

Of Fishing, Baseball, and Grace

by Alison Pride

It was 1985 and I was 22 and fresh from college and a summer in Alaska. I was finally at the beach, determined to live a little while figuring out exactly, once and for all, what my life was all about--no small assignment for one so confused. But I was full of grand ambitions back then.

Someone once told me, among other pieces of wisdom I value to this day, that the two things that would influence me the most in my life would be the people I would meet and the books I would read. I was no stranger to books, having been called forth from one book or another while I was growing up by my mother, who invited me to rejoin the "real" world whenever it appeared my withdrawal might be irreversible.

I might also add that I'd come to the beach with some vague idea of rediscovering God. I was questioning the faith that had once seemed as natural to me as feeling hungry and eating. At times I was giddy with the prospect of unfettered intellectual flight, other times scared of abandoning something that had always appeared so secure. It was just your typical spiritual quest or crisis, however you want to look at it.

I read a lot of books my first winter on the coast, some more successfully than others. One I was having particular trouble with was Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Finally, frustrated by my own lack of perseverance, I confessed my difficulty to a friend, who didn't sigh or sneer at me disdainfully, but handed me a copy of The River Why by David James Duncan. Try this instead, he told me.

The cover wasn't enticing. Some guy in a boat flyfishing (or was it bait?). The only time I'd attempted to cast a line, I'd caught the hook in my earlobe. And the only other time I'd fished, off a bridge. I'd tried to psychically warn the fish away, horrified by the prospect that I might actually land one and have to kill it.

Ofcourse, you don't have to like fishing to love The River Why, as thousands besides myself now know. And I cannot begin to tell you (without sounding foolishly rhapsodical and sentimental) all the gifts that book gave to me. So impressed was I that I travelled the next spring with my roommate down the coast in search of the author, something I'd not done before and have never done since. That should tell you something.

And we found him (okay, he wasn't hiding all that hard). He was standing in his front yard (if you could reasonably construe a very wildly overgrown field as a yard), showing a small boy the finer points of casting (a scene which erased any doubts we'd had about locating the right house). At first a little shy and reticent, he warmed up considerably when we produced our offering (or bribe)--a bottle of Chimay Ale--and agreed to follow him out into the "yard" to sit on a log (because, he confessed, he couldn't think while standing up).

And although time has blurred most of the conversation's content, I do remember the sun on my face, the bees buzzing with springtime fervor around our heads, the thwack, thwack of Duncan's son Doonie as he attempted to demolish whole, rotting logs with a stick, and the gracious presence of David James Dun-

can himself as he answered our endless questions and hesitantly accepted our adulation. For me, it will forever be one of those moments in life I look back on and understand that, whatever or whoever I think God is at the moment, I still believe in grace.

He told us he was at work on another novel (information that reassured us tremendously) and that it was tentatively titled The Brothers K, about four brothers who played baseball. We assured him that although neither of us fished or were particularly interested in baseball, we would await the new book with the same enthusiasm with which we revered The River Why.

And we waited. My friend moved back to Seattle. I loaned my copy of The River Why to so many people it's now retired, on my shelf, in three separate pieces. And I told my story about meeting Duncan to more people than probably wanted to hear it, never forgetting to inform them there was a new book on the way (and they heard it from me first).

I heard rumors over the next six years. Duncan had divorced and moved to Portland, Duncan was writing his new book, Duncan's computer had eaten his book, Duncan's dog had eaten his book, there was no book. Not knowing what to believe or disbelieve, I shelved my impatience and... waited.

And I'm here to tell you, in case no one else has, that The Brothers K was WORTH THE WAIT. Ambitious in its scope and cast of zany characters, satisfyingly long (I hate to see a good book end) and emotionally resonant without being (too terribly) manipulative, it is a worthy successor to The River Why. Duncan has not lost his sense of humor, his perspective, or one iota of his compassion for human beings caught in the often agonizing process of making sense of their lives. By the time you reluctantly close the book and say farewell to the Chance family, you may feel exactly like I did--not like writing a book review, but like buying it as a Christmas present for all my friends (and I will, if I win the lottery).

Duncan shows us again, in The Brothers K, why really good writers don't have to know the answers to write really good books--they just have to be able to ask and write well about the questions.

And it also goes to show one other thing: sometimes you meet people that help you discover something important about living and about yourself. And sometimes you read a book... and your life changes then, too.

These books (The Brothers K and The River Why) are available at Cannon Beach Book Company.

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Literature

MEANWHILE, IN NEWPORT

The fall rains have come. The tourist hordes are thinning and parking is once more possible. Yet this is a sad time when old friendships are sorely tried, when even familial ties are endangered. It's SHROOM TIME!

Yes, the Chantrelles, King Boletes, and even the more than worth its weight in silver Matsusake are rising from their mycelial masses to tempt the cupidity. Old and dear friends develop a shifty look around their eyes, a reserve that borders on hostility, and a dedication to secrecy that would do the KGB proud.


Herself, delightful DA* of many years, on returning from time obviously spent in bosky damps and dells, booted, scarfed, gloved and rain geared, will claim to have been on an innocent beach walk. Only later, discovered in the act of chuckling evilly over a wad of legal tender, will the magnitude of her perfidy be realized. She claims it's borrowed money repaid by a friend.

Even Nice Bill, that epitome of kindness, openness, that paragon of sharing will look you in the eye like a man and lie through his teeth about where he found the five pounds of Matsusake he's rumored to have sold yesterday. It even does no good to buy him beer. (Normally a fool-proof ploy) In Vino, Veritas takes a holiday where fungoid dollars are the subject.

Still, when the abundance of Chantrelles makes it possible to completely cover, hide the sirloin steaks bought in their honor, when there are enough King Boletes strung to dry above the stove to flavor a winter's sauces, when rain and wind make impractical any effort not encompassed by a good book and keeping up the fire, even surly mates can be forgiven. Also, warm and well booked, one has to wonder why anyone would consider living anywhere else. Unless, of course, Measure 9 passes.

* DA=Domestic Accomplice. The term "Old Lady," can be physically dangerous around this house.

Alex LaFollette
This is Alex's November column; he missed the deadline (for obvious reasons) but we felt we should share it anyway.




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To speak of "mere words" is much like speaking of "mere dynamite."

- C.J. Ducasse



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If it takes a lot of words to say what you have in mind, give it more thought.

- Dennis Roth