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Books for Adolescents

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Books for adolescents

Lisa Ann Richardson

A retrospective with Maureen Daly

Richardson: You were very young when you began writing, weren't you?

Daly: Yes, I was. I had published short stories before I wrote *Seventeenth Summer*. When I was 16, I wrote a short story titled "Sixteen" that won a national short story contest sponsored by *Scholastic Magazine* and it was printed that year.

I began writing *Seventeenth Summer* during my 17th or 18th summer, and I finished it when I was a senior in college. I was short a credit in English to graduate, and a professor gave me one full credit for writing the novel. I had no clear intention of ever having it published. The book was written when I had decades ahead in which to do whatever I wanted. So, I think I envisioned it as writing "poetry for myself."

Richardson: The characters in *Seventeenth Summer* portrayed the lives of you and your sisters?

Daly: Yes. Angie Morrow represents my life at 17. I was well aware of sexual emergence, and even then I was trying to show that sexuality is a given in any human life. I think Angie was in awe of the wonder of it, yet she welcomed the increased feelings of passion and involvement. In that 17th summer, she did not intend to go into deep sexuality. Her innocence, possibly, was that she never faced squarely *what she meant* to do.

For me, there was no personal self-consciousness in writing that novel. In my little town, to have a book such as that published meant revealing how I felt about the young man I was spending time with. It took a certain amount of courage to be frank because it was like allowing people into my most intimate life.

When I did get a book contract an editor wanted me to include some scenes in which one of the sisters has

an abortion and Angie knows about it. I think it is a credit to my judgment as an emerging artist that I just refused to do that.

I said to him, "It could occur in someone else's summer, but it could not occur in Angie Morrow's summer." It was partially a moral judgment on my part, and I was determined to set a mood. I felt an abortion would be too jarring an element. It would rob Angie of any "perfect" experience of her own. Her own emotions would have been overshadowed. She would have reacted with sympathy and horror and sadness for her sister. Angie never admitted—even to herself—that her sister was having an affair.

Richardson: *Seventeenth Summer* has continued to be a success over the years. Why are young people still reading it today?

Daly: *Seventeenth Summer* deals with falling in love for the first time. The first love experience is of prime importance in any life.

That novel is totally a naive and honest outpouring of feeling. I wrote it for myself. Yet I touched some eternal interior truths. Almost by mistake, in speaking of myself, I inadvertently spoke for a lot of other people. It was amazing. In my teens, I was so overjoyed at sheer existence, I wanted to record that feeling, "This is magnificent!"

Another reason I believe *Seventeenth Summer* has continued to survive is that it has some pretty persuasive language in it. And it has a very nice thread of suspense; not a hard-boiled mystery story, but it works.

Also, for all its innocence, there is a strong sexual beat through the entire book. Young people sense that strongly and respond to it. They identify it with a growing sensation in their own lives.

There is a section in the book in which the characters, Jack and Angie, go on a picnic. Eventually they leave the group around the fire and go off into the woods together. Librarians have told me that the four to five

pages covering that incident are often torn out of books, and though it wasn't my intent, there is a distinct feeling there that Jack and Angie's romance had become ultimately sexual. I guess it was suggested strongly.

I've met a lot of people as I travel around the country who still have their own first copy of *Seventeenth Summer*. They have kept the book after all these years. It is like a talisman of youth for them. A friend of mine recently read that a town in Florida ran a moratorium on overdue books. A woman returned a copy of *Seventeenth Summer* she had withdrawn in 1942. She had kept it until a month ago. She said, "I liked it too much to bring it back."

Richardson: *Seventeenth Summer* has been viewed as a milestone in the field of young adult literature. What contributions do you see that it has made?

Daly: Recently, English professors at the University of Nebraska and teachers from the Nebraska school systems met and were analyzing *Seventeenth Summer*, so I'm repeating what I heard there more than what I've thought myself. They found that *Seventeenth Summer* was considered a "turnaround" book for young adult literature. Before *Seventeenth Summer* there had been books like the Ruth Fielding series and the Tom Swift series where stories were told, stories which made little attempt to show a realistic picture of adolescent life. So, *Seventeenth Summer* was considered the first to break the barrier of showing real sexual feelings of teenagers. Also, it briefly treated the issue of homosexuality, an unspoken issue at the time. And there are realistic hard drinking scenes in *Seventeenth Summer*, not too prolonged, but they are there all right. We all smoked and drank a lot.

It never occurred to me *not* to write about those things. I wrote about what I wanted to write about. There was a jazz pianist who played at a place called the Rathskeller, and he wore nail polish. At that point homo-



Maureen Daly. Permission to reprint granted by Maureen Daly.

sexuality was not as open as it is today, as I've said, but I was well aware of homosexuality. I was also aware of the kind of courage it took for that young man to wear red nail polish in such a small town as ours. Supposedly, these elements have caused *Seventeenth Summer* to act as a turnaround book for the entire field of young adult fiction.

Its publishing history makes it an unusual book in itself. The novel came out 50 years ago this last April, and it is still in every library and most bookstores in both hardcover and softcover. It prompted many very good writers to turn toward writing to and for young people of America with a more realistic look at what their lives are like.

Richardson: Are there other elements of *Seventeenth Summer* that influenced the young adult genre?

Daly: *Seventeenth Summer* was not written as a young adult novel, incidentally. It was published to be an adult novel; it was reviewed as an adult novel. There was no such thing as adolescent literature in that day. I am very grateful

that many librarians now mix the classics with contemporary YA novels.

Seventeenth Summer proved to the publishing world and writing world that a lot of money could be made in the YA market. Many talented writers turned to writing for adolescents, and they have had distinguished careers. It opened up the minds of librarians and teachers even further to the fact that young adult literature could be true literature.

