INTO THE WOODS

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A Berkshire Boyhood: Confessions and Reflections of a Baby Boomer
By Robert J. Begiebing
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"WE STOOD ON THE ROCKS OVERLOOKING THE PACIFIC OCEAN preparing to spread my father's ashes among the breakers." So begins Robert J. Begiebing's engaging memoir of growing up in and around Williamstown, Massachusetts, in that most clean-cut of all American decades, the 1950s. Begiebing, a Mailer scholar and frequent contributor to the *Review*, describes a Sylvain landscape of hills and fields, lakes and streams, a world removed from grown-up obligations and worries. That his reflections begin with an ending, the final tribute to the complex and wayward personality of his father, establishes the feeling of loss surrounding the events of this short book. Begiebing, we find, regains his sense of place by returning to New England after adolescence on the West Coast, but recovering the youthful freedom of the Eisenhower-era Berkshires proves more elusive. The tranquil days of summer vacations are with us, and then gone.

Begiebing's time in California nevertheless begins his academic and creative life. Citing Ross MacDonald, an unlikely source for sentimentality but a perfect one for hardboiled authorial advice, creativity is predicated upon a sense of separation, a "particular distancing" that motivates beginning artists to regain what is lost through creative expression (125). "When I first moved to arid, overdeveloped Southern California," he notes, "I began writing a sort of nostalgic, romantic poetry describing the Berkshire landscape.

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Remembered streams and lakes and ponds figured heavily in the sentimental doggerel I cranked out. Writing them gave me a sense of relief that the Berkshires had never really left me" (94). Such inspiration ignites only the chosen few. His sister Joanne, Begiebing speculates, "lost happiness when she left Williamstown," and, without motivation to recover that place through painting, word, or song, suffered the wounds of separation without respite (142).

While sense-of-place emerges as his most prominent influence, informing both the content and artifice of these memoirs, Begiebing's father has a complex presence, invoking affection, perplexity, and acceptance, often on the same page. One of Begiebing's colleagues, enjoying an advance peek at the manuscript, says that these memoirs represent "a kind of agonized love letter to [Begiebing's] father" (83). This statement is an assessment that may be based more on a relationship with Begiebing rather than evidence contained in these memoirs. But Begiebing's father nevertheless looms large over the rolling Berkshire landscape.

Robert Hugo Begiebing had been a sailor and self-trained engineer, life qualities tempered by the carefree ways of the weekend jazz musician and serial philanderer. His wartime experience as Sonar Man Third Class, along with his ability to fix anything mechanical or electrical, offered Begiebing-fils a powerful masculine template. Reading, after his mother's death, previously-hidden documents related to his father's military service, Begiebing comes to realize the extent of paternal influence on his life. These uncovered papers form the basis for an extended homage to the soldier's accomplishments, but the darker aspects of that influence, as cautionary tales often do, similarly worked for the best. "Unlike my brother and older sister," Begiebing writes, "who both rebelled as adults, I would ultimately respond to my father's womanizing, bad marriage, carousing with musician cronies, incipient and later alcoholism, and unhappy movement from one employer to another by seeking stability in my life" (144–45).

Begiebing credits his adult success as a scholar, teacher, and author of eight books to an application of enormous self-discipline, a stoic commitment observed and mentioned by those around him (39). He can intellectualize, now, about the derailment of his parents' marriage using the adult language and mature reason unavailable to an eleven-year-old boy. He mentions, for example, D. H. Lawrence's feeling that "the deeper connections, all the potentials of love, all the glories of unconstrained sex" are missed by far

too many romantic couples, including Robert Hugo and Pat Begiebing. "The battle for such personal transformation," he writes, "is a struggle against one's family, one's culture, one's values inculcated since childhood; one's whole otherwise supporting social structure. We all have the darker liberating blood within us, but it's hard not to believe many post-War Americans denied it, and perhaps still do" (40). Ultimately, the personal connection and romantic ideal recommended by Lawrence requires the same kind of separation from society, the same kind of mortal wound imagined by MacDonald, required to build the creative personality.

