

A Literary Ragbag



Mary Reed & Eric Mayer

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A collection of personal essays for Poisoned Pen WebCon 2009

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Eric's Essays



A Spell Cast By Willows

*F*or years I've named Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind In The Willows* as my favorite book. My grandmother read to me the adventures of Ratty, Mole, Badger, and Toad and I remember those evenings spent sitting and listening beside the rocking chair in her living room as my introduction to the enchantment of the written word. Our circle of orange lamplight and the shadowy Victorian furniture beyond would dissolve into the Wild Wood or Badger's warren and my grandmother's voice might have been the sound of the River by which the animals lived. But while I recalled clearly the spell cast by the words, I recalled very little of the words themselves.

So I decided to read the story again -- or rather to read it for myself for the first time -- a perilous undertaking after nearly 45 years. I was not disappointed. My grandmother's comforting voice has been stilled for twenty years and her cozy living room long-since remodeled by strangers. But Grahame's words still held the magic that had touched me so long ago.

There are the gorgeous descriptions of river, fields, and woods in all their changing aspects throughout the seasons, creating a vivid, irresistible world. And of course the appealing characters, all save for some nefarious denizens of the Wild Wood, as friendly and caring a group as any child could wish, but with enough quirks and peccadilloes, from Badger's anti-social tendencies to Toad's manic irresponsibility, to appear real, hardly a bunch of boring do-gooders.

Then too, the book is mostly about home, the thing best known and most important to a child. Ratty and Mole and the rest are always safe in some lovingly described home, or going home on a cold night, or thinking about being at home in their own warm beds. Which is probably why it is so horrifying when Toad arrives back from his adventures to find Toad Hall occupied by weasels and stoats.

This is one of many harrowing scenes. Losing one's home, or being lost in the dark woods on a cold night as happens to Mole, or having one's freedom taken, a fate suffered by Toad when he is thrown in prison for stealing a motorcar, are not trivial matters. The fears they stir are deep, so *The Wind In The Willows* makes for exciting reading.

Grahame's world is not only filled with real danger, but with mystery. The Wild Woods and the far off Wide World both harbor things unknown. In one chapter Mole and Ratty encounter the god Pan, who strikes the memory from

their minds. As children, like Grahame's animals, we readily accept our strange and contradictory state, creatures seeking mundane physical comforts, some cozy den, in a limitless universe full of mysteries and wonders beyond our comprehension. But as we grow older we too often take the comforts for granted and forget that the wonders exist. I think it might be Grahame's mingling of domesticity and awe that makes *The Wind In The Willows* a classic. Then again, trying to explain the book like that makes me wonder if I haven't just caught some of Mr. Toad's overwhelming conceit.

Originally written for Kaubisch Memorial Public Library, Fostoria, Ohio for Children's Book Week display, November 12 to 18, 2000.

Fear of Plagiarism and Falling Bodies

While we're writing our mysteries, Mary and I occasionally look over our shoulders. There's always that niggling fear that someone else has already conceived the same book we're working on and will get it into print first. If we see a review that hints that another author has already used a device or situation similar to what we're working on, we cringe.

Once a writer puts an idea into circulation, it doesn't matter whether another has come up with the same thought independently. The second writer might escape being charged with plagiarism, but the idea is no longer original as far as readers (and editors and agents and publishers) are concerned.

As co-novelists, we've never been preempted. In my case, though, I largely gave up much of the humorous writing I used to do for sf fanzines for fear of being labeled a copycat.

Actually, in the beginning, thirty years ago, I was a copycat, but not many readers would've realized. When I discovered Robert Benchley in the dusty stacks of the local library, I couldn't resist trying out a lot of his comic devices. I figured it was permissible because Benchley allowed how he'd copied everything from Stephen Leacock and James Thurber admitted he'd stolen everything from Benchley. I was just carrying on the tradition. Besides, most of what those humorists wrote has been relegated to the stacks.

Unfortunately, before I started to sell anything anywhere, Dave Barry came along. I don't know if he's ever confessed to it, but Barry has lifted a good portion of his schtick straight from Benchley. (Or maybe Leacock or Thurber) I soon decided if I continued to write my usual essays I'd be dismissed as a Dave Barry wannabe.

Before I quit, I did sell a Benchleyesque essay to a small magazine called *Modern Secretary*. Oddly enough, the piece was about fear of being hit by a meteorite. Or perhaps it wasn't so odd. For all I know fear of meteorites is endemic amongst modern secretaries, particularly since they no longer have steno pads to cover their heads with. I have to admit I have never actually asked a modern secretary whether she fears falling debris from outer space. It isn't generally the kind of thing that comes up in conversation. Some people might even find it a peculiar sort of question and I must admit when I think about getting a hard look from a modern secretary it makes me want to think about being flattened by a meteorite instead.

One thing that will probably not strike you as odd (if I may use the term "strike" here) is that *after* the essay was published I found that Benchley had actually written an essay about fear of meteorites.

Footnote: I should probably add in the interest of scientific accuracy that what we are likely to be hit by are "meteors." The large, deadly, fearsome rock is properly termed a "meteoroid" while outside the atmosphere, where it poses no threat. Only when it reaches the surface of the earth does it become a "meteorite" by which time we would be under it. Or what is left of us would be. There would probably be little enough left that the "meteorite" could be said to have reached "the surface of the earth" scientifically speaking. Presumably, it is the flaming "meteor" streaking through the atmosphere which would smash into us. Not that it would matter at that point. I don't know what the scientific term would be for the brief moment when the blazing boulder is in contact with our surface but has not yet reached the ground. "Ouch" isn't Latin.

Footnote to the footnote: Some may quibble about the importance of nomenclature but I want to point out that "Look out for the meteorite" and "look out for the meteor" require somewhat different reactions. A limited vocabulary can sometimes put you at the bottom of a crater.

Addendum: Now I'm beginning to wonder if the reason Mary and I occasionally look over our shoulders while we write isn't so much fear of what other writers are up to, as, well...

Kings of Terror

What's the scariest thing you can imagine? That's the question Fitz-James O'Brien examined in his short story, "What Was It? A Mystery."

I read the story when I was a child and I've recalled it ever since with a shudder of fondness. It was included in a collection of ghost stories I found on the bottom shelf of a bookcase in an obscure corner of the local library. I retain a lingering impression of an unnaturally thick, worn volume, a dark cover of some sort, but the title will not come into focus. Venturing into those pages, I encountered such classics as "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" by M. R. James and "The Beckoning Fair One" by Oliver Onions.

It was the Fitz-James O'Brien tale that made the biggest impression on me thanks to the question which was posed to the protagonist by a friend: "What do you consider to be the greatest element of Terror?"

There seems to be no easy answer:

"The question, I own, puzzled me. That many things were terrible, I knew. Stumbling over a corpse in the dark; beholding, as I once did, a woman floating down a deep and rapid river, with wildly lifted arms, and awful, upturned face, uttering, as she sank, shrieks that rent one's heart, while we, the spectators, stood frozen at a window which overhung the river at a height of sixty feet, unable to make the slightest effort to save her, but dumbly watching her last supreme agony and her disappearance. A shattered wreck, with no life visible, encountered floating listlessly on the ocean, is a terrible object, for it suggests a huge terror, the proportions of which are veiled. But it now struck me for the first time that there must be one great and ruling embodiment of fear, a King of Terrors to which all others must succumb. What might it be? To what train of circumstances would it owe its existence?"

Although the conversation offers several other possibilities, such as disembodied voices, subsequent events reveal a better (or should I say "worse"?) answer, albeit not perhaps satisfactory. At least not to me.

The most interesting questions are the unanswerable ones. My friends and I participated in any number of debates about the King of Terrors, usually in dark places as night fell. We hunkered down by the bushes at the end of the lawn just out of reach of the porch light or huddled with a feeble flashlight in a tent as far from a house as possible. There was the summer we built a lean-to

out of some discarded doors and boards we found at the edge of the patch of woods by the field beyond our backyards. That was the best place to discuss terror.

From the lean-to we could see the bent and gnarled birch we liked to pretend was haunted. There was a mossy mound at the base of the tree. A grave obviously. As twilight deepened the white birch seemed to grow brighter as the surrounding vegetation faded into blackness, until finally it swam in our vision, an indistinct, luminous shape. If you squinted and blinked, the apparition moved, appeared, almost to be drifting forward, no longer a tree but a cold exhalation from beyond.

Some nights our discussions of fear did not last very long and by the time we had reached the safety of a back porch we were too winded to talk any more.

