Cultural Daily

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Making a Novelist, One Book at a Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, August 10th, 2016

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I met her in the early 1970s. Her husband, Dan Sullivan, the theatre critic of the *Los Angeles Times,* had just hired me to work with him at the *Times'* theatre desk. It was the early days, I was a rookie, and on the rare occasions when I needed to reach him at home and his wife picked up the phone, I noted that the voice was cheerful, warm, welcoming.

Then one day I was invited to dinner.

Dan's wife, Faith Sullivan, turned out to be altogether as delightful as he was: funny, a tender mother to their three children, with an inner glow and a great smile, and very *casalinga* — a reassuring Italian word that means both home-made and home-y, with just enough *laissez-faire* to put anyone in her presence totally at ease.

I tell you this by way of full disclosure, since Dan and I worked happily together at the *Times* for the next 18 years and, aside from his being a terrific "boss," he also became my mentor, confidant and brother-I-never-had. Our two families grew close and by now Faith Sullivan and I have known each other for more than 45 brisk years.

Faith Sullivan.

First impressions notwithstanding, I soon discovered that inside the *casalinga* is a creature of tempered steel — principled, passionate, argumentative, to be cherished and also reckoned with. Beginning in the mid 1970s, armed with pen, legal pad and an antique typewriter rescued from the "discard" pile at the *Times*, Faith has become the author of eight novels — and counting. Only when she cannot avoid it will she use what she calls a "word processor" (which looks an awful lot like a computer to me).

"I am a Luddite," she says with equanimity. "I love books, it's from books that I get the information I require. I hate the technology represented by the Internet. It drains time, energy and something of our psyches — the very stuff fiction writers should be *hoarding*."

Sullivan grew up in small-town Minnesota with two strong women — her mother and grandmother. Her first book, *Repent, Lanny Merkel* (1981), is a humorous take on a schoolyard romance from the perspective of a high school reunion that the protagonist, middle-aged and married with children, is not at all sure she should attend. Fresh, wry and witty, the book made a splash.

Emboldened, Sullivan began to experiment. Her next book was *Watchdog* (1982), a mystery, followed in 1985 by *Mrs. Demming and the Mythical Beast*, very different from either *Watchdog* or *Merkel* because by now she was flexing her muscles freely and, like a kid in a toy store, started to play around with whatever aroused her imagination.

But it is *The Cape Ann*, published in 1988 and set in the 1930s, that officially launched the mature

novelist Sullivan would become. In it, for the first time, she reached back to her own early life, conjuring up the fictional small town of Harvester, MN, and its denizens — their joys, failings, messes, tragedies and triumphs — a place and a collection of people she has been unable to leave for the past 28 years.

"The *Cape Ann* was written not because I had some autobiographical material lying around," she explains. "I don't write my family's stories; that way lies madness. I wrote it because I wanted to honor the strong women who lived before the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. My grandmother, who had mostly raised me, had just died. She'd been the most important figure in my growing up. I wanted to pay homage to her strength. Since I had no particular story in my head, I made a laundry list of subjects I had wanted to touch upon in my three previous novels — subjects that, it turned out, didn't fit *those* books.

"I had no notion at the time that *The Cape Ann* — it's the name of a house model — would become the first of the so-called Harvester Novels. I just had a situation I wanted to explore: a mother, a child, and an abusive husband/father — the Erhardts — who lived in a small town railway depot where the father was employed. Trains and depots have been a lifelong love affair of mine. But given the husband's gambling and drinking habits, there was some doubt that the real home would ever be built…"

While Sullivan continued to play around with the novelistic architecture she had established in *The Cape Ann*, the architecture of her writing life emerged. Her next four novels — *The Empress of One* (1997), *What a Woman Must Do* (2002), *Gardenias* (2005) and the most recent *Goodnight, Mr. Wodehouse* (2015) — are all about people of Harvester. They also are stand-alone reads, but interconnected by location, time and individuals who, at one time or another, lived in Harvester for all or part of the 20th century. Each book focuses on a family or a person, revealing, in greater depth and detail, what makes them tick.

"One subject I wanted to focus on," says Sullivan, "was growing up Catholic, which had been my experience. Another was a WWI veteran who suffered the aftereffects of that conflict. In the small towns of southern Minnesota where I grew up there was always such a veteran, often more than one, shell-shocked or with lungs burned out or limbs missing. Trench and gas warfare is unimaginably hideous."

Sullivan's great strengths as a writer lie in plotting, detail and pacing. These can be virtually Dickensian. Some whispers even mention Jane Austen. Sullivan is unfazed. She takes her time (*Goodnight, Mr. Wodehouse* took ten years to complete), skirting manufactured shock value in favor of presenting the no less traumatizing disturbances of daily life — a suicide, an unwanted pregnancy, a creeping mental illness, the gradual ruin brought on by alcohol or other abuse — problems ordinary people face. Not earthquakes or holocausts, but the smaller accidents of fate, the quiet desolations of lost dreams, the private struggles, abandonment, unforeseen violence and the devastating anguish of chronic illness.

Speaking at Dutton's Bookstore in West Los Angeles before it went out of business.

"I've tried to show the positives and negatives of small-town life," she says, "the support system built into the fabric of a small community, but also the inevitability of gossip; the claustrophobia of living in a fish-bowl. Not only does everybody know everybody, but also they know *everything about everybody*, and the feeling that one can never escape family history. Small towns are a good deal alike, but not the same. They vary based on ethnic makeup, religion and other factors. Still, readers from around the country who grew up in small towns swear that I've written about theirs."

