

Love is Not Enough

by Richard Peck

AS YOU WILL have noticed all by yourselves, life is a bad novel. I learned that I'd be coming to the ALA Annual Conference this year when I was in the third lock of the Panama Canal. The ship was a great white ocean liner which had embarked from South America on the day Noriega surrendered and was bound for Costa Rica.

On a hot January day, I was having lunch on the Lido Deck with the Canal Zone moving slowly past, a landscape of bougainvillea and gun barrels, when I was paged to the radio room. It was a wavery call from Roger Sutton in Chicago, and behind him a committee in chorus. I heard news from another world, as welcome as it was surprising.

You may well ask what business I had in the third lock of the Panama Canal. Or, for that matter, why I was spending the winter adrift among tropical ports. It would more befit the stations in life of Stephen King or Danielle Steel, though not of course in the same accommodations.

But I was working my passage. I am the ship's lecturer. I'd already delivered an address called, "Blood-soaked Panama, from Balboa to Noriega," and history was fast overtaking my speech notes. You mightn't think ships need lecturers, but they seem to. As a result, I'm the only member of the Greek Seamen's Union in this entire room.

Writers are, after all, at sea most of the time one way or another anyway. Besides, I once found a novel on board that ship. Its title is *Those*

Summer Girls I Never Met, and it's about grandmother power.

On a ship, the peer group isn't a tight pack of teenagers in status sneakers flashing drug gold and gang signs. It's a flying wedge of grandparents, with their own clothes and music, their own language and symbolism. These members of AARP are strangely like the inmates of a high school. They move in a group and demand to be recognized as individuals. They're restless all morning, waiting for lunch. You have to tell them everything three times, and then they swear they never heard it (though in their case it's often true).

But I got a novel from among them, in which two teenagers who didn't even want to go on the cruise find that it's a voyage of discovery as they come to know their grandparents as human beings.

That seemed a theme worth exploring for a generation who no longer even had to write thank-you notes for gifts from grandparents, and so they rob themselves of their own roots.

Books and voyages are both little lifetimes, with beginnings, middles, and ends. They even call the place where the voyage begins "a berth." And voyages and books are both communities.

In fact, a ship is nothing but a small town with everybody's nose in everybody else's business. When I received my first-ever radio telephone call, I found out just how small a town a ship is. I might point out that this was the Christmas holiday cruise, and so quite a few librarians were aboard—librarians who had married wisely and well. It wasn't an hour after the phone call before I was accosted in an elevator by a California librarian. "I've just heard your news," she said. "You've won the Newbery."

I did what anyone would do in this circumstance. I gazed at the floor and

said, "Well, it was a long time coming."

"You can say that again," the California librarian replied. "I thought you should have had it for *A Day No Pigs Would Die!*"

And so I thank you for this award. No good deed goes unpunished, and I have been. And I've learned nothing. Before the summer is over, I'll have run away to sea again.

A novel is a community, more tightly knit than the community where the reader lives, and fortunately I came from one. It was a town called Decatur, Illinois, and I can't prove that I could have been a writer from any other place. It was a town at the exact midpoint between Mark Twain's Hannibal and the Indianapolis of Booth Tarkington. It was Twain who invented boyhood—and Tarkington who discovered adolescence, because he wrote a novel called *Alice Adams*, about a girl who went to a party when it would have been so much safer to stay at home.

I came from a whole community. It wasn't a suburb, and so even a child could see money earned as well as money spent. It wasn't inner city, and so the government didn't give checks to children for having children. It was a town in a time when teenagers were considered guilty until proven innocent, which is fair enough.

Decatur was that place on the map where the puritan ethic had gone to die. There we worked "for the night is coming," which isn't a bad plan for a writer. Every time you set foot outdoors in Decatur, your reputation was on the line. That makes a writer, too, because a novel is gossip trying to pass as art.

It was in that town that my mother read to me before I could read for myself. She gave me what is now called "pre-reading experience," except I actually got it.

I doubt if she was trying to make of

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me a published writer. She was trying to get me ready for first grade. And so she sent me off to elementary school with a vocabulary I can't find in the letters high-school students send me now. She read *Alice in Wonderland* to me. I might not have remembered that, except that my aunt came into the room that afternoon and said, "What are you reading to him?"

And my mother said, "I wish I knew."

That made a reader out of me right there. I thought my mother knew everything, but in books there were even greater depths to plumb. I was a convert. And luckily for me, because nobody but a reader ever became a writer.

I grew up, a reader, in a town where the library was a house of books. It wasn't a high-tech, low-impact, information-retrieval gridlock system. On those library shelves was Mark Twain—there when I needed to know that a novel could speak in the voices I heard around me in my town, that a novel could look at the world through the eyes of the young.

