

BEHIND THE BOOK - IN REVERE, IN THOSE DAYS

Though I don't recall what it was about, I know I was working on a different novel then, in the summer of 2001. We'd just had our second child - who celebrates her fourteenth birthday this week - so it's possible that, on some level, I was thinking about my own earliest years, about family life, about all the things a person goes through as he or she grows.

About 200 pages into that novel, I decided I didn't like where it was going. For reasons I can't precisely remember now it felt false to me, as if I were writing, not from inside but from outside, with the fashion of the month on my mind, with critics' voices in my brain. I clearly remember sitting where I'm sitting now, on this warm July night, in the second-floor writing room (eight feet by twelve, with five windows looking out on the greenery) and reaching a point where I was disgusted with the falseness of the pages. "Screw this," I said out loud (actually, what I said was stronger than that, but 'screw this' conveys the spirit well enough). I set the new book aside - months of work - sat at the laptop and poured out 30 pages of something new before I went to bed.

The next day I looked over those thirty pages and they seemed promising. I'd written about my own childhood in Revere, Massachusetts, living upstairs from my father's parents, and within walking distance of 28 cousins and aunts, uncles, and grandparents on both sides of the family. Our yard on Essex Street was like a small slice of Europe: a huge vegetable garden, a grape arbor twenty people could sit beneath, two different kinds of pear trees, two different kinds of cherry trees, plum trees, a bocce court. On Sundays, my father's seven siblings and their spouses and their kids would come to visit his parents, which meant that the yard was full of aunts, uncles, and cousins. We'd separate into groups, roughly according to age, and run and play and make up games for hours and hours, swinging through my grandmother's kitchen periodically for a cold-cut sandwich, a meatball or two, something to drink. The uncles and aunts would hug us as we made those pit-stops. They'd ask about our lives, tell us we were loved, send us back out into the happy maelstrom.

There were difficulties in that family: addiction, separation, illness. But there was something particularly warm and loving about that group of people. I can't honestly remember anyone trying to make anyone else feel bad, can't remember many harsh words or jealousies or petty squabbles. Those cousins were like brothers and sisters to me, and those Sunday afternoons were an unforgettable festival of love and food.

But I knew I was writing for an educated and sophisticated audience, people who were skeptical of that kind of unblemished warmth, readers who found any kind of sentimentality to be the marker of an amateur, and even some men and women for whom "family" was a label for a miserable arrangement, not love. The trick was - and 'trick' is the right word - to try to be as honest as I could, to silence the echo of critics' voices and allow myself some sentimentality, but, at the same time, not to simply wallow in nostalgia and make happy lives that seemed unreal.

Sad things happened to Tonio that did not happen to me and, with the exception of the grandparents (the only characters I have ever drawn exactly as they were in life) the cousins,

aunts, uncles, and friends, were made-up characters, combinations of real people, observation, and imagination.

I wrote from inside myself, knowing, as I did, what it felt like to leave that warm nest of love and go out into a world that, from my earliest days, I had wanted to explore. Exeter Academy - Tonio enrolls there - was another kind of heaven for me - though I know that memory goes against the experience of some of my classmates, who found the school to be competitive, harsh, and unfeeling. But, in truth, I loved the place. Two hockey rinks, playing fields, kids my age from all over the world, interesting classes, a Grill where I could eat cinnamon buns and hamburgers and milkshakes between breakfast and lunch, woods where I could walk off my sadness or depression or adolescent confusion. A lack of violence and argument. The sense that studying and learning were admirable activities.

Still, trying to straddle my two worlds was another kind of trick, and one I couldn't always manage. There were aspects of Revere that I loved, and aspects of Exeter I loved, but there were many places - humor, for one - where the two cultures did not overlap. It felt strange to me to call my teachers Mr. and Ms., when I'd always called my parents' friends by their first names. The unspoken rules in each place were often vastly different, and I couldn't always navigate that emotional territory.

Neither could Tonio. So writing *In Revere, In Those Days* became, as writing often does, a kind of therapy for me, a way to work through my deepest difficulties and puzzlement, a way to understand myself and say what I wanted to say about my own experience of being alive. Maybe that's why I sometimes say it's my favorite book.

Something controversial happens near the end of the novel. I've occasionally wondered if the book would have sold better if I hadn't put that in, if I'd resorted to a more typical climax, if I'd listened to the imagined voices of critics. But I wouldn't change that if I had the chance to rewrite it now. Tonio's grief found its mate in the grief of an older woman he met by chance. He was exploring the world of meditation then, the contemplative world - something I wouldn't begin to do until I was five years older than Tonio was at the time - and this woman turned out to be his guide in that world. The practice of meditation has become so central to my life that I couldn't imagine living without it now. Revere and Exeter are both embedded in me, but, thanks to meditation and writing, I've learned to blend them, to take what I love from each world and leave the rest, to understand who I am apart from those places and those experiences, to be myself wherever I go and whoever I'm around.

It was with *In Revere* that I realized I had to write about what I really, deeply, honestly cared about, and I've tried to stick to that idea in the novels and books that followed. That isn't easy. There are various pressures - money, the fashion of the times, critics, editors, agents - pushing in other directions. But I can't write from any place outside my center. Or, at least, I can't enjoy writing from any other place. I'm glad and grateful now that I had the courage to set aside that other book. What became of those pages, I don't know; maybe they're in a drawer someplace in this house, maybe not. Some ideas from that story no doubt found their way into future novels; that's how it works for me. So those months weren't wasted time, really, just what the Buddhists might call "practice."

If I have a regret about the novel it's the title. Originally I wanted to call it *The Idea for Me*, which comes from an important line in the story. But my editor, Shaye Areheart, convinced me to try other titles and we eventually settled on *In Revere, In Those Days*. Impossible to change that now, of course, or to change anything I've lived through or put into print. We all carry our history around inside us. I try to remember the joy and triumph, and to think of the pain and failure as simply the mortar between bricks, not pretty, but indispensable to the lives we have built.