

At the Jr. Algonquin Roundtable

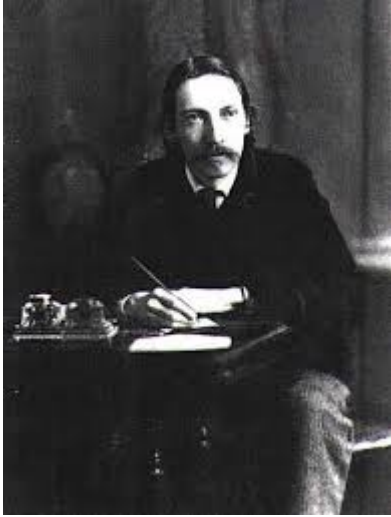
by Con Chapman

It's the end of August, time for me to check on the kids to see how well they did with their summer reading lists. Things haven't changed much in our little town since I was a boy; every spring when school gets out a prim, lavender-scented woman at our local library draws up a list of ten categories, and parents agree that each boy and girl who reads a book in all of them by Labor Day gets a reward.

Summer reading fun!

There's fiction, non-fiction, history, poetry, science, sports, biography, hobbies, geography and romance. I was kidding about that last one just to see if you were paying attention; the tenth category is mystery/free choice, so the aging Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew hardbacks on the shelves still get a workout, as does Duns Scotus, the Scholastic philosopher generally known as the Godfather of Free Will.

I call the boys into the den—they know what's coming. I never actually got a cupcake when I was a kid, because—story of my life—I'd choke on one single category (usually poetry) rather than sucking it up and reading “A Child's Garden of Verses.” My sons are the product of breeding, as you might expect, and have acquired the stick-to-itiveness of their mother's side of the family; finish the job, no matter how inconsequential or boring, for somebody might be looking, or it could come up on your performance review.

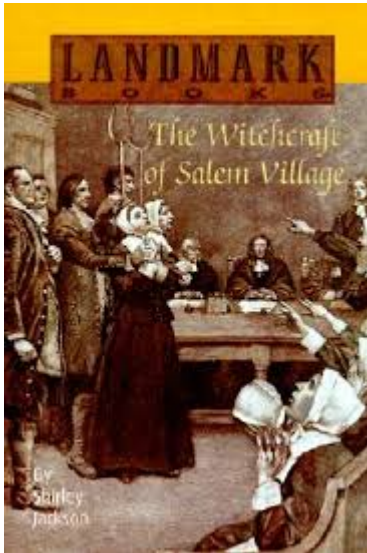


Stevenson: "God, I was hoping I wouldn't appear in this post."

"Let's see what you've got here, Skipper," I say to the younger of the two, a "rising" fifth-grader to use the new performance-enhanced lingo of the education profession. "Well, looks like you're going to get a cupcake, young man!" I say proudly.

"He didn't finish *"The Witchcraft of Salem Village,"*" his big brother Scooter says, tattling on him. I'm projecting him to be a first-round draft pick by the National Security Agency in about ten years.

"Skip—is that true?" I ask. This is a subject close to my heart, as the book in question was one of my favorites growing up.



“I got too scared,” Skipper says, stifling a snife—I mean stifling a sniff.

I lift him up on my knee to impress upon him the importance of the matter. “Skip,” I say with as much fatherly gravity as I can muster, “it’s important for you to understand just what happened here in Massachusetts back then.”

“What?” Skip says—he’s fighting back tears.

“Here in the cradle of liberty, one of our most precious freedoms is the right to harass our neighbors if they’re really weird.”

“Like how?” Scooter asks—he’s interested now.



MAVRA OBT AND HER PERSECUTION.

“More rocks!”

“Well, crazy old women, and men who own land you want—you call them names, pretty soon everybody hates them, then you burn them at the stake.”

“Cool!” You know that was Scooter.

“Or you crush them under rocks until they confess,” I add.

“What if they don't?” Skipper asks.

“Well, they'd better, because until they do, you just keep piling more rocks on them.”

I can tell from Skip's furrowed brow that he's somehow troubled by the superficial unfairness of our unique system of justice, admired the world over. “You don't have to worry about somebody innocent dying,” I tell him as I plop him back down on the floor. “Once our elected officials and newspaper of record and blow-dried TV reporters start a witch hunt, they're never wrong. Just ask them!”



Coakley: "We all make mistakes—but I don't have to admit them."

