

Trouble

Marsha Brock



Of all my siblings, I am considered most steadfast, the one least likely to disappoint or worry my parents. Circumspection comes naturally to a firstborn child. I was born cautious, and, as a child, I developed an uncanny ability to spot trouble and a profound respect for its consequences.

I grew up in a small town in the late '50's and early 60's, a town with few perils and only topographical boundaries to limit wandering play. In my small town, I was free to roam from dawn to dusk and from border to border--from up at the top of Park Street where the Chestnut Ridge began and where street signs ended to the very edge of Peanut, the coal patch that marked the unofficial boundary of town. Within this field of play, the endless streets and the intricate alleyways, how could I not encounter, at least once a day, something my parents

warned me not to touch, something my common sense told me to avoid, something my conscience feared but my imagination craved. Something desperately drawing me in. Despite my careful ways, I found myself irresistibly drawn to the possibility of mischief and adventure.

Mischief seemed compelling, and it appeared in all seasons and in varying guises. Dangerously swollen creeks in March. A garage window left carelessly open on Fourth Avenue. Whispers behind closed doors. Rumors. Locked gates. Suspiciously empty doghouses. A perfectly good bike tire thrown away and calling my name from the bottom of Mrs. Hunter's empty well. My father's hand saw newly-sharpened and left without supervision on a sawhorse. A full box of penny nails. Unsuspecting mailboxes. On endless summer days and in brief winter hours between homework and dark, adventure was a worrisome temptation. Luckily, I learned in childhood that caution could, on occasion, be cast aside. A little adventure could be undertaken. But it could only be undertaken in the presence of younger siblings, for if circumspection is the birthright of a firstborn child, culpability is the birthright of those who come after him. My sister Kathleen, the world's most gullible girl, was born to be blamed!

My sister Kathleen. We were only fifteen months apart in age, yet, as we grew, our personalities became increasingly dissimilar. I loved reading. I immersed myself in glossy-covered series books like *The Bobbsey Twins*, *The Boxcar Children*, *Donna Parker*. My literary heroes were attractive and pretentious youngsters whose mischief merely amused the adults in their lives. Trixie Belden didn't get grounded. Nancy Drew got away with anything. This led me to conclude that a kid could embark on mischief without fear of repercussions only if he were charming, rich, beautiful, spunky, or lucky enough to be a character in a book. I was none of these things. My parents sniffed out and snuffed out a plan even before the first egg had been stolen from the refrigerator. The only thing I really had going for me was that I was the oldest. There was always Kathleen.

Kathleen didn't care about books. She thought my paper heroines dull. She liked her heroes larger than life, true blue and uncomplicated, and, because of this, mostly celluloid. She adored television cowboys: Sugarfoot, Artemis from *The Wild West*, Heath from *The Big Valley*. The Rifleman was her idol. Imitating the guts and glory of cowboy shows, my sister galloped on an imaginary pinto and practiced her shot with a cap gun. She perfected her bravado, and she waited for the first signs of trouble. To her trouble meant just one thing: Indians. When Sioux warriors failed to materialize on the playgrounds she scouted religiously, she sought alternative dangers.

We were destined to become partners in crime. I was wimpy but inventive. She was gullible but brave. Who needed spunk? Nearly every Saturday morning, we set out from 501 North Chestnut Street in search of unknown escapades. Once, with a gang of friends, we dragged an old refrigerator box from behind Edsall's Appliance store into a grove of evergreen trees behind the Catholic church, and, for weeks thereafter, I concocted scenarios based loosely on books, scenarios that revolved around being kidnapped, abandoned, shipwrecked, trapped, chased, harassed, harpooned, marooned, buried alive, eaten by ants, or held captive in schools by teachers gone bad. Being imperiled was always the plot. Wielding a whipping branch pulled from a sycamore tree or a handful of chestnuts--and walking with a swagger bred by hours of watching *Bonanza*--she strode or rode or screamed bloody murder into our big cardboard shelter and, depending on her role that day, marauded or rescued or, sometimes, both.

I devised financial schemes inspired by the enterprising protagonists in the books I read. When I suggested designing and selling handmade Barbie clothes, she smuggled the pinking shears from the sewing box and stole the mink hat from my grandmother's closet. When I proposed scientific experimentation that might save the world from ultimate demise, she shoved grasshoppers into greasy mayonnaise jars. When I inspired her to run away from home like *The Boxcar Children*, she heisted two lawn chairs from Mrs. Sweeney's front porch, dragged them two blocks, hauled them up a rickety ladder and onto the roof of the Malesky's new carport. She was resourceful. She was not easily daunted. Piously good or nefariously evil upon demand, she took direction wordlessly. Crusader, pirate, thief, sheriff: it mattered little to her. She put on purple tights. She put out fires. She accepted dares so dark they had to be whispered. She leaped from lofty heights. She ate almost anything for a dime!

She wore capes carved from Aunt Nannie's damask tablecloths, and she pulverized fireflies to make phosphorescent paint. She stomped on the air hose and ran. She rang the doorbell and ran. She picked up the screaming cat and ran. On my command, she liberated clothing from clotheslines, matches from desk drawers, cereal boxes from their contents, heels from shoes.



Without the instinct to worry or the inner voice to warn her that trouble is the misbegotten child of mischief, without a need for too many details, and without too many tears in the punishment that inevitably followed, my sister Kathleen--a child of chivalry in fringed polyvinyl chaps, all alone in the Dorazio's toolshed poking pencil holes in a five pound bag of flour--opened the doors to childhood adventures that I was too timid and too terrified to open for myself.