From Mark Twain we learn the Sacred Secret, to write in love and anger. Love for the world and anger at a world made wrong, at the callowness of the young before us and of the young we were. Anger at the recalcitrance of the English language, whose words don't drop from heaven to pattern the page as non-writers think they do.

Loving the young is not enough, as we see from the bitter experience of their parents. Never to hold the young responsible for the consequences of their actions because they are only victims: of capitalist society or the welfare state or (more cautiously) victims of each other. This will not make a writer.

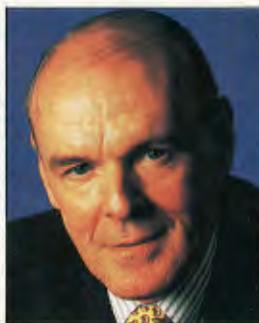
We have an ugly American habit of forgiving those we cannot control. When we learn that the young are more racially bigoted than their own parents, when we learn that the young don't believe they can become pregnant or drug-addicted unless they want to, the parent goes looking for scapegoats, but the writer is moved to write.

I wrote a novel in love and anger, and I found it not far from here, though I might have found it anywhere. I came across it at New Trier High School in Winnetka, some years after that very school had declined to hire me as an English teacher. There at the end of the opulent parking lot was a novel.

It's about the adolescent peer group now that they have the authori-

ty that once rested with teachers and parents. It's about the greatest quest of adolescence, the search for a power source, to give your life a shape, to do your thinking for you. It's the story of a girl who believes her mother is never right and that the girl who commands her peer group at school is never wrong. A tragedy, of course, called *Princess Ashley*. It's a novel on the theme I most believe in, my recurring theme. Since no reviewer has ever discovered what that theme is, I will tell you: that you will never begin to grow up until you declare your independence from your peers. All novels of serious intent incite to rebellion, and this is mine.

It came of being a teacher, and I



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was a teacher as long as I could be. There at the front of the room I noticed that nobody ever grows up in a group. People grow up one at a time (if at all) like a girl named Blossom Culp. It was as a teacher that I grew skeptical of people in groups, whether in the classroom or the faculty meeting. That works for a writer because a novel is a celebration of the individual.

Offering books as gifts to the literate minority of the young—as writers, as librarians—is a high calling. But it's uphill work, and they are deaf to most of our entreaties. We tremble for our mortality and savor every day; they drive drunk because they cannot die. We believe practice makes perfect; they've been getting grades on rough drafts. We believe you ought to make long plans and aim high; most of them would prefer a car to a high-school education and have proved it. We want to live in the widest worlds possible; they've been told by their own schools that foreign language is an elective!

Lucky for them we writers and librarians came along. Lucky for them there's a field of books optimistically called "Young Adult" to point out that the function of fiction is to prepare for life, not to avoid it.

Lucky for me to be here to thank you for the award you've conferred on my books. Writers love irony and have been known to overwork it. And here is another irony: an award from librarians comes from the very people who should be receiving an award because librarians are the official representatives of writers, living and dead. Librarians are a writer's best hope for reaching a generation of readers who do not read reviews and who go to schools where they cannot win letter sweaters for literacy. I wish the world beyond these walls knew that librarians and writers are colleagues with our hopes in tandem and our fates entwined, and with our backs to the same wall while the

American school system persists in handing out high-school diplomas to graduates who cannot read them.

Nor can our publishers save us, though my publisher, George Nicholson, gave me my start. He accepted the first line of fiction I ever wrote, and he's accepted every young adult book since. But for George Nicholson, I wouldn't be with you now. But for him, I'd still have tenure somewhere.

But the next best thing to tenure is a good agent, and so I'm grateful to Sheldon Fogelman.

We are united in this room as publishers and agents, librarians and parents and writers, by the same motive: to put the right books in the right hands and then hope for the best—books that depend on the good will and the hard work of librarians, who may just be the only adults on call in many young lives.

Writers write in all the voices we can find, except our own. We strain to hear young voices inaudible to their own parents, voices they fear to raise within the hearing of their powerful peers. And so I conclude in the voice of a young reader:

I read because one life isn't enough, and in the pages of a book I can be anybody.

I read because the words that build the story become mine, to build my life.

I read not for happy endings but for new beginnings; I'm just beginning myself, and I wouldn't mind a map.

I read because I have friends who don't and young though they are, they're beginning to run out of material.

I read because every journey begins at the library, and it's time for me to start packing.

I read because one of these days I'm going to get out of this town, and I'm going to go everywhere and meet everybody—and I want to be ready. □