

Telling Stories About Writing & Publishing

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...telling me that they'd hated the novels they'd been assigned in class, but came across one of my formulaic adventure stories and liked it enough that they'd decided it might not be so bad to try to read some more. I defy any writer to cheat on his or her craft after getting a message like that.

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books into which I've put the most and those are the ones which the readers affirm with the greatest gusto.

The magical thing about storytelling is the way that a character comes to life when one is writing. My characters always seems to get to a certain place in a manuscript and simply will not follow the plot I've so carefully outlined. They take on a life of their own and it becomes obvious that they simply will not do that thing I'd wanted them to, that's how much they live in my imagination.

When those same characters get to a publisher it seems they've become economic tokens. Will they sell enough copies to earn back the book's advance? Do they help the title fit a genre's marketing expectations? When they arrive in the hands of the critic, they're forgotten.

But these characters are redeemed when the story is read by a reader who is so swept up that he or she has to sit down and write to the author. The messages I get that tell me that reading *FRANNY* gave someone a new sense of identity, or that another character provided a young person with a hero are the ones that let me know I'm a writer and not a part of an industrial process.

Sometimes a reader's care can rejuvenate us to a degree we could never have suspected possible.

I had, a while ago, created a character who starred in a series of adventure novels, *THE MISSION OF ALEX KANE*. I'd been taken with telling stories about a gay hero who would go around the country protecting the dreams of gay men everywhere. I enjoyed writing the books at first and the response was wonderful from those readers who understood the fun they were supposed

to be having with these entertainments. One of the things I loved best about the short novels was that I could roam across a broad area, taking on different issues in each one with a facility that another format might not have allowed.

Eventually, after five volumes, I felt I was getting stale with the books. Besides, my reputation was growing. The publisher, Alyson, was honorable, but the checks for these short books weren't as large as the others I was getting. Maybe I'd gotten too "big" for Alex Kane.

Then I received a fan letter from someone who'd read *GOLDEN YEARS*, the second in the series, a book which dealt with older gay men. "It was wonderful," he wrote, "to read about someone in a gay book who had to stop at the top of a flight of stairs and catch his breath for a change."

I was sure the reader was an older man himself and that was why he was writing until I got to the last paragraph. "You see, I have cerebral palsy and live in a wheelchair. Gay books about discos, beaches and cruising don't touch my life. At least this one came close."

That one letter brought Alex Kane back. I sat down that day and began

LETHAL SILENCE, a novel about a young man in a wheelchair who helps Alex break up a conspiracy of hatred and who, coincidentally, manages to find himself a lover along the way.

I wrote back to my correspondent and thanked him for his letter, telling him that he had done me a great favor. He had reminded me that there were still stories to tell and

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there were readers who were waiting for Alex to save their dreams. There was an audience of real people out there waiting for my words and I had work to do.

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Orton's Hectic Brilliance, Welch's Quiet Dignity

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...been a century before so different are the worlds they inhabit. Where Orton's diary is filled with male prostitutes and tearoom trade, Welch's journals are jammed full of the Georgian twilight and delicate descriptions of nature. But he shares Orton's love of young men's beauty. Encountering a youth swimming naked, Welch notes how "the water gartered his legs round the middle of his calves. The hairs on his body and legs dripped with sparkles of water. He looked like a truncated statue fixed to a base in the bowl of a fountain."

Welch began first as a painter, but while an art student he was run over by a car and suffered the spinal injuries from which he eventually died at age 33. Welch's account of the accident and his partial recovery form the basis for his last novel, *A VOICE*

THROUGH A CLOUD. But Welch's masterwork is his journal which has a rare delicacy and immediacy. His wish is to "mention the tiny things of [people's] lives that give them pleasure or fear or wonder...the details of their houses, their meals and their possessions...the bits of family or intimate history they know."

Welch's writing has a curious effect. One reader told him that it broke "all his shell" because it contained "the absolute honesty that strips away one's barricades, so that one can be hurt, just as one was a child." Indeed, it is Welch's vulnerable honesty that haunts these pages and the magical tales included in Robert Phillips's edition of *THE STORIES OF DENTON WELCH*.

For even more than Orton, Welch recognized the approach of death. In considerable pain, he goes for a trip with his

lover Eric Oliver:

Eric saw how sad I was and he kissed me and lay down on the ground and shut his eyes. We both felt then... how doomed we were how doomed everyone was. We saw very clearly the plain tragedy of out lives and of everyone's. A year after a year after a year passes, and then you look back and your sadness pierces you."

