

## Ruth Suckow's Art of Fiction

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It is an extraordinary experience to become interested, as I did, in an author's published works, and then find there exists a treasure trove of original letters and manuscripts by and about this writer not half a block from my office desk.

Some would call that serendipity. Actually, it's foresight and good fortune on the part of The University of Iowa Library. For, through the generosity of many donors here and abroad, the Library is acquiring a growing collection of memorabilia about this native Iowan whose reputation continues to flourish quietly but steadily a decade after her death.<sup>1</sup> Because she insisted on recording faithfully the human condition as she witnessed it, Ruth Suckow speaks to the present. Her times (1892-1960) have changed; human nature hasn't.

To explore the unpublished autobiography of her father, W. J. Suckow; to read letters from Robert Frost, H. L. Mencken, John Cowper Powys, Dorothy Richardson, Sigrid Undset, Grant Wood, and the recently-donated collection from John T. Frederick; to peruse her original draft pages of novels like *The John Wood Case*, sometimes written on the backs of leftover lecture fliers from California—all this privileged firsthand look at private papers is to see more clearly how Miss Suckow transmuted the shifting matters of her life into the solid material of literature. In the concrete terms that she preferred, let's look at her work itself.

Among the guests at the farewell party for the minister and his wife in *New Hope*, Ruth Suckow has Grandma Story round out the festivities by announcing a special gift:

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\*I wish to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Professor John T. Frederick, whose lively teaching at The University of Iowa first led me to discover the enduring values of Miss Suckow's books.

<sup>1</sup> Doctoral dissertations on Ruth Suckow have been written during the past decade at the University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota, and recently a book-length study has been published: Leedice Kissane, *Ruth Suckow* (New York, 1969).

This, Grandma said, proudly opening the bag, and nodding at the minister's wife, was *her* present. 'Twan't so grand as the other one, but 'twould maybe be just as useful. 'Twould help the folkses to keep warm on those cold nights "out there by the ocean," and be a keepsake from friends back home, besides. People gathered around as Grandma spread out on her lap the bright-colored pieces of silk and velvet: all cut from the womenfolks' best dresses, she said, and from the menfolks' neckties—ties were all the menfolks had to contribute! When she'd got the pieces all collected, she would put them together with feather-stitching and make up a spread. Grandma was noted for her feather-stitching. "Us? Can we have pieces in it too?" the children were all pleading. Grandma told them, yes, everybody would contribute pieces, little ones as well as big.<sup>2</sup>

In a curiously appropriate way, this passage describes Miss Suckow's unpretentious but warming gift of fiction to any reader willing to accept the products of her talents. With painstaking care, in novels and short stories alike, she snips, fits, and joins her observations of Iowa farm and small-town people, both children and adults, well-to-do and poor, then featherstitches the entire spread by her somewhat detached, uncondemning presentation. There is just one exception to the analogy: Miss Suckow refuses to confine her choice of material to bright dress-up samples. More often than not, the cloth of her fiction comes directly and sometimes darkly from workaday habits, daily worries, conflicts, disillusionments. Her people do not so much lead lives as follow them, often along the downward zigzag of misfortune, age, or loss of innocence. Yet the total effect does not become depressing, probably because the author manages throughout her work to communicate a quietly realistic acceptance of people and events as they change, and to see genuine worth in that reality.

I grew up in a period [Miss Suckow writes in "A Memoir,"] when, whatever its other failings, there was at least a great hunger for truth—objective truth, so far as that is possible, and truth wherever found. I felt I must be free to search for this truth. And to me, aesthetics was not ornament, but an expression of truth in beauty.<sup>3</sup>

The major aspect which must be understood about Miss Suckow's truth is that she never confuses it with the sensational. Her own back-

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Suckow, *New Hope* (New York, 1942), p. 318. In a letter to John T. Frederick dated June 2, 1951, she states that she had just finished this book. "It is almost the only time I have written what would literarily be termed a personal view. . . . The piece is not contentious, though, or written to persuade but to record experience."

