it: the farther from Texas the book has gotten, the warmer have been the reviews it's received. Pretty good in St. Louis, excellent in Chicago, really outstanding in New York and Philadelphia and Boston. In London and Edinburgh they positively sang my praises.

So if the pattern holds good, I may expect critics to rave their heads off in Amritsar and Mandalay, Kuala Lumpur and Djakarta, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands—wherever is as far from home as my book can get without leaving the planet. I've had to wonder at this inverse effect, although I'm certainly not the first writer to experience it. "Who first recognizes a good one?" Robert Frost asked. "Not his home town. Because it's very hard in the village, when the village idiot gets started." Village idiots, village know-it-alls, village complainers, village explainers—who needs them? But books-editor Larry Swindell graciously consented to have this village explainer back, and on a grand occasion, and I deeply thank you and your colleagues at the *Star-Telegram* for such splendid hospitalities.

Most writers of poetry and fiction will tell you that what they need most for their art is what they learned early and indelibly in the momentous, often unmerciful years of childhood and youth. To have survived these, says the great writer Flannery O'Connor, is to have material enough to last you the rest of your writing life.

Here's the chief difference between artists and that other writing tribe—journalists, bringers of the news of the day. What a poet or novelist brings must last longer, else what he brings is not art. Journalism strains for a look forward in order to guess what may happen next, have the scoop first, whereas poetry and fiction circle back on everything that is primordial and buried and unavowed. Journalism is about what's up, what's new, literature about what's irremediable. Journalism tends to the novelties, literature to the eternities.

None of which is to disparage the daily news. I live by it as if it were my bread, reading papers on- and off-line, listening afternoons to NPR and some nights to the BBC, watching a good bit of broadcast journalism too. When I've tried, even briefly, to live without the news, tried to encase myself in a creative dream, I've grown dull and dry. It would seem that we need each other; it would seem that this commerce between artist and journalist is never-ending. Faced off and bowing—formally, suspiciously—old enemies and friends, fixed as if in a frieze: thus I see us.

Coming home to Fort Worth, I ruminate with particular gratitude on the primary education I received here, which was at a marvelous school, Westcliff Elementary. I truly do wonder sometimes if I've learned as much since leaving there as ever I did under the sternly magnificent tuition of Mmes. Packston, Bassinger, Pinson, Pyburn, Kirk and Westbrook. Bless them all. These utterly dedicated educators—for without exception they were—opened my eyes on a world of wider and wider circumference. I learned who Johannes Kepler was, and who was Michael Faraday. Mrs. Canafex, in charge of music, introduced us to Haydn's “Surprise

Symphony,” Mussorgsky's “Night on Bald Mountain,” Dvorak's “Symphony from the New World,” Debussy's “Girl with the Flaxen Hair,” Stravinsky's “Petrushka,” Copland's “Appalachian Spring.”

What a school that was! We put on Spoon River Anthology as a playlet. I was assigned the following sepulchral words to speak—and speak them I manfully did, on stage and in front of parents: “I am Anne Rutledge who sleeps beneath these weeds, beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln, wedded to him, not through union, but through separation. Bloom forever, O Republic, from the dust of my bosom!” For weeks beforehand I lay in bed, eyes out on stalks, wondering how I'd get through it.

We were introduced to poems by Walt Whitman—“O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” songs of mourning for the noblest of presidents. And then suddenly we were introduced to history, the real thing, atrocious and insensate, when on a brilliant autumn day another president was done to death.

Under the guidance of Mrs. Everett, our art teacher, we discovered pictures, or pictures of pictures, really—Fra Filippo Lippi's “Annunciation” (which I came upon unexpectedly recently at the National Gallery in London and greeted as an old friend, unseen for decades), Vermeer's “Lady with the Red Hat,” Millet's “Gleaners,” Van Gogh's “Sunflowers,” Thomas Moran's “Grand Canyon of the Colorado,” Grant Wood's “American Gothic.”

What I didn't know for a few more years was that a genuine masterpiece—on a par with any of the famous works I'd seen in reproduction—resided in a Fort Worth art museum. The fame of Thomas Eakins' “The Swimming Hole” is now of course universal, along with the story of how it has been recently saved for Fort Worth by the generosity of certain of its residents and, in particular, the *Star-Telegram*. I'm so glad it's still here, nice as it would look among the acres of other Eakinses at Philadelphia. I like to think of some awestruck Fort Worth youth of the next century, or better yet the one after that, staring long at the picture and coming under the spell, as I did, of the sublime Philadelphian.

In the summer between sixth and seventh grades, at a boys' camp on the shores of Lake Mendota, near Madison, Wisconsin, I took a valedictory piece of advice that Mrs. Westbrook, our sixth-grade teacher, a personage utterly beyond praise, had given us upon graduation from Westcliff. She seemed to me already in the Arctic of old age, maybe even past 45. I heeded her good counsel—I read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Thunder, lightning, revelation! Thelma Westbrook had set my feet on the path of the journey, the long, long meander that has brought me belatedly to tales of my own, a novel to tell.

Work on a novel goes like this. You start with something akin to an image. In my case, with *Tales Out of School*, it was of a woman washing another woman—out of doors, as it seemed, and by moonlight. To find the full meaning of the image, to discover what lay all around it in every direction, was my task. To tell the story or stories of which that image silently spoke to me, as the first glimmer, followed to the end, leads every novelist down “the long road of things unguessed-at and unforeseeable,” as Willa Cather put it. And you really are frightfully on your own, and must go the whole way on your instincts and your nerves, as if trusting to a knowledge in your feet to get you home on a dark night.

Later on, in secondary school and at college and university, I would see how others had greatly accomplished the thing. Melville in *Moby-Dick*, James in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Wharton in *The House of Mirth*, Cather in *My Antonia*, Dreiser in *An American Tragedy*, Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, Ellison in *Invisible Man*, Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie*

March, and so on. Such are the models an American aspirant comes to. But ever and always, for me, Twain's masterpiece has precedence. There is a time in the early reading life of every writer-to-be when the wax is softest. Huck came my way just then, at the moment of optimal receptivity, prepared by steadfast, valiant, stouthearted ladies. And what happened is what happened—I became a novelist.