And yet, too, there is a quiet dignity and joy that suffuses these pages and touches me just as deeply as the hectic brilliance of Orton. After a rare night of reasonably sound sleep, Welch awakes to hear Oliver's "breathing mixed [with] the wonderful nightingale which never stopped... and it seemed a miraculously pleasant end to

our troubles." He concludes, "I don't know what will happen in the future to our friendship, but now it is good to keep it alive all I can. And I will give all I can."

In a time that thinks it has just invented gay romance after a period of sexual profligacy, these quietly truthful, bitter-sweet journals may seem all the more immediate and necessary. They teach us about how men can love each other with a tenderness and sympathy so often exhausted in Orton's frantic life.

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Catcher In The Rye Revisited

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...denouement, while believable, is anti-climatic. The reader has figured it out long before, and once revealed, it offers nothing new, nothing terribly insightful.

THE HUMAN SEASON is a study in craft, a finely-drawn and confident craft. Previously, Ms. Rossiter has written a collection of short stories, *BEYOND THE BITTER AIR*. Clearly, she has sharpened her techniques there, for *THE HUMAN SEASON* is the most well constructed of books. At times too much so. It is a textbook of how to write a well framed, and logically symbolized piece of fiction.

For instance. When we first meet Peter, he is working on an assignment for Manning: "The Nature of Tragedy in Shakespeare." This is no accident. It is clever, pedestrian, even obvious foreshadowing. And yet, by having Peter say, recalling Cate's mysterious death, "maybe I won't have to write it now. Maybe no one will." Rossiter makes the symbol real. Breathes into it life. This undisguised clue to Rossiter's eventual catharsis may be blatant, but it is well placed. It is the first of a series of echoes which are first novel careful, yet promisingly true.

"Everything's going to be okay," repeated over and over to Peter by Manning, by Mrs. MacQuire, by Judith, and by Peter to Cate in several flashbacks, is a central thread woven throughout the narrative. It is offered as an assurance to the speaker as much as a comfort to the listener. It is heard

so often in everyday life, along with such toss offs as "how are you-fine" and "see ya" that one believes it by rote. Peter is no different, believing that in fact everything will be okay. If not because he has faith in the speaker, but because he has never considered what would happen if things did not turn out "okay."

But there is much at Dunster School which is not "okay," much which bodes true of collegiate life in general. The groves of academe are often fecund with sexual misconduct. One has but to look at the paper, or visit a local campus of either college or secondary school to feel the pressure, the almost malleable tension-both sexual and psychological. Here, the untrained student is met by the cosmopolitan teacher. Virgin sexuality is both tempted and temptor. This air is thick with all manner of physical experimentation.

"'Poor Spaulding,' his classmate Edwards taunts. 'Another illusion shattered.'

I keep my eyes closed. I don't say anything. He does.

'Shattered,' he says. 'And after all she's done for you. All these years. Tea and sympathy. Just like a mother. And all this time to think you never knew that she was otherwise inclined.'

The perceived *deja vu* is strongest in sections such as this. Is this not something out of Lillian Hellman's *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR* or Robert Anderson's *TEA AND SYMPATHY*? Do not the sand filtered strains of the theme music to *THE SUMMER OF '42* seem to be blowing across our brains? The night of Cate's death sees a venerable tree smote by lightning-an overly dramatic choice, and one we recall from Arthur Miller's *ALL MY SONS*. We are not surprised when Peter tells his stepmother that he always likened his father to Zeus, complete with edicts flung down like lightning bolts. We expect the imagery to complete itself, for Rossiter to fill out the poetic superstructure she put in

place. And, waiting like a saved up punch line (one eagerly awaits it from the first mention of "tea and sympathy") there is even this line reminiscent of the play and film of the same name:

"'Peter,' he says.

I turn. His hand lifts. A brief salute. A silent pleading.

'Remember me kindly, will you?'

Deborah Kerr never said it better.

Sarah Rossiter is a gifted graceful writer. Though delicate, her writing never falters toward the treacle or the overly sentimental. If the *HUMAN SEASON* reminds us of stories, films, plays-real life experiences-with which we are familiar, it is no fault of the author's. Rather, it is a laud. Virginity is lost in many ways. Rape, family betrayal, the death of a loved one.

"I praise the fall; it is the human season..." from Archibald MacLeish's "Immortal Autumn" gives Rossiter her title. It is so. Those halcyon days between summer and Halloween, smelling of leaves, football fields and a fleeting tenuous innocence seem ingrained in golden memory as the most fitting time for those first tentative steps into adulthood. If Rossiter has framed a story about an overused subject, it is one framed in autumnal gold. And given the purity, simplicity and undeniable talent of her writing, it is a minor flaw. *THE HUMAN SEASON* is a joy to read.

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