He's mollified, so I turn to his big brother. "Let's see, Scoots."

He hands me his card and I have to squint to make out the title in the Poetry category. "What's this say—'Arsenal and Other Poems'?"

"It's *Ariel*," he says correcting me, referring to the landmark second volume of poems by Sylvia Plath, the overrated poetess who grew up one town over from us.

"Really?" I say, and I try to work as much skepticism into that word as I can. "Who suggested that book?"



Plath: "What's your problem—everybody else likes me."

"Ms. Frobisher," he says, referring to his fifth grade teacher, a young woman whose hyper-political approach to earth science caused our little elementary school to crap out of the *pâpier-maché* volcano regional tournament without making the finals for the first

time in the 21st century. That's what you get when you blame dinosaur extinction on George W. Bush.

It's time for Scoot's Little Lesson in Life from dad. "Scoots," I say gently but firmly. "That book has a lot of racist and anti-Semitic images in it."

His faces clouds over. "That means it's bad, right?"

"I don't think so—all the critics thought it was great."

"But—they told us on Diversity Day," Scoots begins, but I cut him off.

"Diversity is for saps," I tell him. "When you're a liberal poet—like Plath or Tom Paulin—you can say anything you want!"

I'm not sure they're persuaded, but I'm the only published poet in the house, so they defer to my aesthetic ruling.

"Well, an objective judge might disagree with me, but I'm your dad so I'm going to sign your cards."

"Yay—cupcakes!" Skipper yells.

"Not so fast, young man," I say, putting the brakes on his enthusiasm. "Cupcakes are dessert. First you have to have a wholesome dinner."

"But we get an afternoon treat," Scooter says.

He's right, and I see from the fancy faux-antique clock that my wife bought to make my man-of-letters cave less comfortable that it's three o'clock, the Pavlovian point at which by routine the boys' mouths start watering for a snack.

"All right. But you can't have a cupcake on an empty stomach. First you've got to have cocktails."

The two look at each other as if I'm daft—they score very high on aptitude tests, by the way. "We can't drink anything in the liquor cabinet—you told us," Scooter says.

"We'll make some play cocktails. Why don't you call up Mary Beth Schoenen and Tommy Valvo and ask them to come over."

"If we do, there won't be as many cupcakes for us," Skipper says.

"I knew you guys would come through, so I got enough to go around. I want you kids to learn how to have a literary *soirée*."

"What's a . . . *swa-ray*?" Scooter asks.

"Since you're both so literate, now you ask your friends over for a Jr. Algonquin Round Table Party!"

"What's that?" Skipper asks.

"Well, the Algonquin Round Table was a bunch of funny men and women, all very well-read. They'd get together and make smart remarks about each other."

"Whenever we do that mom tells us not to be 'fresh.'"

"I know, bub. She's just trying to make sure you grow up to be a well-behaved, respectful young man so you can toady up to people who have more money than you."



Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley

"Why would I want to do that?" Skipper asks.

"So they'll give some to *you*!" I fairly shout. I'm tempted to say "Duh," but I refuse to corrupt the boys' speech the way I undermine their morals.

"Oh, I get it," Skipper says.

"Great. Well, let's get going—you call your friends, I'll set the kids' table and put out the Hostess snack treats."

The boys' friends arrived in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and Mary Beth Schoenen almost wouldn't come in when she saw the mess the lamb had made on the floor. "Eww," she said. "Lamb doody!"

"I'll clean it up, you kids sit down and start being witty."

Each of the boys took a card from our Jr. Algonquin Club deck; Skipper draws Robert Benchley, my favorite because we both lived in Worcester, Mass., one of two—count 'em—two Roundtable members to come from the Industrial Abrasives Capital of the World, the other being playwright S.N. Behrman. Scooter picks George S. Kaufman, another playwright and author of several Marx Brothers screenplays; Tommy Valvo goes last because he's guest—the transvaluation of values as my buddy Fred Nietzsche would say—and selects . . . Harold Ross.

"Who's he?" Tommy asked.

"Only the greatest editor The New Yorker ever had."

Harold Ross

"What's The New Yorker?" Tommy asked.

"It's the magazine that keeps turning our dad down," Scooter said. He really knows how to twist the knife.

Mary Beth has only two choices, Ruth Hale and Dorothy Parker. I cross my fingers and hope against hope that she won't pick Hale, a tiresome feminist and a freelance writer more successful than me.