Begiebing's own artistic sensibilities may have emerged in those early California pastoral verses, but a later break with the ritual and traditions of the Catholic Church signified his intellectual independence and anticipated his later creative success. An extended reflection on religion reveals Begiebing's commitment to nature and to the intimations of something lasting, something beyond our corporeal experience. "My early connections to the Berkshire landscape," he writes, "had formed a foundation for my sense of a spiritual power in the natural world and living beings. By the time I was in my twenties, the Church well behind me, I began to seek my sense of the sacred in nature, a search less consciously begun during my Berkshire boyhood" (78). Begiebing's wonderment at nature, at times nearly pagan in tone and import, implies that there is hope yet for human beings, but his tone suggests just how unrealistic and far-off such salvation may be. The formal religious teachings of his boyhood in the Berkshires restricted sexuality denied the body, and above all asserted the inability of common people, without Church, Pope, or priest to minister to their own sacred consciousness. "A true secralization of life on the planet," he maintains, "would re-connect people to both their sacred bodies and to the sacred earth, to their native landscape" (80).

Despite plentiful theorizing about religion, the sources of creativity, or the foundations of social happiness, the eye-opening revelation in this memoir, surprising to Millennial readers but perhaps self-evident to Boomers, is that children in the 1950s enjoyed freedom and autonomy unknown in our culture for the past half-century. "In the summer," he recalls, "we left the house after breakfast, returned for lunch and then left again, returned for dinner (or supper as we called it), and left again after doing the dishes, until we were called in for bed in the early years or came home, later, according

to various curfews" (68). Those were more trusting times, and that peculiar protectiveness of helicopter parents, so evident today, was virtually unknown.

Books, films, and popular and scholarly articles in the past few years have examined the phenomenon of modern cosseting parenthood and contemplated the advantages of leaving kids alone to wander, fight, fall, and get a scraped knee, or worse. "Hey! Parents, Leave Those Kids Alone," an article by Hanna Rosin in the April, 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*, reviews some valuable resources. Geography student Roger Hart, for example, completed a 1972 dissertation compiling a "geography of children," a map of the territory covered by kids during playtime in a rural New England town. This study of a bygone childhood culture affirms Begiebing's observations about the freedom of kids just a few decades ago. "Reading his dissertation today," Rosin notes, "feels like coming upon a lost civilization, a child culture with its own ways of playing and thinking and feeling that seems utterly foreign now. The children spent immense amounts of time on their own, creating imaginary landscapes their parents sometimes knew nothing about" (82).

Similarly, Vermont filmmaker Erin Davis believes that engaging in risky behavior and making decisions empowers children and promotes mature thinking. Her forthcoming, Kickstarter-funded documentary, *The Land,* chronicles a Welsh playground where kids are free to light fires, pound nails with hammers, climb trees, and generally devote time to the dangerous autonomy that Begiebing chronicles. Boston College psychologist Peter Gray, in his essay "The Play Deficit," analyzes the relationship between the passing of the raucous 1950s childhood culture and the depression, narcissism, and over-medication of today's Millennials. And educational psychologist Kyung-Hee Kim, in "The Creativity Crisis," a paper published in 2011, points out that student scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking have steadily declined over the past decade or so. Rosin implies that this widespread diminishment of creative faculties in the classroom is the direct result of modern parents' cuddling, insulating ways. Thus creativity, for a new generation of children, is inhibited not only by the social institutions Lawrence worries about, but also by the fundamental lack of access to the rough play so easy to come by just a few decades ago. Begiebing's memoir emerges as a primary anecdotal artifact for this new discourse on parenting and maturation.

The memoir, indeed, is loosely organized by a Radio Flyer-load of child-

hood micro-catastrophes, peccadillos, and clubhouse secrets that compose the memes of classic American youth. Whole chapters are devoted to "Spies and Spying," "Sleeping Out," "Snakes," and "Our Pedophile," all concerns and experiences looming large in the childhood consciousness. Young Begiebing shoots a bird out of the air with his treasured BB-gun, camps in a cabin in the woods built by a previous generation of young ruffians, catches fireflies in Mason jars, finds stray condoms, tolerates a local biddy's horrendous stories, and cuddles the family dog, Duchess. A full-page photo reproduces, in full-fledged 1950s black and white, the cropped book cover image of the young Begiebing dressed in classic cowboy togs and sitting proudly on a small paint pony. The young rider's smile is almost alarming in its innocence. Always creative, he invents his own words for common neighborhood people and events, and is gratified when this new language is adopted by his family. A slightly more mature Begiebing, aged fifteen, would discover the confusing wonders of exploring below the waistband of a girl's pants, but the unbridled joy and shame of peaking at women in the family bathroom—and getting caught!—at a younger age somehow has a more elemental presence in the narrative. If kids are experts at anything it's taking risks, making stupid decisions, and somehow forever getting a pass for their actions. As Begiebing's Cousin Ron would have put it, "Dumbshits!" (111).