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Suckow, "A Memoir" in *Some Others and Myself* (New York, 1952), p. 173.

ground influenced this approach. Born into a minister's family, she described her father as a "liberal, temperate man," who "liked to talk to all sorts of people. . . . The most original thing about my father seems to be that, while he was such a sharply defined individual, he was not eccentric in the least." She had a chance to grow up hearing sermons every week which contained "no padding, but a purity and economy of style and of organization. His manner of preaching contained no false climaxes, singsong or sentimentalism, no play-acting, no bid to the gallery. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

She transferred this inheritance of mind to print, giving up consciously, no doubt, the chance of popular ephemeral success for the more valued goal of satisfying her own artistic beliefs which were remarkably consistent with her religious beliefs. The following two passages, for instance, while referring to her religious convictions, apply equally to her writing practice:

I realize more and more what such a religious upbringing as mine does have to give, and that it is something positive, not negative. Yet it seems to be the kind of experience which, because it is not sensational, more a matter of gradual natural growth, tends to be passed over, or if spoken of, misinterpreted.

. . . the word [liberalism in reference to a religious attitude] also implies generosity of mind and spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Because of this deliberately quiet, unsensational approach, Miss Suckow's work does tend, in our scrambling age, to be "passed over." But because of the "generosity of her mind and spirit," and the perceptive record she created from her time and region, future readers may come increasingly to reopen her books for an accurate, perspective-restoring portrayal of midwestern modest living before TV, Big-Frog-in-Big-Pond-Ambitions, and Prosperity combined to work their leveling changes on most Americans across the country.

To be successful as a regionalist, it seems to me an author must surmount three steps: He must 1) know and use the particulars of his region; 2) use those particulars to express universal human experiences; 3) express both particulars and experiences well.

Certainly Miss Suckow managed the first two steps. Her characters still move in kind in the more rural areas of the Midwest today. Generally law abiding, church going, conservative, independent, frequently with German names and faces, they still run the course of the generations like the Kaetterhenrys in *Country People*, resign themselves to

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

their young people leaving, as Ralph Chapin's foster-mother had in "A Rural Community," gossip about and sometimes disrupt the lives of their minister as in "Wanderers," react miserably to town retirement after a life of farming, like Seth Patterson in "Retired," or August in *Country People*. They go to hearty food-laden festivals where talk ranges from weather to misfortunes (sometimes identical), tend cemeteries as though they were extensions of their homes, keep the cats mostly to the barns, and gather for family reunions or funerals despite marked differences in personality, position, or age. Their lives still hold a broader community involvement than is typical of compartmentalizing cities. Not long ago, in Tama, I saw the local doctor answer a cafe owner's inquiry about an injured friend by drawing on the back of his lunch bill a picture of the exact farm machinery part which injured their patient-friend. It is close, concerned, informed interrelationships like these which still mark Iowa (or any rural community), and which Miss Suckow developed especially in *New Hope* and *The John Wood Case* to the point where one man's action (Clay Hetherington's or John Wood's theft, or Mr. Greenwood's departure) crucially affected the feelings and actions of others in the community.

Some of Miss Suckow's particulars are peculiarly Iowan. She uses place names like Dubuque and Wapsie, lets the name sound often as "Ioway," puts pampas grass in the parlor vases, and in "A Rural Community," describes the "coloured sand in a glass arranged in the form of a wreath of flowers from the 'Picture Rocks' by the Mississippi." (Anyone wanting to check the intricacy with which colored sand has been arranged in bottles should visit the Des Moines Historical Museum.) Her settings are also familiar to Iowans—woods, roads, cornfields, barns, gardens, houses, Sunday School rooms, churches, main streets, side streets, lawns, and porches. As one familiar with Iowa, Miss Suckow uses sources firmly based on firsthand observations. She must have been intensely alert to people and stories from the time she was a child. Otherwise, she could not have described so many different people in such detail over a time span which stretched from the early 1880s to the mid-1950s.

To recognize the pattern of her sources, it is interesting to compare details she used in both *New Hope*, published in 1942, and *The John Wood Case*, 1959. In each book the main-viewpoint character is a boy, a great part of the action centers in church activities, the protagonist is attracted to a single and unobtainable opposite who leaves his life (Elaine rejects Philip, Delight moves away from Clarence). Minor characters have counterparts. Anton Rakosi, the town's foreign-born photographer in *The John Wood Case*, brings the outside world in as

does Ollie Jenks, the slightly mysterious stonemason in *New Hope*. Flor and Codie, dead sisters in the former, match the talented, educated Harper recluses, Amelia and Caroline, in the latter. Dave Miller, Clarence's friendly, balanced father plays the same steady, fair, rational part as Mrs. Merriam in *The John Wood Case*.

