

Ross' Rave: We Have Met the Enemy, and He Is Us

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“I don’t care much for Fred Allen,” she tells me.

Sadie’s hand feels gray. Occasionally, she rubs my arm and says, “Smooth.”

“I like Senator Claghorn and Mrs. Nussbaum,” I tell her.

“Oh, yes,” she says with thin lips. “Is Sid here?”

“No, Sid passed away many years ago.”

“Oh, I thought he might have,” she shrugs, as if to say, “Well, what can you do?”

“You were married a long time.”

“And, I like *The Shadow*,” she suddenly remembers.

“Oh, that’s a good one, too,” I pat her hand.

“My brother and I listened to it every Thursday night. Where is my brother?”

“He died a long time ago.”

She grows quiet and settles into a place I can’t get to. We sit silently, and she strokes the back of my hand with her thumb. She has fingers like a nun.

As Sadie’s dementia worsened, I found one way to reach her was by listening to old radio programs. So, I bought an internet radio and every other day, we tune into the *Green Lantern*, or *Jack Benny*, or *Duffy’s Tavern*. The voices trigger a flood of memories: Her mother makes spaghetti sauce with tomato soup, and her brother teaches her rude words in Yiddish while sprawled on the floor reading *Little Orphan Annie*. Here, she sees again, and paints, and reads, and wears beautiful clothes, and dances and dances and dances. It is a safe, uncomplicated, peaceful place, free from the confusions and cloudiness, the grief and the pain.

I know these small vernal pools, too, will gradually vanish, but for now, it’s all she has.

Oddly, I’ve grown to like these old radio shows. *Space Patrol*, *The Saint*, *X-1*, *Suspense*. They are marvelous, despite

their corny organ music, predictable story lines, and sexism. There is something mesmerizing and escapist about them.

I tried to explain this to Lanette, one of our student assistants at the library. She looked at me like I was nuts.

“Really,” I said. “You should try this. Just Google “OTR” and you can stream it.”

Her whole body said, “Whatever.”

Who was I kidding? A twenty-year old, college sophomore who texts over 50 times a day, uses her phone to pay her parking tickets, and complains that she has to buy an e-n-t-i-r-e book for her history class, is going to sit still for 30 minutes to listen to *The Great Gildersleeve*? Not likely.

Her world is not an aural one it, it’s a visual one. Iconic. Her whole life is made up of pictures of things. PowerPoint slides, YouTube videos, Facebook photos, re-run news clips, Coach bags online. Her eyes are cameras, taking in images with every blink, processing only what she needs and losing the rest. Information, itself, has no intrinsic value to her. Enough to pass the test, or do a presentation, or get the job. She’s been conditioned to this since birth. Raised on TV and movies, video games, computers, and the web. Lanette has no real imagination. Sure, she can do mash-ups and re-mixes and samplings. She can mimic, but can she construct? Can she visualize Simon Templar racing through a dark alley, or see Miss Brooks flirting with Mr. Boynton? She has little capacity to wonder, to create, to imagine, to see the story in her head. She’s a skimmer.

It’s not her fault. We did it to her. We drove her to play dates as she watched Elmo on her backseat DVD player. We gave her awards for just showing up, and bragged on our bumpers that she was an honor roll student. We scheduled homework time, between ballet and band, and gave her Lunchables, a Mac and a cell phone. We helicoptered in when her teacher gave her a B, and screamed at the coach when she didn’t get enough field time. In our misguided attempt to look after our children, we, instead, indulged and entitled them.

[As I write, a young man sits 20 feet away facing the Reference Desk. He’s moved the newly upholstered chair closer to the couch, so he can put his feet up. He’s eating chicken wings and chips and talking on his cell phone. Ac-

cidentally, he's knocked a colored stack of flyers advertising "Game night in the Library" onto the floor. He leaves them there and continues talking. I'm quite sure he doesn't know he's in the Library.

Or perhaps he does. Perhaps this is his construct, his idea of what a library is. Event center, student union, mall, café.

A celebratory email circulates among the Library staff that our gate count is higher than ever.]

Lately, I've been worried about what so many institutions (including libraries) have done in a search for relevance: created identities on social networks, learned to tweet and teach through YouTube. Many libraries built their physical spaces to more closely resemble a Borders, offer yoga classes and free coffee between 10 p.m. and midnight. I have also worried that our talk about academic standards, collections, instruction, curricular support and learning, have been supplanted by institutional positioning and aggressive fund raising. Who could deny that Google, Starbucks and cell phones (the perfect storm) have swept across the academic coastline so severely, only fragmented remnants of our heritage and traditions remain? I have worried that libraries, so desperate to justify their value, will do almost anything to appeal to the millennials.

For a decade, I've written about struggling students, their challenges, obstacles and achievements. I've told you about migrant workers rising from the fields and walking, head held high, into the library; about single moms, grandparents and children; about avatars and water and 9/11 and Disney. Observation, dialog, and a happy resolution. Libraries provided the backdrop, students the lead, and librarians the supporting actors. In forty Raves, I have tried to find that silver lining, that modicum of meaning, to prove we are making a

difference... at least to that one starfish. But, today, I mostly worry.

Too often, I worry that a generation of students has been so misled by corporate culture and consumerism, and duped by media and materialism, that they view their diplomas as receipts. Too often, I worry that an academy based on the traditions of scholarship has less regard for learning than for meeting FTEs or for scoring on the field. Too often, I worry about a growing disrespect for the many, hard working professionals (like us!) who make libraries possible. Over the years, have we all not witnessed intellectual rigor, once a tenant of higher education, confronted by market-eers, computer technicians and development officers? We have seen cataloging outsourced, reference departments eliminated, and library deans, once stewards of the collected knowledge of humankind, replaced by CIOs. In their scramble for significance, I worry that many libraries, once the heart of the university, are now struggling for their own survival.

But, mostly I worry about our student assistant Lanette. Transport her back fifty years, and see if she could pass a high school exit exam. Approach her today to give her a map and chances are she couldn't find Iraq. Ask her to balance her checkbook without a calculator, or lead a class discussion without props, or tell you about the last book she's read. Or worse, transport her fifty years forward: What memories will give her sanctuary? What reminiscences to calm her chaos? Can a mind fraught with transience bring her peace? I don't think so.

Tomorrow, if it's a good day, Sadie and I will listen to the Lone Ranger and she'll ask me about Sid and tell me about her mother's chicken soup. I'll do what I can to guide and reassure her. For that's what we do.

Fin.

(*Engaging Sources...Continued from page 9*)

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