Richardson: In your writing you express a passion for nature.

Daly: I am glad that you noticed that. Everyone has a "right" to nature. Most of us have responded to flowers in the spring, snow, and leaves changing. My own emotions are influenced by nature. This has created in my books a feeling of universality. If one loves nature, one has a gift that is invaluable. There is always something for you ever moment you are awake, every time you go outside. You can see and feel, and that is magnificent!

Richardson: Are you in the process of writing another book?

Daly: Yes, and the subject is so strange you'll wonder why I'm doing it. I'm writing a book about a young woman of today who decides to enter the convent. It is a deep love story, as all of my books are, I guess. It is a story of her personal evolution in her attempts to enter the convent and what she finds there and why she leaves. The title of the book is *Mariette Loves J.C.* There are so many people who are deeply religious, and I am religious in my own way. This is a very challenging book.

I became partly interested in writing *Mariette Loves J.C.* 3 years ago when I took a trip to West Africa and spent a lot of time with the young people of the Masai tribe. Only the young males in the society are school educated. They are usually taught to read and write by Catholic nuns. There was a time when the Catholic nuns were the educators of much of the world. People who might have been nuns in the old days might be members of the

Peace Corps today. Both were trying to make a life better for a lot of people.

I was educated by nuns and have found them mostly interesting and informed women, often ahead of their time. They built hospitals and grammar schools. A lot of young people today would like to be doing that kind of work. The question remains: Is it possible today to obey the rules of the convent and still recognize the problems of today's world? That's what I'm exploring in this new book.

Richardson: How did you prepare for writing *Mariette Loves J.C.*?

Daly: I did a lot of research for it. I spent a month on my own college campus, at Rosary College in River Forest, Illinois. I was teaching creative writing, but I lived with the nuns in the convent. Then I went to the Dominican Motherhouse in Wisconsin where all the nuns do their final studies. I interviewed many nuns there. Finally, I spent 3 days in a lovely, tiny, old fashioned convent in Hayes, Kansas, where everybody wears secular clothes. On such limited budgets, all of their clothes are secondhand, and yet they're keeping the school open. I found the visit very touching.

Richardson: How do you capture the interest of your readers?

Daly: In *Mariette Loves J.C.*, the chief thing that I want to do is make it highly readable for those who don't care one bit about the subject. In the other books, I wrote for myself, not for a particular audience. With this book, I have to use techniques to engage people's interest initially.

Like *Seventeenth Summer*, *Acts of Love*, and my other books, *Mariette Loves J.C.* has a very strong man-woman relationship. It is a complete involvement with human beings and how they are going to turn out, how each is going to handle the terrible emotional claims life makes.

Richardson: How has being a reporter and an editor influenced your writing over the years?

Daly: Sometimes I have too much

material in the first drafts because I am so interested in detailing facts. One of my books, *First a Dream*, was about a third too long. For example; I tried to be accurate about what an Arabian horse eats. "Standing there nibbling at the hay" is all I had to say. Being a reporter makes me tend to be overly explicit. Also, it makes me observe everything. For instance, I rarely go to a supermarket or a party that I don't come out able to describe the room, the people, the conversation in detail.

Richardson: What concerns do you have for young adults today?

Daly: I am concerned about the lack of opportunity for individual resolution of lives. I am troubled that many people can't find work or meaningful work and are not trained to earn a living. It is not necessarily an individual's fault. Living in impoverished areas or city ghettos puts up obstacles and barriers that can be almost insurmountable. If I woke up in the morning and had nothing to do, I would be in despair. Too many young people are currently in despair about their futures.

Because of television, young people are assaulted every day with the problems and the oppressions of others. In my day we were all great newspaper readers; we had a lot of radio, but we didn't feel as responsible for the entire world as many people feel today.

Richardson teaches at Pearl Sample School in Culpeper, Virginia.

Young adult books by Maureen Daly (current editions)

Acts of Love. New York: Scholastic. 1986. US\$2.75. 164 pp. ISBN 0-590-43631-7.

First a Dream. New York: Scholastic. 1991. US\$3.25. 224 pp. ISBN 0-590-40847-X.

Seventeenth Summer. New York: Scholastic. 1968. US\$2.95. 291 pp. ISBN 0-671-61931-4.

Computer software

Peggy Nelson
Judith Cochran

Writer's Helper for Windows: Pre-writing and Revising Software.

1992. CONDUIT (*The University of Iowa, Oakdale Campus, Iowa City IA 52242, USA; 1-800-365-9774*). US\$135.00. *Includes instructor manual, user manual, and protected software with backup. Hardware and software requirements: IBM PC, PS/2, or 100% compatible; 1MB of memory, 286, 386, or 486 microprocessor; hard drive with 400K of free disk space; mouse; DOS version 3.1 or later; Microsoft Windows 3.0 or later installed on the hard drive; 3.5" floppy drive (for installation); printer and color monitor recommended.*

Conduit's *Writer's Helper* was a computer program that attempted to present reading and writing skills in an integrated format that could be used by students individually or in groups and to provide for teachers to write curriculum-relevant material. Now the revised *Writer's Helper for Windows: Pre-writing and Revising Software* incorporates activities that teachers have been asking for as well as improvements to previous activities, combining the word processor and Windows' powerful features. It can be used by adolescents who know how to use a Microsoft Windows word processing program.

Writer's Helper for Windows is a collection of activities appropriate for a variety of writing assignments arranged into two major types. "Prewriting activities" offers ways for students to choose and explore a writing topic, helping them to narrow the topic and then to organize their information in preparation for writing. "Revising tools" allows students to analyze various characteristics of a document in order to locate structural and grammatical problems and to help them improve their writing style.

The program is designed for secondary students from the enrichment-starved sixth grader to the floundering high school senior who hopes