When we were not interrupted by the malevolent spirit of an Indian, entombed for some reason beneath the roots of a birch tree in the suburbs, we couldn't reach any consensus on the nature of terror. No doubt because terror is mostly in the mind of the beholder.

My friend Jack reckoned that it would be especially terrible to be chopped to pieces by a maniac or skinned alive. I countered that physical torment, bad as it was, could not compete with the horror of a phantom -- something that chopped to pieces and skinned alive our very concept of reality. What scared me most was the sort of "wrongness" H.P. Lovecraft was always going on about. "Well," Jack riposted, "how about being chewed up, alive, in the mandibles of a giant ant. That would be painful and horribly, horribly wrong too."

He was partly right. My heart starts racing when I see a stinging insect. I keep a can of bug spray on the shelf in the office, just in case. But it is not the physical stinging that scares me. I'm not allergic, and having stepped on honey bees in the grass and brushed against yellow jackets at the picnic table I know the pain is minor. What horrifies me is the insect itself. The appearance, and sound, and even the movement of a wasp is disturbingly inhuman. It is less the sting that frightens me than the contact with that dreadful "otherness."

The "other" is unknown, and unknowable to us, trapped as we are in our own perceptions of the world. My worst nightmares usually involved the unknown. I vividly recall the dream in which I climbed the precipitous, worn stairs to the second floor of the barn behind the house. Sitting in the lean-to, gazing into the weird shadows created by the flashlight and the irregular corners, I told Jack about the dream for probably the twentieth time.

"It was dim up there. I could hardly see. The floorboard creaked under my feet as I walked toward a big pile of boxes near the back of the barn. Suddenly I sensed...something. Somehow I knew there was something behind those boxes. Something....waiting for me....something...horrible...!" Now that was real terror. To emphasize my intellectual point I made a scary face and held the flashlight under my chin.

It isn't that physical trauma is not horrifying in its own way. I don't even like the sight of needles. But existential terrors are, to my mind, more fundamental. As I become older I tend to believe that terror related to the

supernatural is nothing more than a metaphysical draught from the abyss of oblivion which surrounds our brief lives.

Jack refused to see my side of horror though. He allowed that something could be pretty spooky. "But I'll bet if you could see a ghost or have your head chopped off you'd pick the ghost."

I reckoned that might be so, but only because I'd be afraid of having to join the ghost in the great unknown, after my head came off.

We never came to an agreement and unlike the characters in the Fitz-James O'Brien story, we never had any revelations. At some point the discussion always got around to whether ghosts could bite and how hard, if you'd get infected with ectoplasm, and whether ghosts with razor teeth would be more or less frightening than less substantial phantoms that might tap you on the shoulder when you least expected it.

At the appropriate moment, when we had been scaring each other for long enough, someone would, without warning, turn off the flashlight. That wasn't the King of Terrors, but something like it.

It Wasn't the Cat

*A*t Halloween I always recall my childhood brush with the supernatural. My parents had taken my grandmother to visit relatives and so my grandfather had been left in charge of my younger brother and me, not to mention my grandmother's very fat black cat.

My brother and I were fed easily enough. My grandfather carted us down cellar, opened the furnace door and we roasted hot dogs over the coals while conjecturing cheerfully about what might be lurking in the dark coal bin, behind the boxes of earth where the dahlia roots were buried for winter.

The cat was another matter. After futilely calling, my grandfather shoved an opened tin of Puss N' Boots under a kitchen chair.

"The cat must have got out. If he shows up he can eat." He preferred looking after his tomato plants. He always knew where to find them.

"Maybe something eat kitty," piped up my brother.

The expression on my grandfather's face became, as my grandmother would've said, "sour as pig swill."

"What would do that, here?"

"Don't know...something," said my brother, giving the final word a certain alarming twist.

My grandfather did not lack imagination. In later years, after he'd cleared the pigs and rabbits out of the barn and had some spare time in the evening, he'd often don his spectacles and launch himself into a book of flying instructions which, while not as current as they had been during the bi-plane era, were every bit as adventuresome.

No, what he was against was the febrile wool gathering that during his boyhood had been a prime cause of tuberculosis in obscure romantic poets. When he saw us threatened he nipped it quick as he'd pick a cut worm off a cabbage.

"My razor strap will something you," is how he put it.

My brother chose not to pursue his theory. The razor strap wasn't as mind-bendingly awful as what might be lurking in the coal bin, but it stung worse.

"Kitty just out," he agreed.

I suppose I was somewhat responsible for my brother's flights of imagination. Being five years older I felt I should take some part in his

education. I decided to teach him useful words. A selection of everyday items would be laid out on the table in front of us.

"Scissors," I'd explain, pointing. "Apple ... orange ... banana ... bandanna (I was a tough taskmaster) ... amorphous horror."

My brother cast a bewildered look at the empty air I pointed toward.

"Can't see."

"Exactly," I said, giving the word a certain alarming twist.

My grandfather marched us upstairs early. The unfamiliar bed was high. More than high enough for something to have slithered underneath. But before we could check, the light was switched off and the room plunged into darkness.

As with all children, we spent our last moments of wakefulness waiting for sudden shrieks, eerie glows, disembodied voices and things that dropped off the ceiling smack into the middle of your bed. I generally slept with the covers pulled up over my head, snorkeling air through one partially exposed nostril, fingers clutched at the bed sheet in case something tried to pull it off.

In the strange dark of my grandparent's spare room our sensations were heightened. For awhile we listened for telltale scratching from beneath the bed. It struck me that this was a good time for a favorite diversion - recounting recent nightmares.

It's been a long time since I've had a nightmare worth remembering. My dreams have grown gray and mundane. But when I was younger my nights were filled with killer robots, werewolves and skull littered plains stretching endlessly into the distance beyond my closet door. This evening I plunged into the "barn dream."

"It was dark," I began. "When I climbed the stairs I suddenly felt another presence. Something waiting. Something indescribably horrible. Waiting for me...behind the boxes piled in the corner."

My brother's face floated in the dark before me like a gibbous moon. His eyes were round with fear. It took few words to call forth that consciousness of inexplicable horror shared by the young and submerged later in life beneath the paltry annoyances of reality.

When I paused the room filled with a terrible quiet. There was a sudden rush of breath from my brother's side and then, from somewhere all too near, there came a distinct, hideously loud THUMP.

When he spoke, my brother's voice was heavy with resignation. "There it is."

"And it isn't the cat."

For a few seconds we both contemplated this mind numbing truth in mute terror. Then my brother regained his voice.

"A morpus horror!" he cried. We both started shrieking.

My grandfather came upstairs and cleared the air with his razor strap. Next morning the cat was nowhere to be seen, but the cat food had been eaten.

I'm glad I didn't see what ate it.

The View From Weehawken

For a few months, while I was going to law school, I lived in Weehawken, New Jersey, on Boulevard East, down in the cut where the highway begins its descent toward the Lincoln Tunnel into Manhattan.

If you walked up the Boulevard, out of the exhaust fumes, to the top of the hill, you could make your way onto a street that ran behind, but far above, where my apartment sat. It would have been possible to reach the street by pulling yourself over the retaining wall and crawling up the steep earthen bank behind the apartment, but then you would have had to cross someone's backyard.

The houses up on the ridge had spacious backyards, not to mention swimming pools and tennis courts. From up there you could see the whole sweep of the Manhattan skyline, if you could afford it.

The street came to a dead end, a turnaround where the macadam dissolved into gravel. Beyond, a footpath led through weeds and trees. It's not the sort of thing you see in the city -- a path leading into the woods.

It didn't have far to go. A few steps and I emerged into a clearing, a flat rock half covered with moss and grass, edged by spindly saplings. The adventurous, or foolhardy, could have proceeded further, down to a bare rock outcropping, but the view from where I stood was startling enough for me.

I was at the end of a spur. Below, on one side, sunlight glared off the small, distant roofs of vehicles crowding silently toward the tunnel. On the other, across the water, rose the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

The scene must have been an illusion because I was in a forest clearing. Around me were only trees and space. The rock underfoot, reflecting the heat of the sun, created a pool of warm air, smelling of earth and dry grass. Insects darted and glistened in the sunlight. It was not a spot from which you should be able to see a great city.

I wonder if that untamed bit of land still survives?

Taxi! Taxi!

I caught a taxi into town in order to empty our post office box. The fact that there's a taxi service out here that will ferry me on the ten-mile round trip should make it a bit easier to be snowed in for weeks on end.

The last time I took a taxi was the last time I was in New York City sixteen years ago. During the time I lived in the city, when I was going to school in the late seventies, I rarely used taxis. Subway fares matched my budget better. I did, however, learn how to flag down a ride if I really needed one.