The strongest evidence of common source material, however, lies in the double entry of crime into Miss Suckow's novels. The paradise that New Hope seemed to be and the innocence of Clarence are first seriously disturbed by the church janitor's apparent theft of funds. In *The John Wood Case*, it is not only the Wood family's life that is disrupted by discovery of the deacon's embezzlement. Col. Merriam is made an old man, friends are turned into enemies, men and women are forced to doubt the truths and relationships they had taken blithely for granted. Only the young minister emerges stronger, but sadder, from the community wound. It is interesting, but hardly necessary, to find this corroborating statement by Miss Suckow as to why the theme of evil affecting more than evil-doers played so recurrent a role in her artistic consciousness:

. . . a tragic situation . . . concerned the misuse of funds—common enough; but to my father, this tragic happening, involving one of his dearest friends and most trusted church members, was of almost crushing nature. It touched me through my parents.<sup>6</sup>

Evil, of course, is one of the universal human experiences which the novelist ought to confront in order to merit reading. What other human experiences concerned Miss Suckow? And what themes did she develop, based on these experiences?

Death attracted her more than birth because life, and what people did with it, was increasingly interesting to her as it advanced. Sometimes the reader gets the feeling that Miss Suckow must have called on every retired farmer, every spinster, widow and recluse, every grandparent and invalid in the whole of Iowa, and then pursued some emigrés to the Pacific Coast. It would be fascinating to estimate and tally the age of every character in every short story and novel she wrote. I sometimes feel the median age would edge toward 60.

Although she often wrote about children, and used them as protago-

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183. In his autobiography, *Seventy Years in Retrospect*, p. 174, W. J. Suckow refers to a possible prototype for John Wood when he describes "a leading banker . . . found guilty of having misappropriated funds. . . ." Ruth Suckow, in a letter to John Cowper Powys dated 8/1/57, wrote ". . . the story is really that of the effect upon a community of a man believed to be trustworthy who proved not so. Abstractly, I think of it as a 'confrontation' of the principles of love and truth. But I like to write more in concrete than in abstract terms."

nists, what interested her repeatedly was the change that must inevitably come to them, their loss of innocence. Thus, Florentine Watkins in "Eminence" has her triumph as the Christmas Fairy ruined when she first encounters envy and the loneliness of superiority. Doris Thompson in "The Big Kids and the Little Kids" must release her kitten as her parents must eventually release her—to prowl in the night. Patricia in "The Little Girl from Town" is shielded from the facts of life about the birth of kittens, but realizes the awful fact of slaughter when the calf she has admired is plainly destined for butchering. Daisy Switzer in "A Start in Life" hires out to work and finds her status lowered.

This revelation of truth is most carefully spelled out for Clarence in *New Hope*. His life has gone on idyllically, delightfully—parallel to the town's—until events force themselves on his growing awareness.<sup>7</sup> He observes his sisters' different tentative love relationships without understanding much about them. He hears his parents' and others' dismay over the janitor's theft, but still is not really touched personally. Then Delight, playing significantly at taking the veil, excludes him from their previously undifferentiated play, and he joins some older, less innocent boys in a hunt which ends with Clarence killing a defenseless muskrat. (For an interesting comparison in techniques, read Miss Suckow's account of this episode and Golding's account of the pig-killing in *Lord of the Flies*. Structurally, the episodes serve precisely the same purpose, but Miss Suckow avoids the sensational while still making her point.)

It is noteworthy that Miss Suckow alternates the growing list of revelations between those which affect Clarence directly and those which he merely observes. After the killing he regrets, he again is merely a distant spectator at the funerals of Mr. Budd and Mr. Broadwater (who have been New Hope's first losses). But personal, acutely felt grief returns again to Clarence when Delight leaves, and to Delight when, at the last minute, she realizes through all the excitement that she *is* leaving, and cries out "NO!" Nevertheless, the train bears her away. Clarence is left to resolve somehow the loss of all he's cherished by facing it but looking ahead.