"Turn it over, Mary Beth," I said. Yes—Dorothy Parker!

"I don't want to be her," Mary Beth said, her little mouth turned upside down into an exaggerated frown.

"Why not, sugar?" I asked.

"She was unhappy."

I don't have any daughters, so I was a bit uncertain as to how to proceed. "Mary Beth—think of all the happy women you know, like your mom and her friends."

"Yes?"

"Don't you think they'd be *much* happier if they knew that people would be repeating their funny jokes nearly a half century after they died?"

She thought about this for a second; I could tell she was struggling with the concept of posthumous fame. “I don't think so,” she said finally.

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely interested in the workings of the female *litterateur's* mind.

“Because my mommy wants a new Sub-Zero refrigerator—she told my daddy.”



“Hmm—more venom, or more spleen?”

“Oh, okay,” I said. I should have known that people in our wealth-obsessed suburb would make bad choices and prefer material comforts while they were alive to acclaim that they couldn't enjoy once they were cremated and their ashes scattered over unsuspecting sunbathers on Cape Cod.

“Well,” I said to Mary Beth, “in Jr. Algonquin Club, as in life, you have to play the cards you're dealt, so you're going to have to be Dorothy Parker, okay?”

“Fudge!” she said bitterly, and then—much to my surprise—blurted out a little quatrain that sounded like something Parker might have written when she was a girl:

*You tell me how I should prefer
Future fame to stuff in the present,
I disagree, and I demur
I'm not a stupid peasant.*

"That's very good for a little girl," I said. "Where did you learn that?"

"We did a unit on Depression as a Fuel to Creativity in Language Arts," she says, before excusing herself to bang on the bathroom door. "I'm not through!" Skipper calls out from within.

Things settle down in a bit and I make the kids a pitcherful of lemonade "martinis" that I serve with a raisin garnish. Skipper starts to gulp his, but I remind him to observe ceremonial conventions. "Somebody needs to propose a toast."

"I had toast for breakfast," Tommy says.

"Not that kind of toast—you say something fitting about the occasion."

"Like what?" Mary Beth asks.

"Well, for example, if one of you got an A on a paper . . ."

"We *all* get A's on our papers," they say in unison. I'd forgotten about grade inflation.

"Okay, well, if one of you just got a big part in a school play, or won the talent contest."

I see four sets of lips purse together as they think for a moment. "I got a gold star on my drawing the other day."

"Okay, let's work with that. Guys—anybody?"

Skipper, the natural gentlemen, rises to the occasion: "To Dorothy," he says as he stands up and raises his glass. "On her latest, but most assuredly not her last artistic triumph!"

"Hear, hear!" I say. We all take a sip of our lemonadetinis.

"Now what?" Scooter asks.

"Now you all make cutting remarks about each other. Mary Beth—why don't you go first?"

She looks around the table until her eyes lock on Scooter, as if he's an animal caught in the crosshairs of her rifle scope. "You stink!" she cries out.

"Do not!" Scooter fires right back.

"Kids, please," I say, intervening as a thoughtful, conscientious parent should when a party game threatens to spin out of control.

"But you told me to!" Mary Beth pleads by way of excuse.

"I should have made myself more clear. You have to proceed by indirection if you want to be known as a wit."

"What does 'indirection' mean?" Skipper asks.

"It means you have to insult your friends in an obscure roundabout way. So if Mary Beth thinks Scooter stinks, she can say 'I think I'm going to change seats. Being downwind from Scooter is like walking along the beach at low tide.'"

"Ew!" Tommy says, holding his nose. "P.U.!"

They all giggle except Scooter, who is not known for his adherence to high standards of personal hygiene.

"Okay, Skip—why don't you give it a shot," I say, encouraging my younger son who can be something of a wallflower in grade school social settings.

He looks around the table, and both Tommy and Mary Beth put on their most innocent faces, hoping to divert whatever spleen Skip may be capable of venting onto someone else.

That someone is, naturally, Scooter, who has made his little brother's life a living hell for the better part of a decade, what with noogies, wedgies, Indian sunburn and—most painful of all—"monkey bites," a hard clamp with the hand to the region of the thigh right behind the knee.

"Can I have your cupcake, Scooter?" he asks after a moment, in the sweetest, most genial voice you can imagine.

"No, dubohead," Scooter snaps. "Why would I do that?"

"I didn't think you'd still be hungry," Skipper says, "after picking your nose and eating it all day."