My most recent visit to New York only lasted a few hours. A magazine aimed at high school English students for which I'd done some freelance work sent me to interview Nicole St. John, the author of numerous young adult books. While Jane Yolen and Jeannie Moos had been happy to do phone interviews, Ms. St. John stood on her right to be interviewed in person, during high tea at the Helmsley Palace.

Needless to say, the train from Rochester pulled into Penn Station late. Now I am not normally a very assertive sort of person, but it is amazing what a whiff of those heady Manhattan exhaust fumes will do. It all came back to me. I strode out of the station, barged straight through the tourists who were milling timidly on the sidewalk, stepped into the street, grabbed the side mirror of the first Yellow Cab I saw and wrestled it to the curb, more or less.

The cabbie obliging made an illegal U-turn against eight lanes of onrushing traffic and delivered me to the gilded Palace dining room in plenty of time to juggle tape recorder, pen, notebook and tiny cucumber sandwiches while being served by waiters dressed like the flying monkeys from the Wizard of Oz.

I thought about all that as I waited for the cab down by the road and watched a big red rooster peck at the frozen gravel a foot from where I stood.

Fit to be Tied

*W*ith the holidays are approaching, I can't help but think about neckties. They are among the most traditional and thoughtless of gifts, a step up from socks perhaps.

Mary gave me a necktie one year. To be fair, it was not just any necktie. It was an English school tie, reminiscent of the school ties the Kinks are pictured wearing on their 1970's album "Schoolboys in Disgrace." It was, I believe, from a school in the area of northern England where Mary had grown up.

There was sentiment behind that particular necktie. It is probably the only tie (does anyone actually refer them as neckties?) for which I have ever had any use. In general, ties strike me as a waste. Why spend a lot on a tie? Who needs an expensive mustard catcher?

I don't wear ties these days. Whenever I wore one there was something unpleasant going on. They evoke memories of the boredom of suffering through interminable Sunday sermons, the horror of facing the unforgiving camera for school photographs, the misery of dragging myself to the office.

On a few occasions, while still in school, I varied my neckwear. I wore turtleneck shirts and a medallion on a chain. Ties weren't my thing but neither were medallions. Mine seemed to have been forged of iron. It was so heavy I walked hunched over. Bummer!

I tried a bow tie. The Kinks' Ray Davies wears a bow tie on the cover of the "Everybody's In Showbiz" album. The bow tie didn't work for me. I was going for the rock star look but what I got was Orville Redenbacher.

Yes, about the only things I know about fashion was what I saw on old album covers. I've read that ties originated as a fashion statement. They were a mark of the leisure class, worn by upper crust folk who didn't have to worry that a useless bit of dangling cloth might get in the way of their work. To me, though, ties are an emblem of corporate servility. Every morning, getting ready for work, when I looped that cloth around my neck, I felt like I was putting on a noose.

Not long after I started the job I found a cardboard box full of ties at the thrift store. For \$4. It might have been a random selection but I liked to think it was someone's lifetime collection. It was a veritable history of neckwear. There were ties wide as bibs and narrow as ribbons. Stripes, checks, stars, paisley.

I imagined the ties reflected not just changing fashions but the changing

tastes of the owner. The loud ties of youth, the sober ones of middle age. Or perhaps it had been the other way around.

Those were all the ties I ever needed. For more than a decade, every morning I simply picked one of the ties from that box and headed to the office adequately uniformed. I wasn't particular. A tie is a tie is a tie. There was no rule against ties that were twenty years out of date or looked like the cat had thrown up on them. And considering how styles tend to go in cycles I must have been in style as often as I was behind, and on certain days I was probably a trend setter.

I'm not sure where those ties have got too. They might be in the attic. They would make a good nest for mice.

When I began to work at home I stopped putting on neckwear. I only wear a tie to funerals now. Other people's funerals. I will certainly not wear a tie to my own. Well, a school tie maybe.

The Horror Behind the Curtain

From time to time people wonder what Mary and I look like. At least I suppose that's why they occasionally ask why our photographs aren't on our home page or the back covers of our books.

Actually, there are a couple of photos reduced to postage stamp size lurking on the inside flaps of our book jackets. It's a good place for my mug shot, where it can't scare off potential buyers.

Before our first book appeared we were invited to send our publisher professional portraits for the back cover. Fortunately, we were able to talk them out of such folly. The idea of standing in front of a loaded camera strikes me as only marginally more enticing than facing a firing squad.

I'm not comfortable around cameras unless I can see the backs of them. I've always been that way. When I was a kid I dreaded the school picture day more than exams. Even now I get shaky when I remember standing in line, waiting to step behind the curtain where the monstrous machinery squatted in all its complexity and horror, designed for no other reason than to find, magnify, and expose to a mocking world my every imperfection.

As I sat on the wooden chair placed before the camera, the merciless glare from the floodlights made me feel I was ready to melt. Or maybe I was melting, like the Wicked Witch of the West, into a puddle which, mercifully, no one would want to photograph. No such luck. It was just the Brylcreem dripping down my temple. The smell of hair dressing in the super heated air was enough to make me choke.

But it was still not so stomach churning as the day the photographs arrived. There were various sizes. The tiny ones, which you were supposed to trade with your friends, were bad enough, and then there were the wallet sizes. Still, I could glance away from those without focusing on the details. The portrait size was another matter.

There was no escaping that. It smacked me right in the face with my face. My eyeglasses would be askew, one eye half shut, my attempt to "Say cheese" a paralytic rictus exposing a Jack-O-Lantern display of missing baby teeth and half

emerged adult ones. And the hair, despite its weight of goo, had stuck out in all directions, resembling a hedgehog that had run afoul of a tractor trailer. Just a bad hair day? My whole life has been a series of bad hair decades. And that billboard was installed on the living room mantelpiece where it could humiliate me every day.

Mary points out our jacket photos bear some resemblance to the old glamor shots of 1930s Hollywood stars -- the resemblance being that they're in black and white.

She suggests we might start doing books with an Egyptian theme which would give us an excuse to cover ourselves with mummy wrappings for our jacket photos. Maybe we could loosen the bandages enough for just one eye to show. Kind of the Veronica Lake meets Boris Karloff look.

I'm still hoping to banish my photograph from our books entirely. It's not that I'm shy, really. I display my face to the world all the time. The face I want to display, that is -- my writing.

Stringing Readers Along

I don't listen to music on the radio any more. The short snatches I've heard recently seem to consist of homogenized play lists of commercially successful songs (few of which appeal to me) interspersed with D.J.s straining to sound loud, frantic, and aggressive.

There was a time when I had the radio on a lot. I grew up carting plastic transistor radios around on summer days and with crackly car radios accompanying me everywhere. It was important that a stereo system include a good radio.

During the fifties and very early sixties I only liked novelty songs. My parents had record albums but what did Ray Conniff, Frank Sinatra, or Perry Como have to say to a kid? (Except, maybe, "get lost so the elders can be alone"?) Fortunately the radio stations displayed better taste than mom and dad, playing classics like Alley Oop, Purple People Eater, Little Space Girl, and the whole brilliant oeuvre of David Seville and the Chipmunks.

By the time I was in college my friends and I disdained AM radio, which is where popular music lived in that era, because the Top 40 never contained enough "good" music. In particular, radio lacked the Kinks who didn't have many American hits. How we reveled in those few weeks when Lola neared the top of the charts and "our" sound was heard in the land.

FM was where it was at in those days. I recall driving at night, headlights illuminating a winding two-lane back road, one hand on the wheel, the other on the tuner, turning the dial back and forth, trying to hold onto a distant FM station which kept threatening to drift out of range. More than once I pulled out of the depths of the night some weird, seemingly endless, psychedelic opus. The title, artist, and station were lost in the deep space radio noise that kept washing up over the music. I never heard those songs again. They might as well have been broadcasts from another world, received only on the tinny radio of the old Plymouth as it rumbled past black empty spaces that were fields, shadowy mountains of discarded coal ash, and dingy houses, one window in each filled with a television's wavering blue glow.

Long before that, when I was still into novelty songs, my friend Bobby and

I decided it would be fun to have our own radio station. We were sure our younger brothers would love to tune in to our station, if they knew what was good for them.

As I recall, the station's music library consisted of one badly scratched 45 rpm of See You Later Alligator by Bill Haley. For variety we also featured the Chipmunks' version -- the same record played at 78 rpm. The song is actually about a rough patch in a relationship. The singer sees his baby "walkin' with another man" and nearly loses his head, but it turns out to be a misunderstanding. We didn't give a 'gator's tail for any of that. All that interested us was what she says in the chorus:

"See you later alligator, after 'while, crocodile."

