

Talk Before Young Adult Workshop at Charlotte-Mecklenburg

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Last year a friend of mine, discussing something as innocuous as my college class schedule, leaned back in his professor's swivel chair, eyed me over his glasses and asked, "Just what are you going to do when you grow up?" I admit that the question both astonished and annoyed me. Had he measured me against some secret adult criteria and found me a failure? Did he mean that working on a degree, writing a book, caring for a family, and running a household were not important, grown-up things to do? Was he judging me, a woman of the Seventies, already busily sweeping guilt out of my corners, and telling me I should commit myself to one thing, two at the most (preferably husband and children) and be really good at that instead of juggling my time and energy into many different directions?

I didn't answer the question. I remember mumbling a weak "I don't know" and escaping to the library where books, someone else's thoughts, would comfort me for a while. But the question stuck with me, nagging to be evaluated and wanting an answer.

Eventually I decided the best way to figure out both the question and the answer was to think specifically about my chronological childhood. How did I

relate to that child? Was the key to identifying a "grown-up" state locked in those past years? Why didn't I have an honest, spontaneous answer to the question of my growing up?

The beginnings of a writer's life need not be auspicious. A small Southern town with one line of stores facing the railroad tracks, four churches, one school, two stop lights, no picture show — a town like that will do. In such a place the community is an extension of your family and so many different people, from the deaf and dumb man in his mule-drawn cart to the exotically dressed black woman preacher, affect your life. You see and hear everything because there are few secrets, and although you don't understand much of what passes your door, you absorb it in another way, by sight and sound, sensations that can come back to you when something in your present life touches the chord of memory. As a child you are as vulnerable in a small town as you are in the privacy of your family life, because everybody knows where you can be hurt. People know your family tree and who you look like. They know the family past that you don't even know yet. The town, like the family itself, can both help and hurt you, so you learn to be wary and loving at the

same time.

If you have intelligent parents in this small town, parents who don't want your life to be limited by theirs, you will go to concerts, plays, movies, and the ballet at a nearby college. You will have books, records, magazines. You will take trips, dancing lessons, piano lessons. Your mother will make costumes, listen when you quote poems and the Bible, read aloud to you after you can read yourself. She will nurture you the best she can. She will encourage, not knowing what her words stir up in your brain. Can I be a writer? you wonder. Can I trust what I believe about myself? Of course you can, she says. And so you put on a cheerleading uniform and yell your throat sore and then spend the rest of the night in the half-dark of your room, writing poems. You leave home, believing you will be able to come home again, because she believes it. How else could she let you go?

And you find out she was right. You are a writer. You left home and yet you can come back to it in your mind, because it is always there, waiting, with all its richness of human experience.

My first novel *Home Before Dark*, published in October 1976 by Alfred A. Knopf, is dedicated to my mother. The characters in it are not people she knew, the town is not the one we lived in, the story is not one I heard from her, and yet it is all those things. It is a story about a family, a small town, and three women — fourteen year old Stella who is learning to commit herself to both place and people; her

mother Mae who can't accept the small town life forced on her; and Maggie, a spinster with a big house and a willingness to give herself to a widower and his children because she knows too much about loneliness already.

The basic plot goes like this: The migrant Willis family comes to the father's hometown where his brother is running the farm. The family moves into a tenant house on the homeplace and, much to Stella's delight, she quickly makes friends, first with a tenant farmer's son, and then with a more socially acceptable boy. The migrant mother, fearful of losing her husband and children to this rooted way of that she despises, is killed in an electrical storm, and her husband finds solace in Maggie, the proprietor of a general store. He and the woman marry but at first Stella who feels committed to the little tenant house on the family land, her first real home, refuses to move into town to Maggie's big house. Gradually she comes to understand the difference between a house as a place in which to live and as a place where love is. In the final scene of the book she is arriving at Maggie's to stay.

My original intention for this story — and it began as a short story — was to explore the reaction of the town to this new family. One of the interesting aspects of Southern small town living with which I dealt all too frequently as a school age child had to do with the effect of heritage on the community's social order. Friendships were based on family status, not necessarily because of parents so much as

because of the children themselves who seemed to have built-in systems for knowing where they belonged. Sometimes I'm sure parents did create these situations. The "shall nots" of rural life were indeed great. But basically these were historical responses, having little relation to what was happening in the present such as new educational and economic opportunities or awareness of the world outside our little community. These attitudes were, for the most part, invalid mind-sets, but they were so strong that neither group tried very hard to change them. "That's how it is," we would say, although it literally pained me sometimes, as I believe it did the children on the other side. But nevertheless, after about the fourth grade, we were two different groups and nobody stepped over the line.

Stella, my migrant girl, is then in a peculiar situation. Because her father was born in the town of a good family, he and she are immediately taken back into the fold, even though they've been living out of a stationwagon all of Stella's life and she has had little schooling, has few social skills and no grace at all. Stella is thrown into a social situation with which she has had no experience. She doesn't know the "rules" and her blunderings hurt people, although the rules themselves because of their limits prove to be the real culprits. Stella, egocentric, stubborn, willful, survives her blunderings because she invents another set of rules based on her own needs.