Her sidebar achievement, no less remarkable, is keeping logistical track of it all — the complex larger and smaller events in each of the five Harvester Novels. She has been compared favorably to

the late Kent Haruf whose novels *Plainsong*, *Eventide* and *Benediction* did a similar thing for the fictional village of Holt, Colorado. From the changes in her characters' lives as they mature, to changes in the industrial, political, technological and attitudinal drivers of the wider world, she covers the ground in meticulous detail, going from the invention of the automobile through two world wars.

How does she do it?
Simple: "I keep a separate file as I'm writing into which I put names, dates, places, the characters' ages and relationships."
And historical detail…?
"I was a history major. My specialty was 20th Century American History. The bookshelves behind my desk are filled with it. They're also crammed with the history of the automobile, farm machinery, fashion, popular music, film and athletic competition in the U.S. I collect books and pamphlets about flora, fauna, card games, Minnesota minutiae. A little pamphlet published some years ago by the Department of Agriculture about weeds of the Upper Midwest was immensely useful in writing *What a Woman Must Do*. I'd picked that up at a flea market — the source of many of my best references."
What about references to housekeeping customs no longer practiced and brand names of last-century products, many of which don't even exist any more?
"Many brand names I remember from my childhood," she offers, "but I also have reproductions of early 20th-century Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck catalogues that pre-date my memory. Plus I have quite a collection of old magazines. Is it any wonder my office resembles a rat's den?
"The same applies to the housekeeping habits that we've long abandoned. I lived in my grandmother's house. We beat mattresses, carpets, pillows and anything else that gathered dust or staleness through the winter. Lace curtains were washed, starched and stretched on wooden stretchers.
"We cleaned wallpaper with something that looked like pink Play Dough. And when the wallpaper was beyond cleaning, we wallpapered. I say 'we' loosely. Usually, the grown-ups did it, until the children were old enough to lend a hand. Virtually every girl then was taught to sew, first on a treadle machine, later with an electric one. Most of our clothes were made at home from Butterick, McCall's or Vogue patterns, though the Vogue patterns were more expensive and more difficult to cut and sew. You might break down and buy a Vogue pattern for a wedding dress."

This intricate interconnection is a feat of literary prestidigitation that culminates in *Goodnight, Mr. Wodehouse*. With the exception of *What a Woman Must Do*, a Harvester third-grade teacher named Nell Stillman and her son Hilly weave in and out of each of the stories, appearing as brief reference points in the earlier novels. But the engrossing and heartbreaking *Wodehouse*, which rightly made the *Wall Street Journal*'s top ten novels of 2015, belongs entirely to them. Nell withstands the ups and downs in her life with help from a completely unexpected source: the late British humorist and writer P.G. Wodehouse, whom she adores, who seems to speak only to her, and the only character who inhabits Harvester solely through the presence of his books on the town library's shelves.
"I fell in love with Nell," says Sullivan, who runs a couple of writers' workshops in Minneapolis, her home for the past 25 years. "I knew I wanted to tell her story, a story containing much tragedy but also a great deal of satisfaction," she says. "It is perhaps in her story, which is at the heart of *Good Night, Mr. Wodehouse*, that we best see the scope of small town life."
But why P.G. Wodehouse in particular?
"I discovered Wodehouse when I was living in Los Angeles. The woman who ran a book group I

attended at the time posed the question one day: ‘Is there a book or an author who has seen you through bad times?’ Well, when I discovered [Wodehouse’s] Wooster and his butler Jeeves I wished I had known them when I broke up with my college sweetheart! These were the guys to get me through. *Goodnight, Mr. Wodehouse* took off from there…

Dan and Faith Sullivan kibitzing in the kitchen. Photo by Maggie Sullivan.

“Certainly *The Cape Ann* was the genesis of most of my Harvester people,” she adds. “Silly as it sounds, it was almost *Brigadoon*-like. When I entered the town of Harvester, the citizens were there waiting. You could make the case that they were already formed in my subconscious. Someone has said that story is a skein of yarn in the back of our heads, and once we get a hold of the end and begin pulling, out it all comes. That has been the case for me in some very real way.

“No writing is as easy as I make it sound; it’s a craft, after all, and craft entails ‘measuring twice and cutting once.’ In other words, fine-tuning. Once the plot and characters are in place, it’s all fine-tuning.”

Faith Sullivan’s Harvester Novels are available on Amazon at CulturalWeekly Literature and Fiction Store and most brick and mortar bookstores.

AND ANOTHER THING…

Aaron Hendry as Ajax and the company of *Ajax In Iraq*. Photo by Anthony Roldan.

Since this show is ending and Cultural Weekly is going on a two-week break after today’s edition, I must mention the Los Angeles revival of Not Man Apart Physical Theatre Ensemble’s ***Ajax In Iraq***, with a cast that includes veterans of our current wars. Harking to the days when psychodrama was more prevalent, the production uses theatre in one of its most vital applications: healing.

Last Sunday’s performance of this Ellen McLaughlin socially conscious take on the Ancient Greek legend (strongly choreographed by director John Farmanesh-Bocca and Jones Welsh, and tellingly lit by Matt Makulka), was followed by an animated talkback with the cast. It included vets in the production, plus people from veterans’ groups working to redeem the horrific personality distortions that continuous war and repeated tours of duty inflict on soldiers.

Known chiefly by four neutral letters, PTSD is an unspeakable scourge of epidemic proportions that should haunt the country and serve as a powerful warning against the inhumane consequences of endless war. Tragically, the population at large has largely been insulated from this catastrophe. This revival is a deeply felt reminder that it should not, must not and cannot be. We’re all in this together.

Ajax in Iraq plays The Greenway Court Theatre, 544 No. Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles 90036, through Aug. 14 only. Reservations: 323.673.0544 or http://www.greenwaycourttheatre.org/ajaxiniraq/

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