It sure was a catchy chorus, and suitably ridiculous.

"See you later alligator, after 'while, crocodile."

You can't listen to it just once!

Simply sitting beside the ancient record turntable and listening does not a radio station make. The magic of radio is that you can't see where the noise is coming from. Or so we reasoned. In order to create a realistic radio experience we took the turntable down into Bobby's basement which featured a window level with the lawn. Since we weren't planning a television station, the window interested us only because we could open it a crack. Then a couple of paper cups attached to either end of a long string extended outside made a transmitter with a broadcast radius of over twenty feet, sufficient to reach our audience at the base of the maple tree. We could have reached the back of the basement but unfortunately our show didn't have listeners in the oil furnace area.

This worked decently, but not well enough. Almost immediately we switched a more sophisticated broadcast technology -- an old garden hose. Once you put the hose up to your ear -- and shook the water out of your ear -- you could hear what was going on in the basement much more clearly. The depth of sound was superior to the cup and string, especially in the bass register. The equipment even added echo to music, rather advanced for the time.

The audience did have to trade the radio receiver back and forth. And it was necessary to clamp a hand over the ear that wasn't pressed against the nozzle so as to block out the sound coming naturally through the partially closed window and ruining the effect. But why would our audience need a free hand to enjoy hearing See You Later Alligator over and over? Our demographic was too young to drive, obviating any need to hold onto a steering wheel even if the broadcast had been available on a car radio, which it wasn't. The hose couldn't reach the driveway.

We did our best to vary our programming. Aside from playing Bill Haley's original and the Chipmunks' cover, we sometimes just set the needle down on the chorus. We also introduced both versions enthusiastically and at great length, and announced the name of our station:

"You're listening to WGTR. Proudly serving Bobby's back yard since 2 PM. WGTR. Your only choice for the best reptile tunes. We play the scales."

We also advertised the hand-drawn comics and lemonade which could be

purchased by our listeners at the end of the broadcasting day, unless they were yellow bellied sapsuckers who didn't want to play along.

I'm sure our little brothers remember the radio station as fondly as I do. Unfortunately we only went on the air once. Afterwards, whenever we moved the turntable to Bobby's basement our brothers never seemed to be around.

It's too bad our station didn't have much reach -- so far as we knew. But who can explain tricks of the atmosphere? I like to imagine that somewhere, some time, someone's driving along a dark road, randomly changing stations and there suddenly emerges, from the hiss and crackle:

See you later alligator, after 'while crocodile,
See you later alligator,
So long, that's all,
Goodbye.

Mary's Essays



Little Women

When strings of street lights sprang up in yellowish necklaces dotting along the busy roads and another sooty night began to fall upon Newcastle-on-Tyne, my sister and I would go up to our attic bedroom and draw curtains patterned with castles, ships, and jesters with curly-toed shoes to shut out a darkening urban landscape of slate-roofed dwellings marching down in regular lines to the river. Ungraced by gardens or trees or any growing thing except whatever took root in the cemetery at the top of our street or on bomb-sites left uncleared for years after the war, those long grey terraces of houses stretched away out of sight in all directions, sheltering the inhabitants of the northern English industrial city known proverbially for its coal, not to mention shipyards and factories that in those days rang with the noise of machinery around the clock.

As bed-time approached we'd read for a while before the light was put out -- and for a lot longer afterwards by torchlight under the covers. Books aplenty were available to us between the city's free libraries and Christmas or birthday gifts, for we always received a book to mark each occasion. So it was that at about 12 or 13 I discovered Louisa May Alcott's *LITTLE WOMEN*, and later on her other novels about the March sisters' adult lives.

One thing about *LITTLE WOMEN* was rather puzzling. Like us, they lived in financially straitened circumstances and yet had a servant, Hannah, who had been with them for years. As a daughter of the working class, this seemed very strange to me, the more so as my mother had been a parlour maid and the notion of us having a servant was so alien as to be unthinkable, despite the fact that I was always being told that I had too much imagination. One of my favourite scenes is Beth's reaction to the beautiful piano given to her by elderly Mr Laurence, for her expression upon seeing it must surely have been the same as that displayed by my musically gifted sister when our parents managed to get hold of a second-hand upright piano for her. This piano subsequently lived in our scullery next to the copper where the original tenants boiled up their washing, our street and those surrounding it having been built for industrial and pit workers when Queen Victoria still ruled. Graced with high ceilings, picture rails, and ornate iron fireplaces, they are now sold for fabulous sums as artisans' dwellings. When we lived there, there was still a working gas light in our

bedroom but the entire place was also extremely damp and the only plumbing was a cold tap in the scullery, the necessary offices being in the back yard -- about as far as you can get from the brown stone March house which, although old and a little shabby, had a garden with roses and vines and stood on a quiet street in the suburbs.

Yet as thousands of readers from numerous countries living in all sorts of housing have discovered, there is much emotional common ground with this delightful tale of a family's ups and downs and its tears and triumphs. I loved LITTLE WOMEN the first time I read it and every year or so I re-read it. The four March sisters -- gentle and ailing Beth, artistic but vain Amy, quiet, dependable Meg and the tomboy bookworm Jo -- have become old friends. We see them shepherded by Marmee while their father, too old to be drafted, serves as a chaplain in the Civil War. Then there's their dashing next door neighbour Laurie, his grandfather Mr Laurence, Laurie's tutor John Brooke, the girls' rich but demanding Aunt March with her huge library and disrespectful parrot, plus a bevy of supporting characters, most of them types familiar to us all. Time has made LITTLE WOMEN as familiar and comfortable as a favourite pair of slippers, while that strong sense of the March family's love and emotional support for each other remains as striking as the first time I opened the book and began reading.

It is Jo, generous and good hearted although hasty in her speech until she learns patience, who has always been my favourite of the four sisters. She is the only character with whom I have ever identified and as a youngster I firmly declared that like her I was going to be a writer and furthermore intended to live in a garret. In fact, I said it so many times that it became family legend, one of those humorous stories trotted out whenever we'd gather for celebrations, like the saga of when my brother-in-law lost me at a tender age in the London Tube system.

Now, years later, I live far away from Newcastle-on-Tyne. But I still have my battered old copy of LITTLE WOMEN and I did finally achieve that long-held ambition -- only I scriven in a basement rather than a garret!

Originally written for Kaubisch Memorial Public Library, Fostoria, Ohio for Children's Book Week display, November 12 to 18, 2000.

Beware of Theodora's Hair-Pin

What a wonderful sight it must have been when Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, made her grand entrance. Resplendent in embroidered gold tissue garments sewn with emeralds, diamonds, rubies, and other jewels, set off by a lavishly embroidered green velvet trailing train decorated with more gems in a lotus flower motif -- not to mention a golden crown encrusted with diamonds, festooned with pearls and accented with ostrich plumes -- in a word, or actually three, Zenobia eclipsed Theodora.

A daring move indeed, you may be saying, especially considering new arrivals at Justinian's court were doubtless discreetly advised that it would be unwise for them to (reversing metaphors) outshine the imperial couple -- and especially Theodora, a woman of peppery temperament to say the least. Indeed, Zenobia might have lived long enough to regret her display of expensive finery, but fortunately the outfit just described was in fact donned by the Duchess of Devonshire to merely play the part of Zenobia, and that only for one night.

For the duchess was hostess of a costumed ball held at Devonshire House in London on 2nd July 1897. It's fair to say that her gathering of the creme de la creme of society was one that would have competed on an equal footing with any jamboree organised at the Constantinople court -- while being much less nerve-racking for its gilded guests.

One of several hundred blue-blooded attendees at the ball was Winston's mother, Lady Randolph Churchill, née Jennie Jerome (born in Amity Street, New York, next down from Congress Street where Eric lived while attending college). Lady Jennie decided to go as Theodora and her costume was accordingly based upon the Ravenna mosaic portrait of the empress. Thus her beautifully sewn garments were just as heavily embroidered, lavishly ornamented, and equally uncomfortable to wear. Photos of Lady Jennie as Theodora are among numerous images of the costumed guests, including the redoubtable Duchess of Devonshire herself, forming part of the Lafayette Negative Collection in London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

In an aside, the museum website also provides a detailed description of the

plot of Victorien Sardou's elaborate play THEODORA, which debuted in Paris in 1884 with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. Scenes are set in and under the Hippodrome as well as at Justinian's court and mystery aficionados will be interested to hear that the play features a novel murder weapon, Theodora's golden hair-pin. Having used the hair-pin to stab a man to death, she tells Justinian she did it because the man had insulted her -- not the real reason at all, needless to say.