The universality of Begiebing's childhood experience is an undercurrent throughout the narrative's misadventures and triumphs. Case-in-point: Emily Fox Gordon's *Are You Happy?*, a chronicle of growing up in Williamstown that Begiebing sees as a parallel narrative to his own. Other sunburned kids, he realizes, reveled in creek, pasture, and woods. "We are, in fact, a nation with a number of such charismatic landscapes and enclaves. When I look back on my Berkshire childhood and youth, I realize my memories and feelings toward that place are part and parcel of a more universal experience" (135).

Begiebing is my senior, but not by much, and I can testify to my own idyllic summers in the damp hollows of West Virginia. With my Daisy BB gun I shot, not a bird, but a bat, in mid-flight. I lazed in hammocks hung from the rafters of an old clubhouse built by an earlier gang of youths. I caught fireflies, encountered snakes. I slept out in a tent borrowed from some older boys, friends of my sister. I suffered through gruesome stories told by our aging neighbor, the rheumatic Mrs. Price, who sometimes had supporting photos from an early-century physician's surgery. I spied, using a homemade

periscope, on women using our family's bathroom. I wondered at the stray condom found in the road, "sold for the prevention of disease only." I was photographed, decked in my own cowboy duds, astride a donkey, that Appalachian substitute for the horse. Our family had a dog named Duchess.

Yet somehow it seems, without tabulating evidence or support, that these transcendent, almost occult, moments of youth differ in both quality and type from the everyday lives of children in post-9/11 Western culture. Does Facebook count as a clubhouse? Does Minecraft mimic orchards and streams? Perhaps the passing years will devalue our experiences and the questions will be moot. "The sixties and seventies, let alone the fifties, if alive in many a memory and imagination, are by the decades of the 2000s dead and gone" (139).

Begiebing's concerns about the passing of authentic childhood experience takes on a global dimension midway through the narrative. Citing Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s autobiography *A Life in the 20th Century*, Begiebing affirms that artists in the 1920s confronted obstacles against autonomy and individuality much like those of today: religious fundamentalists, gonzo patriots, omnipotent corporations, and the shifting notions of politically-correct behavior all challenge the freedom of thought and choice that should constitute basic human rights (137). The artist's divergent thinking, that cerebral push against society observed by Lawrence, may require even greater resolve as human societies and cultures converge. As Begiebing observes, "The disciplines and hypocrisies we've built into our system of living crash against other systems and living beings—and never more than now as our economic, ecological, and political arrangements grow more intertwined, global, and parlous every year" (84). Begiebing seems to chronicle not only childhood's end for a wide-eyed, mid-century Berkshire boy, but for the whole of an automated, accelerated human culture.

Just as the book opens with Begiebing mourning the passing of his father, I began reading his memoir on a trip to visit my own ailing dad who, aged ninety-six, was under hospice care and beginning to give out. He would not live to see me off on my return trip home. Begiebing's description of the grief and guilt experienced at the passing of a parent made my own feelings even more pronounced. Each of our fathers had been a product of the Greatest Generation, depression kids who grew to experience mid-century war and the relative prosperity of the 1950s. Begiebing, to me, seems intuitively right about the commonality of experience, the connection developed

worlds apart by rough-shod children heading into the woods on a dangerous mission of freedom. Will this shared experience be there in quite the same form for another generation? Does it matter, after all? We have Begiebing's engaging memoirs, if not to answer these questions, then at least to document their astonishing yet ordinary source.

Video previews of Erin Davis's The Land *are available at playfreemovie.com*

WORK CITED

Rosin, Hanna. "Hey! Parents, Leave Those Kids Alone." *The Atlantic* Mar. 2014: 74–86. Print.