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<sup>7</sup> Compare W. J. Suckow's entry on page 124 of his autobiography. Describing the real town of Hawarden, he wrote: "The church was young, and had worn no ruts, developed no hampering traditions. The people were amenable to any reasonable leadership and ready to give enthusiastic cooperation. No social cleavages had as yet become noticeable in the community; it was more like one big family. A spirit of enterprise was everywhere present. Everybody believed in the future of the town."

Change for children and adults alike fascinated Miss Suckow. Characteristically, the change did not need to be rapid. It could develop as slowly as the decay of a fallen tree in the woods, and still she would be interested in watching—and recording at almost the same rate—the process.

“Home is best” is a theme she frequently used, with many variations. In *Children and Older People*, Toldine of “Spinster and Cat” relishes her own ways; in *Iowa Interiors*, Enos Bush of “A Pilgrim and a Stranger” prefers a living death at home to a dead life in strange surroundings kinder to his health. “Be yourself” is another form of this theme, most clearly presented in “Midwestern Primitive” where city patrons of a would-be Inn reject Bert’s conforming attempts to please in favor of the old individual German ways of Bert’s unselfconscious mother.

“Control by others” is a darker theme. This occurs in “Wanderers,” where the minister is forced out by a split congregation; in “An Investment for the Future” where Rev. Albright is persuaded to sink his savings in worthless southern land; in “Mrs. Kemper,” whose life is ruined by her husband’s apparent indifference; in “The Man of the Family,” where the widow’s son discourages her possible suitor; in “Renters,” where the Mutchlers once again are dispossessed. Miss Suckow has compassion for these people, but her heart is on the other side—with Toldine, the spinster, who reflects: “The things she liked were the things that wouldn’t let themselves be caught.”<sup>8</sup>

But, in Miss Suckow’s vision, people are caught. Even in the midst of apparent success, failure is embedded. Philip Wood, of course, is her most elaborated example, along with his embezzling father John. One of Miss Suckow’s most dramatic stories, “The Top of the Ladder,” has a Richard Cory denouement when rich Joe Ramsey, whom Albert has always humbly worshipped, shoots himself. Miss Suckow doesn’t let the story end, however, before the effect of one man’s action on another is explored. Albert’s faith, his glory, his one sustaining crutch in life is snatched from him by the suicide. Miss Suckow is saying again here, as she said in *The John Wood Case*, that we live by what we trust in. Remove that trust, and something vital in us dies.

But how successfully has she stated her universals and particulars?

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<sup>8</sup> Both the name “Toldine” and the use of simple words to express complex living are reminiscent of Robert Frost’s style. The connection was not accidental. The Iowa letters show that Ruth and her husband, Ferner Nuhn, were corresponding friends of Frost, and stayed, at his invitation, for two months at his South Shaftsbury farm while hay fever season made him leave it. And where Frost knew farming ways, Miss Suckow kept bees to feed her chance to write.

Let me get the negatives out of the way first. In a more precise way than Thomas Wolfe, she sometimes offers too much detail. Some of the parlors she catalogued someone should have distracted her from before she saw everything. When, in "Four Generations," she observes that "The thin varnished supports of the camera stand glittered yellow and sticky," she's noticing more than an individual would normally notice, and the reader senses author intrusion. There's a far more successful use of detail at the funeral in "The Resurrection," when the naturally-heightened sensitivities of the mourners let them—and the reader—see every fern and scroll.

Miss Suckow's work sometimes suffers from repetition. One typical example will do. In "Renters," she mentions "Fred's teeth—but then his teeth would have to go." Two paragraphs later we meet "Fred, a lank, skinny fellow, with thin light hair and bad teeth, several of them gone." Another problem in her characterization is the curious flatness her minor characters sometimes reveal. She is careful to include both good and flawed people, but they are so consistently good or flawed in just the way she's set them up! Bertha in *New Hope* always looks on the dark side of things. Mr. and Mrs. Stiles always wrangle. The Groundhogs are always dirty. Even Mr. and Mrs. Wood are always considerate of each other, in a saccharine relationship, until external circumstances jolt them to a change. People just aren't that much of a piece under normal living.

One other important problem concerns viewpoint. Miss Suckow could well have learned from Miss Cather, or from John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* if she'd had the chance, to place an adult story told through the eyes of a child firmly in a reminiscent framework, so that she might get away with occasional unchildish lapses. Obviously, she was aware of control. *New Hope* begins and ends at the railroad station, with the arrival and departure of the minister and his family. *The John Wood Case* begins and ends with Philip in his bedroom. In both novels, the conscious repetition of setting stresses the enormity of the changes in between. But Miss Suckow might have had that much more freedom to let her protagonist's thinking range, and won our willingness to be convinced, if she had set up in some brief comment a retrospective view.