Returning to our mutttons (as Sardou's fellow countrymen so colourfully say) I must confess that upon reading The Times' detailed description of some of the costumes I found myself wondering why the Duchess of Sutherland attended the event as Charlotte Corday, assassin of Jean-Paul Marat. Hers was a modest get-up indeed, consisting of a plain red gown and a muslin cap adorned with a tricolour rosette.

On a woo woo note, The Times reported that supper for the glittering throng was served in a huge garden tent hung with Louis XIV tapestries depicting Roman scenes. While particulars of these scenes are unfortunately not given, doubtless they were easy to see by the newfangled electric lights attached to garlands of flowers festooned around the tent walls. The gardens, through which guests strolled until the early hours of the following morning, were also illuminated, ensuring none of the distinguished revellers ran the risk of falling into a decorative garden pond -- unlike the barbaric Sir Thomas in ONE FOR SORROW.

Woolly Thinking

When we were children 8'o-clock was set in stone as the time when we had to hit our sacks. It's true that by special parental dispensation we were allowed to stay up "late" some nights to listen to the Goon Show or Journey Into Space, but by 10 past 8 most evenings my sister and I were tucked up in our bunk-bedded snugery in the attic.

Needless to say, we'd read by torchlight for at least an hour after retiring, secure in the knowledge that even if one of our parents came tippy-toeing up the long staircase that hugged three walls on its journey from the landing below, the loud creakings of its Victorian era wooden steps would warn us of their approach in good time to conceal books and torches under the covers.

However, a much more sinister type of approaching steps were heard once a week most weeks, since they were often featured in one of our favourite BBC radio programmes.

Presented under the title Appointment With Fear, the series featured half-hour plays introduced by the suitably sepulchral and sinister tones of Valentine Dyall, *The Man In Black*. In memory at least these dramas were replete with menacing footsteps tapping slowly along dark alleys and exceedingly strange noises at ungodly hours -- often emanating from fictional attics, I may add, which made the shadows in the corners of our sloping-roofed bedroom seem *much* more interesting after these plays ended. Between the best efforts of the BBC Sound Effects Department and the vivid imagination of the young, we could almost see the thick, swirling fog pressing close to the windows of some isolated mansion, muffling all sounds except the grandfather clock in the hall as it began its whirring run-up to striking the twelve chimes of midnight and the supposedly locked study door began to squeak open...

However, it wasn't until I looked up the programme that I learnt plays for the series were mostly originals written by John Dickson Carr, with a sprinkling of reworkings of classic tales by Stevenson, Poe, and other luminaries of weirder fiction, including (of course) an adaptation of *The Monkey's Paw*.

The format of Appointment With Fear involved Dyall's Voice of Doom book-ending each play as well as providing occasional mid-drama links. By modern day standards the stories were not that ghastly and whereas our mother always claimed eating cheese sandwiches before bed-time caused nightmares --

although I for one did not find it so -- this wonderful drama series did cause a problem of a related kind in that after having had our latest Appointments With Fear neither my sister nor myself wanted the job of turning off the light.

The difficulty arose because the light switch was (naturally enough) next to the door, on the far side of which stood the old, mesh-fronted radio. The door was several paces away from our bunk. Who knew what might be lurking with evil intent behind the wardrobe between the door and our side of the room, or for that matter under the lower bunk? Which, I may add, was my berth.

Well, with a bit of ingenuity we came up with a solution. The light switch was of a type long discontinued, consisting a short, protruding stub terminating in a tiny knob. In the UK, dowsing a light involves switching up rather than down. So we obtained an appropriate length of wool, tied it tightly under the head of the switch knob, and then ran it from there up over the top of the aforementioned wardrobe, down to the bunk, and so into our grubby grasp.

The following week, once the play had concluded, I switched off the radio, got back into bed, and gave our semi-automatic light-switcher-offer a good, hearty tug.

Unfortunately the wool broke.

Childhood sometimes inflicts sad disappointments.

Looking back, it now occurs to me that a piece of string would have been a better choice for the task, but for some reason that never occurred to us. We continued to listen to the plays and then have whispered arguments about who should get the dreaded task of turning radio and light off. As oldest, it usually fell to me, and groping my way back, it struck me more than once how long it takes to cross even a familiar room when your eyes have not adjusted to the dark and there might be something nasty waiting...

In a touch of irony the programme's producers would surely appreciate there was a presentation in a later series called A Day At The Dentist. Now *there* is a play whose sound effects I shudder to contemplate -- let alone its plot line.

Never a Doll Moment

*A*s a devotee of Golden Age and locked room detections, I enjoyed Mary Roberts Rinehart's *When A Man Marries*, a blending of both. As I related in a review over on Mystery File, as the plot unspools one of several young folk who suddenly find themselves sequestered in a large house because the butler has just been stricken with smallpox wagers a large sum they'll all escape from quarantine within 24 hours.

I got a particular kick from this novel I once spent some time in quarantine. However, unlike WAMM no mouthwatering food hampers from upscale emporiums were delivered to our door and we had no officer of the law locked in our furnace room, largely because we had no furnace. The lumps of honest working class nutty slack fueling our kitchen fire lived in the coal hole under the stairs going down from scullery door to back yard. As for food, we ate our usual fare, heavy on carbohydrates and washed down with highly sweetened and villainously strong tea. Except for my younger sister, who had scarlet fever and could scarcely manage soft nourishment such as jelly or blancmange.

My durance vile, then, was necessary under health regulations vis a vis precautions against the spread of infectious diseases.

Philippa Pearce's 1958 classic YA novel *Tom's Midnight Garden* may be the only such work whose launching point is directly related to these requirements, for Tom is packed off to stay with an aunt and uncle because his brother is suffering from measles. In our case, however, my sister had come down with something much worse. Commonly described as strep throat with a rash, it's more than that. It can be fatal and in some cases lead to rheumatic fever or kidney damage but neither of us knew that at the time. I'd forgotten that in *Little Women*, Jo and Meg March both recovered from bouts with it but when Beth caught it she never recovered full health and it contributed to her death at a young age. Then too my sister's illness also occurred some years before I read *Frankenstein*, in which Victor Frankenstein's mother dies from scarlet fever caught from Victor's cousin Elizabeth.

Thus it was that my sibling, flushed and feverish and with the tell-tale

"strawberry" tongue and bumpy rash, had to be sent off to the local isolation hospital. She was carried downstairs, looking very small and frail on a stretcher somehow maneuvered around the narrow L at the top of our steep stairs and under the shelf halfway down the flight where our gas meter resided. After she was trundled away in the big white ambulance, disinfection of various items and boiling of bed linen and such got under way. Officially quarantined, I remained off school but at home for three or four days, allowing time for the illness to put in its second appearance at our house if it was going to do so.

But the thing of it was I didn't want my sister to be alone at the isolation hospital. Parents were not allowed to go on the wards and could only look at their ailing children through a corridor window. Patients' siblings of course were not even allowed to set foot on the premises. How then to accomplish the plan?

My mother had warned me that under no circumstances was I to utilise the crockery and cutlery set aside for my sister's use...so naturally when alone I did just that, hoping to fall ill and be hauled off to isolation as well. Just to make certain I had also washed after my sister, using the same water and borrowing her towel. But it was no go. My immune system must have been working on time and a half, as I never caught scarlet fever although it was certainly not for lack of trying.

Before my sister was whisked away with luggage consisting only of toothbrush, slippers, nighty, and dressing gown I gave her one of my dolls to take with her. Alas, another thing we didn't know was the iron-clad rule that when such cherished possessions were taken into the isolation hospital they never came back out. Thankfully my sister got better and came home in due course -- but I'm still annoyed about that doll.

The Sands of Tyne

*I*t was a rite of summer. Sunny Sundays invariably saw an exodus from the city, as the railway carried load after load of families, older members laden down with baskets and towels, younger fry frisking at the leash, away, away, away to the windy shore of the North Sea. It was time for a trip to the seaside! To Tynemouth, perhaps, or Whitley Bay, or North Shields. Which would it be?

Fortunately for us impatient youngsters, preparations were quickly made. Mum packed a shopping bag with meat-paste sandwiches, bread slices cut thick from yesterday's loaf. There would be apples, green and crisp, which she ate with a spoon. There might be biscuits hidden below her handbag, and bags of crisps with their individual blue paper twists of salt, and, lastly, a huge thermos of tea, well-sweetened and milked. Ordinary fare, to be sure, but the food of the gods after the long walk down from the Victorian railway station, taking us past rows of boarding houses with their neat little gardens and mercurial signs flashing VACANCY or NO VACANCY. We tumbled by, the smell of the sea already in our nostrils, scorning the fairground we passed on the way, with its rides and stalls and lounging ne'er-do-wells. It was the beach which called us.