In the Bottom Land

Marsha Brock

In the bottom land at Wildcat, West Virginia,
The confluence of the Little Kanawha River
And a nameless mountain stream,
Test a traveler's tenacity,
Dictating whether he may ford the waters
To reach the road that resumes beyond
Or whether he must turn back,
Climb around the mountain to Rock Cave
And descend from there,
Clinging to a serpentine county road,
To stand in surrender
Here upon the sandy banks opposite
Where he stood
Over an hour before.

In the bottom land of Wildcat, West Virginia,
Miner Jordan's house has collapsed,
And its crumbling chimney sinks
Into fallen walls softly turning to ivy and pine
Recovered by the mountain that knows its realm
And whose fingers are flood and rust and vines
That reach up from the ground itself
To reclaim those places where
Here once stood
An old sign, a rickety bridge, an iron gate
On a tenuous road home.

In the bottom land at Wildcat, West Virginia,
Fog reclaims the meadow
When night falls.
An austere presence, acknowledged by silence,
It stays time and swallows the hollers and runs,
Erasing distance
And making ghosts of rock piles and fence posts.
Here tractors abandoned in fields
Pause in sacred stillness
When, in the fog, borders vanish,
When, on the porch, a window of yellow light
Becomes the known world.



Off With His Head: Teaching in The Kingdom of Adolescence

Marsha Brock



A freshman in high school lives in a land reigned by himself and inhabited by other selectively chosen fifteen year-olds. His is a realm in which outsiders do exist but only marginally so. Parents, teachers, coaches, and adults in general shout from the beyond the borders of his land, largely unable to cross over. Asking a freshman to consider the opinions of anybody other than His Royal Highness or those At Court only confirms his disdain.

Because of this, those of us in the classroom face staggering odds in vying for student attention in the Kingdom of Adolescence, a land where authors hold even less stature than English teachers. Yet, because ours is the job of expanding intellectual horizons, we annually arm ourselves for battle. We plan an encroachment. We ask ourselves whether and how we will accomplish one of our most crucial forays into The Kingdom: a crusade dedicated to moving students beyond the young adult fiction and self-exploratory writing of middle school and into literature and writing of a more conceptual and a more analytical nature. We know of the connection between reading good literature and accomplishing good writing, but how do we help a freshman--who prefers his court jesters to short stories and who shows royal disdain for five paragraph essays--to forge this connection? How do we get him to open his eyes? How do we help him see that, through literature, he might get a glimpse of a world beyond his castle walls? Few freshman are willing and able to admit that there might be an intellectual gap or, as in some cases, an intellectual chasm between his world and the world.

The best literature and writing transcends restrictive individual experiences and illustrates shared human experiences; therefore, as teachers of ninth graders, we guide a student toward the perception of other realities and in the direction of abstract ideas. We attempt to focus his attention and, ultimately, his pencil upon that point at which his own circumstances intersect the human condition. We want him to consider the elemental, the archetypal, and the essential. As teachers of ninth graders, we suggest with pages and prompts that conceptual truths do exist Out There. Common ground exists between himself and those who are not his friends, those not very much like him, and those who are not fifteen but fifty. Common ground exists between himself and even those who are poets ("Gross") and, even worse, dead poets ("Harsh").

To lead a student on this raid into increasingly sophisticated books and complex modes of writing--literacy experiences that may alter his perception--is not easy. With middle school students, such a raid may be ill-advised. Sometimes the Prince is just not ready. With high school students, such a raid can seem equally misguided. Sometimes the King just had a fight with his girlfriend. Nonetheless, somehow at this age and sometimes to our amazement, a ninth grader is able to recognize and, let the trumpets sound, to articulate, that universally-recognizable concepts and themes underlie most human experiences. Yes, even those sacred experiences at the very core of a freshman's existence.

Beneath the allure of a driver's license and the deadly arena of basketball tryouts, beneath the backstabbing of best friends and the enigma of parental logic, beyond the open passageway that leads to adulthood and slamming door of childhood lie concepts of fear

and courage, benevolence and betrayal, change and constancy. Is it possible, he wonders, that his life is not unlike every other life? Can he be Everyman? When a student recognizes that his poem of the beloved but ill-fated family dog is, in an elemental way, *The Call of the Wild* or that his narrative essay about the first time he drove to the mall by himself is, in essence and without the word “awesome,” *The Odyssey* or that his descriptive paragraph of his father’s childhood in Beckley, with a few minor revisions and few less obscenities, is *Catcher in the Rye*, he has climbed to the parapets of his fortress to view the world of universality. The world Out There. From upon this dizzying intellectual height, he may find that novels, essays, poems, lyrics, movies, and, yes, even *The Simpsons* and *South Park* suddenly say something significant to him. Comic books now sway with substance. Television commercials cry out for his interpretation. For a time, symbolism runs rampant and unchecked in the kingdom.

Perhaps in the last days of his reign, the freshman King, divine with the heady power of contemplation, lets us know that his *My Week at Deer Camp* is, pretty *much Lord of the Flies*. “If what’s his name hadn’t gotten the idea first,” he supposes, “we’re talking B+.” And this is a pretension that a high school English teacher is willing to abide. This is exactly where we want His Royal Highness to be: past a purely self-centered reality, poised on the edge of literacy, pleased with the possibilities.

In the closing hours of a school year, if all has gone according to an intrepid plan of literature analyses and crossed-fingers, teachers of ninth grade English recognize in some of their students a writer’s voice, a voice that shows that a student has undertaken reflection of his own past and retrospection upon his own experiences. He has begun to forge connections with thinkers outside the realm. In June, if all has gone according to a fortuitous plan of red pens and an exact and unerring alignment of the planets, teachers of ninth grade English raise their voices in triumph. “The King is dead. Long live the King.” And for this breathless hope, we begin again every September, undaunted, building word bridges over moats and constructing catapults with the brave pages of books.