But enough of this negative and, to a large extent, hindsight criticism. Miss Suckow has much to offer, whether we consider her as a regional writer or not. She is adept at characterization or description in a few words. From Mrs. Kemper who "rocked too much, one foot always pushing at the floor, and her sallow hands fumbling at the chair arms," to Mollie "who always worked harder at anything that wasn't her own work, and wasn't what she was supposed to be doing,"



Miss Suckow's people stand out vividly. The words manage to give a flavor of the region and the work, too. In "A Great Mollie," a man and wife are summed up: "Lu don't have time from five o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night to pick all the grass by hand around the trees. Charles goes back and forth to the office." Or the weather conditions are stated so that we see and feel the times: "The hitching posts were too hot to touch."

Sometimes Miss Suckow uses conversations to characterize, or to indicate very divergent opinions. Two of the sisters in "Mame" would have made the same observation of their brother differently. "You look kind o' thin, Louie," Mame would have said. Grace would have said accusingly, "Aren't you thin, Louie? What have they been doing to you?" Again, in "The Resurrection," "It is not herself," the daughters thought. "It is herself," the old man felt. . . . Her household look was gone from her."

What Robert Frost asked for, to hear the voice in the words, Miss Suckow almost always accomplished. Someone narrating "The Renters" obviously says, although there are no quotation marks around the original passage, "Next, wasn't it Gus Niederfranck he had worked for?" Bertha's "a-ready" at the end of sentences is comfortably familiar in *New Hope*.

Miss Suckow will even use a comment to unify and anticipate her plot. When John Budd dies in *New Hope*, Bertha says, "Ja, this is only the first." Her cronies, those women around the kitchen table had joined in, "When one of the old settlers goes, it means others to follow. They've begun to go now." And the chapter is set for the next funeral Clarence observes.

Miss Suckow uses objects as well as dialogue to make smooth transitions. The homesick Mrs. Albright in "An Investment for the Future" sees pecan nuts, and her memory triggers a long flashback to hunting walnuts in Iowa. In "A Pilgrim and a Stranger" Miss Suckow uses the moon to shift viewpoint. Son Harry sees it complacently from his front porch; his ill and homesick father sees it rebelliously from the bedroom window—an alien moon until he can see it as his own familiar possession over his own old house.

Sometimes her use of objects is fairly obvious as symbol for what she wants to represent. Halfway House becomes a consciously recognized symbol by the wife in "Good Pals" of her halfway dilemma between being wife and mother. The deep bruise Clarence receives just before Delight leaves is an outward physical sign of his inner emotional suffering. The frustrated Laura Haviland owns nothing but "the old house, the trees, the fallen petals on the lawn."

Where her handling of objects works best, however, the results do

not stand out so obviously on first reading. The same heat which pleasantly warmed the railroad station at the beginning of *New Hope* was a totally different heat from that which blazed at the end. Then the station stands with "blistered . . . yellow paint. The steely blaze on the railroad tracks seared his eyes." Here Miss Suckow uses her characters' reactions to objects and sensations to express their inner turmoil, without stating it overtly.

In the same way, her irony comes through very quietly. In "Up-rooted," Sam has bullied and jollied his parents against their wishes to live with some of their children, and leave the home Sam despises for its decay. The closing paragraph is simply this, from Sam's viewpoint: "Lord! He would be glad to get out of that hotel and back to his own home again."

*Iowa Interiors* has a double meaning, referring both to the scenes presented, and the inner emotions of the people moving through those scenes. A portion of the final paragraph of the final story, "Golden Wedding," is a fitting summation of Ruth Suckow's lifelong interest in those interiors, whether she dealt with them in short stories or in novels:

The irritation died away into calm, and she lay holding in the solitude of her own mind deeply felt, wordless things . . . as she had done in countless other nights; holding quiet both the beauty and the bitterness, encompassing them in the tranquillity of her comprehension.

# THE BONNEY FAMILY



## RUTH SUCKOW

Front dust jacket of Ruth Suckow's *The Bonney Family*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1928.