And what delight it gave! There, seaweed made a slippery carpet on limpet-encrusted rocks around dark pools of water trapped along the shoreline, microcosms of the ocean. Small, dark crabs lurked boulder-like in them, the occasional rippling fronds of a sea-urchin dancing lightly in the current. Round, raspberry-like sea creatures lurked in sinister clusterings near the waterline. Were they really the bloodsucking mutant jellyfish with which we scared each other? Taking no chances, we paddled in pools scoured clean of marine life each time the tide turned.

But the adults were less squeamish about jellyfish, more coy about clothing. Men rolled up their trouser legs to the daring height of mid-calf, slung their jackets over their arms and entered the surf for a paddle. Even dad, who was rarely seen without a tie and immaculately polished shoes, got his feet wet. We children, in scratchy woolen bathing-suits, rushed in and out of the water, frolicking loudly. We had donned our waterwear by modestly contorting winter-

pale bodies behind towels held up around us by tightly permed and corseted mothers and aunts. Later, these female relatives would brave the briny themselves, holding frou-frou petticoats above their knees, Kiss-Me-Quick hats perched at a jaunty angle on back-combed hair stiff with hairspray. The salty wind cutting in from the horizon to give us goose pimples had come "all the way from Roosha", our parents commented, downing another cup of hot, sweet tea and munching on sand-gritty sandwiches.

But what cared we? There were sand-castles to be built, intricate fortifications topped by a piece of grey driftwood, waiting to be captured on black and white deckle-edged photographs for the family album. The fortification's underground network of tunnels carved haphazardly in the wet sand were a constant snare for unwary beach cricket players. Caves which were under water at high tide had to be explored, as we scared each other half to death with tales of kids perishing in kicking agony, trapped by the raging tide.

Along the railed promenade, deckchair men sold tickets for renting wood and canvas loungers, which invariably took ten minutes of wrestling to get ready for use, with much muttering under the breath as renters grappled with the Escher-like pieces of furniture. We just sat on a blanket, if we could be dragged out of the water.

Meanwhile, a brass band played gamely on, melancholy and slow, over the sound of crashing waves, mewling seagulls, and music from the fairgrounds, blended with hoarse shouts from sideshow men and the screams of teenagers splashing each other with sea-water. And over it all lay that distinctive seaside aroma, a tantalizing mixture of salt air, frying chips, drying seaweed, and occasional dead fish temporarily overlooked by the swooping seagulls.

If we were lucky, we might be treated to those delights available only at the coast. There might be paper cones of snail-like "whellecks", winkled out from their shells with a free pin. Or candyfloss, cloudy and white, sweet on the tongue for a few moments and then gone as quickly as summer was speeding by. There were long ropes of licorice, and hard-crust ed toffee apples whose flat tops defied our teeth even as the apple juice ran down our wrists. And when we had eaten, we scavenged along the shore-line, booty popped into our sand buckets. There might be a weathered piece of bleached and knotty driftwood, or waxy yellow, brown or white shells which had survived the grind of the surf. Long strands of brown-olive seaweed were collected, pulled from piles deposited against rocks, for when hung outside the back door, the seaweed's wetness or dryness, so it was said, accurately predicted the weather.

And so the afternoon rolled by, as our city-pale skins were burnt scarlet by sun and salt. We played until the setting sun's liquid gold path made a bridge from horizon to shore. Then, because it was Monday the next day and that meant work and school, it was time to pack up the towels and the thermos, the shells and the seaweed, and go home. As stars twinkled and winked over the restless sea and strings of coloured lights popped on along the promenade and in the fairground, we toiled back up the street to the railway station, our shoes uncomfortable with sand. On the return journey, half asleep, we children looked

out at the backs of houses as we travelled by, clackety-clack, clackety-clack, clackety-clack, all along the shining rails to Newcastle, nodding, dozing, dreaming.

Commodus Von Trapp

Remember the days when you didn't go out to the mall to see a film at a multiplex -- and hear half of what was going on in the next screening while you were at it? Those days when -- if you lived in England, at least -- you'd sit on the edge of a shabby plush (but somehow prickly) fold-up seat in the local fleapit, craning your neck this way and that to see around the heads of the people sitting in front? When the interval between Pearl & Dean's string of crackly ads for local businesses and the main feature heralded the arrival of the lady with the discreetly lit tray of ice-cream and the subsequent dash along your row, falling over patrons' feet and knocking coats off the backs of seats in a mad rush to get the last orange-flavoured ice lolly? When you kept scrapbooks made from brown paper and filled them with three-colour studio portraits of the stars, snipped from weekly film fan magazines and glued in with flour and water paste?

The recent announcement that *Gladiator* has been nominated for twelve Oscars reminded me of those days, or actually nights, when we went to the pictures every Friday and/or Saturday, depending on how much pocket money we had left after buying licorice whips, gobstoppers, and packets of Spangles. It was at one of those local cinemas, small but with suitably baroque architecture, that I first saw the retelling of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Alec Guinness played a grave Marcus Aurelius and Christopher Plummer a rather sinister but well-spoken Commodus and whereas Rome was proverbially not built in a day, the Empire managed to crumble around statuesque Sophia Loren in the space of a mere three hours. Not that we noticed its extraordinary length, for we sat enthralled, overlooking even the usual jumps and changes in depth of colour as the reels changed, not to mention that irritating occasional patch of light that spilled over the screen as patrons entered or exited through the main doors at the rear, behind the not-quite-tall-enough curtain hanging on a brass rail running along behind the back row of seating.

Every evening's presentation ended with the playing of the national anthem, during which the audience stood -- or at least those who had not rushed out as the credits began to roll so they could catch their last bus home or start the brisk walk back through cold, smoky night air or perhaps just to avoid having to stand there feeling like a lemon as most of the audience slunk off through the

exit before the anthem was even half done.

We all went to the pictures at least once a week, no matter what the film happened to be. The fact that they arrived locally years after they premiered was neither here nor there. If they showed it, we would come. At least, if we could get in. Occasionally there was a problem when the film had been rated A by the Board of Censors, whose certificate prefaced all films. The sight of a hand-written title set within their florid printed declaration that the film in question had been judged suitable for a particular audience, as sometimes shows up when old films are presented on late night TV, must bring nostalgic tears to eyes that originally saw the same certificate in a cinematic setting.

There were three rating categories: U (Universal, considered suitable for all audiences), A (Adult, judged too mature for children) and X (reserved for horror films). However, younger persons were admitted to view an A film if they were accompanied by an adult and so we guttersnipes would hang about in the foyer asking "Will you take us in, missus?" should we arrive to find that the poster for the feature of the week displayed the dreaded, if not scarlet, A. Thus many a courting couple began a romantic evening by agreeing to escort three or four children -- unknown to them or for that matter to each other -- into the cinema. Needless to say, the ticket-seller in her glass-fronted mini-fortress turned the proverbial blind eye when the "offspring" peeled off into the lower floor and their temporary parents went upstairs to the balcony, a favourite haunt of amorous duos. Well, after all, it was a bit more private and certainly less expensive than that other popular destination for the working class weekend date, the Palais de Dance, recalled so nostalgically in the Kinks' Come Dancing.

However, the Saturday morning matinees for children were a different business entirely. With most of the audience stamping their feet, whistling, cheering, and booing and (I regret to say) occasionally running up and down the aisles, these screenings were much more raucous and lively affairs. They were attended by very few adults -- and that was just as well considering that most of the boys perched in the balcony so they could lob small missiles of various sorts over its edge (scrunched up bits of paper were particularly popular) in the hopes of hitting one of the girls sitting far below. Not that they entirely got away with it, as there was a fair amount of hair-pulling when the matinee was over and it was a wise boy who got away quickly as soon as the house lights came up after our weekly ration of a newsreel, a cartoon or two, and the next episode in the serial. It was fortunate indeed that a snack I hear was on sale in later years at the Bensham, another cinema we patronised, was not available in those days. One shudders to think what those wretched lads would have got up to with helpings of soup.

Our much-loved picture houses were not exactly from the Grand Electric Kinematic Palace mould. If you've seen *The Smallest Show On Earth*, you'll have a good idea of the sort of cinema we went to, although I will admit that I never encountered a ticket-seller quite as eccentric as Margaret Rutherford's character. Even so, imagine my surprised delight when I recently stumbled over a photograph of the Coatsworth, a particular favourite when we lived in

Gateshead, displayed in the council's local history page.