Toby, the tenant farmer's son, is

bright, industrious, and gentle, none of which helps him overcome the emotional dilemma he puts himself in. He doesn't think he's good enough for Stella. Then there's Rodney — dumb, vindictive, finally pathetic. He has financial and social position. He has heritage. But he has very few redeeming personal qualities.

I hope these social situations are clear in the book, although gradually as the migrant family became more and more alive to me, the attention of the work shifted away from theme and more to the people themselves — to the mother, father, and Stella equally. I intended no main character.

For that reason *Home Before Dark* deals with sexuality in a peculiar fashion for the young adult. The reader enters everybody's mind: Stella's parents and how they feel about each other; the man in his grief at losing his wife and then the awakening of feelings of passion he's forgotten he has; the willingness of Maggie; Stella, in her relationships with both boys but more importantly, with her father and his new wife. In this book, I hope sexuality suggests the total person and not just sex. While it deals with three separate marriages and the budding relationships between Stella and two different boys, there is almost no graphic sex in it. It didn't seem important to it. Emotions, sexuality on a larger plane that deals with who a person thinks she is and how she relates that person to the people around her is more interesting and even more private than sex.

Home Before Dark wasn't written

specifically for the young adult market, although I'm very pleased that my publisher expects it to be read by people of different age groups. It wasn't written for any market because I don't think about selling while I'm writing. I'm writing for me, not you.

Toni Morrison recently told me she wrote *Sula* because she wanted to read it. I think that's why I kept on working on *Home Before Dark*. As its length moved beyond short story limits, I found myself caught up in the small town world of the Willises. It was like going home. And I wanted to find out what was going to happen to them there. I wanted to read it. I hope you will too.

It's hard to speak very specifically about the writing of this or any other piece of work. I can't remember how long it took. I do know that the first fifty pages of the Willis story were written two years before the rest. I realize that is a long gestation period but I tried to be patient. My work consistently takes that form — a beginning, a page or two, and then nothing for a length of time. It's much like carrying a baby, except that the idea seems so subconscious that it rarely kicks or disturbs me at all. But once the actual writing starts, I'm as absorbed in it as an actor in a role, except that I get to play all the parts. I have to force myself not to think consciously about it all the time. That's mostly for my family's sake. They get tired of repeating their sentences because mother's mind is elsewhere — and I dislike not hearing what they have to say. But it's hard.

The typewriter calls me. I shut my study door to lessen the temptation. I visit friends, clean out cupboards, cut the grass, think about renovating perfectly adequate rooms. Because I've learned that if I write too fast, if I get into a frenzy of eight hours at the typewriter, the work is no good. It's like force-feeding and what the typewriter spits up is not worth the time it took to type it.

Faced with questions about how I manage to write and keep house and family together without being a recluse, I respond that I yell and scream a lot. That's true. But when I wasn't writing, during those years when domestic demands seemed truly overwhelming and I thought I'd lost touch with the "me" in myself, I also screamed and yelled a lot. At least now I feel productive.

Although I've yet to find a happy medium between too much and not enough activity, I'm convinced that writing and scrubbing floors are frequently compatible work. I try to write fairly early in the day but not necessarily everyday and rarely in summer at all. I start after the children are on the bus and the kitchen and other immediate eyesores are cleared away. By noon, I'm finished or I stop. Then I feel like physical work. Cleaning, cooking, shopping, yardwork, are ways of winding down energy to a level at which I can function the rest of the day. Writing, when it's going half-way well, is a trip. I have to come down gradually, and I think that giving my attention to mundane tasks is one effective method.

In the course of these words I wanted to tell you something about the writing of *Home Before Dark* and I wanted to answer for myself the question posed to me and I think posed to each of us in one form or another in our so-called adult lives. It has to do with how we feel about ourselves.

"What are you going to do when you grow up?" Well, I've decided not to ever answer that question. Because I think what it really asks is this: "What are you going to do when you settle down?" The truth is that I don't intend to and so the question doesn't worry me anymore. If growing up means picking one pattern to live by, like selecting china, and then being afraid to change it, I don't want it. If it means shutting up mental and emotional shop so it can be neatly labeled *ADULT*, I don't want it. Especially if it means disavowing Santa Claus, popsicles, and books with less than twenty new words in them, I don't want it.

Rather than growing up, I think I'll try just growing. I have some more books I want to write and read, a husband who doesn't want to grow up either but who is considering growing old with me, and children who are hopefully discovering the answer to that question in their own ways. I want to be open to all the wonderful possibilities of their answers. I want to write books that entertain, that make both young and old people laugh and maybe cry, and that cause a reader now and then to stop and say to herself, "Yes, that's how it is with me."

I think just plain growing should be our concern. I believe it is the concern

of the people in *Home Before Dark*, and while writing with a message is not my thing, I hope that these people do show something of the many natures of love and the value of commitment based on love which will be ever expanding, flexing, renewing itself. That's the kind of growth I'm interested in.

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