Looking at that familiar soot-stained facade again after so long, I could almost hear the shouts of "See you at the flicks!" as we rushed down the back lane after school, anxious to gulp down our tea and get going. We could hardly wait. It was Friday and that meant a new film was showing! Even the Academy Awards just don't seem to generate the same sort of excitement and perhaps we're all the poorer for it.

Changing a Bathroom Washer

When Eric declared he needed a crowbar we realised that changing a bathroom washer was not going to be an easy task. And it didn't help that we had only two hammers and a pair of semi-stripped screwdrivers to do the job.

Lest readers think that employing a hammer to repair a tap is somewhat excessive, I should reveal that the item in question was, in fact, a washing machine and our problem (apart from the fact it had conked out and could not be repaired) was that it was too wide to get out the bathroom door.

The laundry machine in question was a twenty or so years old Harvest Gold behemoth, and it was obvious that to get it in there the bathroom door and part of the wall had had to be removed. Not being builders, we decided it would be simpler to dismantle the washer in situ and haul it out piece-meal rather than start tearing down walls.

I was reminded of Bernard Cribbins' comical song about Fred and a pair of his friends struggling to move something not actually specified, although it was definitely very large and from its described encrustations has always struck me as likely being of Victorian vintage. Anyhow, they have such a terrible time of it that at one point Charlie, one of Fred's helpers, suggests taking off the thing's handles and candle-holders and then using a couple of ropes to accomplish the job. To no avail.

We thought we'd come up with an inventive solution, even without the cups of tea Fred and company endlessly imbibed while considering their difficulties. However, when we began to dismantle the washer we discovered they sure made them to last in those days. It took an hour with hammers and screwdrivers before we managed to remove the back portion holding the timer and other controls along with the top containing the lid and the front panel. Getting the latter off revealed that the drum was attached to yards of wiring and piping and switches and such, to free it from which took a fair amount of labour.

The drum was by far the washer's heaviest part and therefore caused the most trouble, because being held in place by its own weight and four huge springs that could have launched a 747 did they form a catapulting device, it was a terrible struggle to get the quartet of metal coils sufficiently out of shape to unhook the drum. But with minimal bloodshed we managed to pull it off,

turned the washer on its side, and triumphantly rolled the drum out of the bathroom.

This left a somewhat dented metal cube to be extracted from the bathroom. We tried the getting-a-couch-around-a-door-post manoeuvre, but the frame was just an inch or two too wide no matter how we angled it.

Inspiration struck! If we could somehow make one side narrower we could get the frame out using that particular side as the leading edge. But how to do that, you may well ask. Well, we reasoned, since the bar bracing the side panels runs from corner to corner across the front, if it could be hammered into a v-shape -- the front panel itself having already been removed as mentioned -- this in turn would pull the side panels in towards each other and thus narrow their width just enough to be able to get the wretched thing out through the currently impassable doorway.

So it turned out to be.

It was when we brought the new apartment-sized washer home that we discovered although we had carefully measured the width of the bathroom door we had completely overlooked extra inches added when the washer was packed and boxed. So we could not get it in through the front door. However, since a passing kindly downpour was steadily reducing the cardboard packaging back to its original pulp, we eventually wrassled it inside, soggy but triumphant. The washer cleared the bathroom doorway with an inch to spare -- and it didn't need any encouraging taps with a hammer to help it along either.

Just in case you're wondering, Fred and his colleagues also tried taking the mysterious item's feet and seat off, but that didn't help either. Neither did removing the door, walls, *and* ceiling so in the end whatever it was was left on the landing.

Bit of a Mystery

*T*he winds of fortune brought the two of us to Pennsylvania, but they couldn't dispel the heavy fog that morning.

We'd not long arrived in the state and after several days of rain we awoke to the sort of really thick fog from which patrons of horror films would expect a mummy to suddenly lurch through the French windows, intent on strangling those who desecrated its tomb with its spicy-scented bandages, assuming its parchment-skinned hands were not up to the task.

A quick glance outside revealed that much was concealed by the thick, coiled miasma draping the landscape with swirling wedding veils of white silk. When we went out for our morning walk, we found ourselves in an eerie world, one where sounds were muffled and the light had a strange quality to it. As we ambled along the narrow road up to the ridge overlooking the valley, what little could be seen faded from view as we moved forward in a world of clinging mist. If we glanced back, the tall grass verges and trees marking field boundaries soon disappeared behind a pale wall of vapour, and looking ahead we found ourselves advancing into a curtain of white that seemed to move with us, as if it was subtly shepherding us along the stony road.

We walked onwards and upwards. Numerous spider webs, little parachutes in the wet grass or decorating vines hanging in garlands from telephone lines, were heavy with droplets. Oddly suggestive rustlings came from the undergrowth along both sides of us, where tangles of blackberry bushes grew and rabbits could be counted by the dozen towards sunset most evenings. It was as if something was pacing us. A fox? We'd once seen one cutting through a half-mown field. Perhaps it was a bobcat on its way back to its den, possibly the handsome specimen seen crossing the track up there one time.

We finally reached the crest, where the oil-and-chipped road poises to take a breath before plunging dizzily down towards civilization. In better weather we could have observed six or seven mountains playing footsie with each other on the other side of the valley, but that morning we could hardly see into the nearest field. We stood for a while listening as the clammy quiet thought about

departing. Birds began to tune up for their morning concert and somewhere close by a crow with a sore throat started to engage in his usual morning croaking duel with his rival across the way. We looked a little longer into milky nothingness, and then turned back along the foggy way, leaving the hidden heights to honeysuckle and dark aisles of firs and whatever creatures were moving in them. Our little pocket of visibility moved with us. We never reached the barrier of fog hanging across the road ahead, no matter how far we walked towards it.

The philosophical will, no doubt, find this odd effect a perfect metaphor for life.

Forecasts for the Forecastle

One childhood night truly dreadful weather blew in over Newcastle. Curtains of sleet lashed the city, rattling icy rain against windows and scratching impatient claws down steep slate roofs. It was teatime, and my younger sister and I were eating boiled eggs as we listened to the measured tones of the BBC radio announcer -- snug and safe in a London studio a couple of hundred miles south -- reading the nightly weather forecast for ships at sea.

"...Rockall, Irish Sea, Shannon, southeast backing northwest 4 or 5, occasionally 6...."

We grew up hearing these five minute forecasts every night when we turned on the wireless to listen to the six o'clock news. Thus whereas a recital of names and terms would be merely a list, to listeners such as us and countless others they mean much more than that. They are part of our personal history.

"...Gale warnings have been issued for Dover, Wight, and Portland...."

The nightly litany passed on to Fastnet, whose lighthouse was the last sight of old Ireland emigrants could look back to see before facing the Atlantic gales between them and their new lives, and Cromarty, bringing to mind Scottish witches who made a good living selling favourable winds to herring fishers and gullible sailors, not to mention Lundy, famous as a haven for pirates although only a scrap of an island off the Devonshire coast.

There was Trafalgar, site of Horatio Nelson's great victory against the combined might of the Spanish and French fleets, and Plymouth, where it's said Francis Drake insisted on finishing his game of bowls before going out to engage the Spanish Armada. Defeated, its remnants were to founder in terrible storms around our rocky coasts.

Next, the far northern Faeroes, famous for puffins, Fair Isle, called the peaceful island by Scandinavian mariners who put in to shelter there when the sea was running too high, and by way of contrast, Viking, calling to mind less friendly seafarers whose long-ago raids left linguistic traces in our local dialect and what has been claimed as the highest percentage of red hair in the nation.

Biscay is mentioned, far to the south although closer to us in time and one

of many marine graveyards during World War II, when shipping forecasts were suspended and the international brotherhood of the sea fell apart for six years although the gales didn't stop raging. Closer to home, the familiar rivers Humber and Thames, who bear their sons and daughters away to their fates across the high seas as lightly as their names trip off the tongue.

All the names identifying particular patches of the sea were a familiar and generally unremarked-upon part of our everyday routine. But sometimes the forecast became a matter of personal interest, as on this particular night.

It caught our attention towards the end of the announcements.

"Gale warnings for Forth, Tyne, Dogger...."

We finished our boiled eggs hastily, thinking of the trawlers that put to sea from further down the Tyne. That river rolled by behind the Vickers-Armstrong factory at the bottom of our street, beyond where yellow haloed streetlights swayed sickeningly in the wind-whipped downpour scouring Scotswood Road. As we well knew, those scrubby little vessels carried local men, men who were broad and loud in their clunky boots and oversized knitted sweaters, and who when they went to work sailed away down the Tyne and out across the North Sea to the Dogger Bank's rich fishing grounds.

Given the grim forecast we'd just heard, it seemed very likely, to mangle Kipling, that the unfed sea would be calling that night. So as was our custom we turned our empty eggshells over and pierced their bases with the tips of our teaspoons. After all, didn't everyone know that witches sailed to sea in eggshell boats for the sole purpose of raising deadly storms? And on this terrible night of gales, surely fishermen and sailors and mariners of every nationality needed all the help they could get.

Lichens

*L*ike Charles Dickens' Scrooge, George Bailey was given a second chance in the holiday classic which declared "It's A Wonderful Life" from many television screens during the recent festive season. But the wintry scene where George is scrabbling at the snow concealing part of his brother's tombstone recalled to mind a visit to a small graveyard in a rural town last summer.

Like Bailey's hometown, Bedford Falls, it's a smallish town. The surrounding mountains looming green and dusty at the end of its streets are so heavily forested that in the dancing summer heat haze they look as if covered by dusty broccoli. At the bottom of the hill, there's a river, but it offered little relief on this particular roasting hot day. When we saw a small rural graveyard by the roadside, we took the chance to stop and walk around it. It was a good to get away from the brassy sunlight pouring down syrup-like on the narrow road crowded with impatient cars, and enjoy the dappled shade and strangely serene oasis of quiet on the other side of the sun-hot metal fence.

We ambled around the little cemetery, staying in the shade and skirting too-bright swatches of sunlight, stopping now and then to read names and dates on headstones. It was difficult to do so with most of them, however, for a century and a half of slow time had erased many of their details. A few more deeply chiseled decorations - a lamb, grieving willow-trees, clasped hands - were still distinguishable on more elaborate stones, though even so many were identifiable by touch rather than sight. A few tablets were legible, carrying loving farewells, Biblical verses, names and dates telling sad tales. One family, for example, lost all three children within two weeks of each other, leaving their father and mother to live for another half century or so before being laid to rest beside them.

But here and there, dark in the dappled sunlight, there were, leaning at odd angles, small irregular pieces of slate, only a hand-span or so wide. These grey markers were painstakingly scratched with angular initials and dates, but only occasionally a name, and all obviously made by amateur hands. They were memorials to the poor, and perhaps in keeping with the class distinctions of the nineteenth century, most of them were half hidden by sun dried grass in odd corners, or overshadowed by larger and more magnificent monuments.

Yet where those more ornate memorials had weathered beyond reading, the few details on the humble slices of slate were still largely legible. Their uneven scratchings were picked out carefully in yellow ochre paint, added perhaps, after all those years, by some local descendant. At least, that was my first thought. But closer inspection revealed that the colouring was, in fact, ancient growths of lichen following the lines of the scratches.

As we returned to the hot, narrow road, we thought more about the slate markers. Why was lichen flourishing on them and not on the more traditional headstones?

Eventually a rather curious meteorological explanation suggested itself. Lichens thrive in moisture and clean air and light, all abundant in rural graveyards such as the one we had recently walked in. They also prefer to grow on undisturbed sites. Since slate weathers extremely slowly as compared to the softer stones more conventionally used for headstones, this had perhaps allowed them to flourish on the humbler markers as opposed to the grander sort, even though the latter had more nooks and crannies providing footholds for their growth.

Thus it seems that, while the sun and wind and rain of almost two centuries had done their slow work, eroding the names and texts and decorations of the grander chiseled memorials into anonymity, that same weather had, more or less by accident, provided ideal conditions for lichen growth, thus preserving those few details scratched by grieving relatives on their home-made slate grave markers.

They Could Have Played Euphoniums

Occasionally I find myself wondering if those eternal motion machines that are the young ever pause long enough to contemplate the enjoyable sight of the lengthy vista of days -- nay, weeks -- stretching out before them when the summer holidays finally begin.

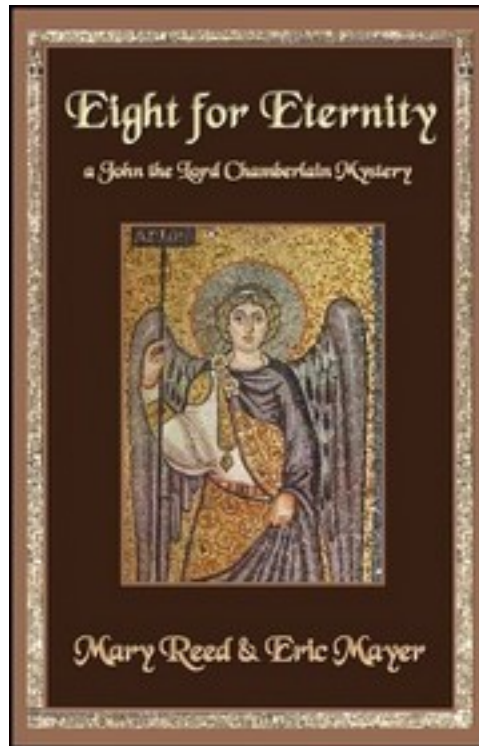
Why, the time rolling out ahead seemed endless to us when school was at last out, with those menacing back-to-school sales so far away at the other end of the summer as to be easily ignored -- and just as well since once they arrived we would have to get the number 4 bus into town to buy school supplies and new tennis shoes, which in turn meant the new term was not far off and thus soon it would be time to drag ourselves off to the grey Victorian building in which we laboured, to again wrestle with French verbs, toil over geometry exercises, and try to recall the names of all the Hanoverian rulers in the correct order -- all these tasks being carried in that strange chalk-and-old-books atmosphere that seemed to permeate every school in which I ever set foot.

Thinking on it now reminds me that my last school holiday was largely spent sprawled on my bed devouring cookers (cooking apples) so tart my teeth almost shrank from them as I chewed away while reading as many books as I could borrow from the library. It was a particularly hot summer that year and our fashionable sponge-skirted petticoats ensured that those of us who considered ourselves trendy suffered mightily for the privilege. But the unaccustomed heat -- for when it's above 72 degrees in England, it's inevitably described in the media as A Scorcher -- made my shady room, the pile of green, shiny-skinned cookers, and the even larger stack of books with covers of all colours even more attractive to one who was already a bookworm and fruit-lover. The noise of the neighbours' children playing all over the roadway -- despite living in houses with hanky-sized gardens that were nonetheless large enough to allow games of Traffic Lights or Statues or Tag without any risk of getting run over by the mobile fish and chip shop or a passing coal lorry -- was easily ignored, even though our windows were wide open to whatever breeze might meander in, bringing with it the scent of the two small lilac trees growing by the corner of the

house.

Because even if those kids had spent their entire summer practicing playing euphoniums outside our front door, I should have taken no notice at all -- I had flown off on the magic carpet of books and would not be back until teatime. And so those long, golden afternoons unwound to the gentle rustle of pages turning and the piling up of apple gowks (cores) until it was time for tea. And when the washing up was done, the tea-towel hung up to dry and the plates and cups and cutlery put away again, there would still be time for a chapter or two or more to be read as shadows started to advance, shrouding raspberry canes in the back garden and fingering the windows. Soon there would come that strange hush that creeps in between the time when workers arrive home for their evening meals and when they go out for the evening. Every night that quiet calm fell around the house like a kindly mantle and while it was true that, to the despair of my parents, I would probably be found in the kitchen at midnight frying up bacon and eggs, still I knew that tomorrow would proceed at the same slow pace, and the next day, and the day after that as well.

But it was recalling that this would be my last long summer holiday before I joined the work world that really added to its strange enchantment and, I think, to the sense that time was flying, bearing us all along willy-nilly faster and faster towards adulthood. It all seems dreamlike and far away now.



The husband and wife team of Mary Reed and Eric Mayer published several short John the Lord Chamberlain detections in mystery anthologies and in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine prior to 1999's highly acclaimed first full length novel, One For Sorrow. Their protagonist's adventures continued in Two For Joy (2000), a Glyph Award winner in the Best Mystery category. Two For Joy also gained an Honorable Mention in the Glyph Best Book Award list and in addition was a finalist for the IPPY Best Mystery Award. Three For A Letter (2001), Four For A Boy (2003), and Five For Silver (2004) followed. The latter two novels were nominees for the Bruce Alexander History Mystery Award. Five For Silver won the 2005 Glyph Award for Best Book Series. In June 2003 the American Library Association's Booklist Magazine named the John the Lord Chamberlain novels as one of its four Best Little Known Series. Six For Gold appeared in 2005 and Seven For A Secret in 2008. Eight For Eternity is scheduled to appear in April 2010.

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