

# Talking to the Books

Ken Kalish

December 2018

It was already dark, but dark comes early on December 19th. It was wet, too. Somehow it had begun to rain that afternoon. With the exception of the theater and a few bars, stores were closed downtown. I was just driving slowly, aimlessly, thinking about visiting a grocery store when I passed our town's little book store by the post office. The lights were on and a small sign said the shop was open.

"What the heck," I thought to myself, "maybe I'll find a good read to keep me away from the television for a few hours."

A gruff male voice admonished me for being careless as I reached for the door.

"Careful! A rainy day in December means an icy evening."

Warm air from inside the store greeted me. A woman stood behind the counter, sifting through a small pile of paper. She looked up and smiled as I entered. She and I were the only people there.

Something clinked, a simple metal on metal sound, but it came from a bit further back in the store. I stepped over to see where the noise came from and there on the floor was a small, happy black lab thumping her tail against a book stand. Her joy radiated throughout the store, rendering invisible the shaven patch of hair marking the place where her right rear leg had recently been removed. She wiggled toward me on her belly, a small chain tink-tink-tinking against her empty water dish.

"Tripod!" the woman admonished the dog.

Neither the dog nor I chose to pay her any attention. I fondled the lab's ears, cooing to her as I pressed my nose against hers. Her baseball bat tail thumped a bookcase hard enough to tip over a volume of poetry.

"Tripod!" More sharply this time, and we sheepishly put aside our happy meeting.

"Anything I can help you find?"

"Just looking," I replied and began to wander the shelves that graduated from neat and orderly at the front of the store to jumbled and home-like in the odd little rooms at the rear. One room contained a rocking chair, some children's books, and a changing table. I wasn't going to find anything there, so I retraced my path some thirty feet to the front of the store.

I was perusing a shelf of titles written by and about the Ojibwa people when a Child's voice from slightly behind me and to my right said "Pick me!"

I looked to my right, then behind me. There was no one there. I resumed my scan of a book titled *The Assassination of Chief Hole In The Day*, a tale about a century old murder. That persistent small voice kept at it: "Over here! Pick me!"

A wireless speaker atop the shelf to my right was softly caroling old standards. I eyed it, my technological familiarity suggesting that it might be delivering subliminal messages activated by a

nearby sensor, but it was in the wrong place. It was in front of and above me. Maybe my hearing aids were acting up. I reminded myself to check the batteries when I got home.

“Over here,” and it dawned on me. I hadn’t heard that child’s voice in more than forty years nor her adult voice in eight, but I knew I could never hear her speak again. My mind saw her, proudly walking coming home from school in a grass-stained blue dress and announcing that she had just beat up the school bully from next door. The recognition brought with it a sad smile, a memory of her shouted last words to me, “I love you daddy!”

I knew why the woman behind the counter couldn’t hear it, but Tripod had begun a soft alto hum to let me know she could. My throat tightened a bit but I’m sure that was my COPD’s doing. I don’t know where that damn tear came from. An arrow of love buried itself in my heart.

“Here,” she insisted, “by the picture of sunflowers.”

There was only one book on the rack by the sunflower picture. It was a book I had somehow lost in the maelstrom of a divorce. This one was used, smudges on the jacket just where I remembered they should be. A long time ago we read stories from it and marveled at its Norman Rockwell pictures as Christmas approached. I picked it up and gently cradled it as I wandered the shelves.

Other books began to speak. His voice muffled by a blanket, Grant occasionally muttered, coughed, and damned his lungs. Twain wryly responded to Grant suggesting more whiskey. Lautrec countered, suggesting wine. Kerouac wondered aloud whether Grant knew about laudanum.

The balding Cezanne babbled in a pidgin version of French he somehow knew I intermittently used in Viet Nam, certain I could never converse in the language of love and equally certain his art told me things language couldn’t convey. I knew his incessant chatter would only go away when I picked him up.

Another spoke authoritatively: “You need me.”

“I do not need a book on that topic, thank you.”

“Well, you may not need me, but she does.”

“She who?” I asked the loud yellow cover. That caused the woman at the counter to look at me. I’d apparently spoken my question and she had heard. Tripod resumed her staccato tapping of the book shelf as a distraction.

“You know who,” the book said, “and don’t pretend.”

“Neither of us needs you.”

“She doesn’t know where to go or what she can do to become proud of herself again.”

“She might think I’m meddling.”

“No, she’ll know that you’re meddling, but she loves you.”

I surrendered. I picked up the loud book, if for no other reason than in the hope that doing so would shut it up.

Another book chimed in with a smoky Spanish accent from the other side of the store.

“There can be no song without poetry, no poetry without pain.”

“And love?”

“Love is pain,” her voice sadly explained. “It makes the kind of pain Rockwell made for you – an arrow in the heart.”

I gently drew my hand over her cover, momentarily touching a kindred soul. I tucked her under my arm.

The tone of Tripod’s banging tail changed, creating a steady ritual drumbeat, so I knew without being ordered to do so by a pushy book that I had to go back and see what the martyred Ojibwa Chief was offering. Once there I could hear a rhythmic, rustling undertone. My hand found the only children’s book in the broad selection and the sounds quieted. I thought I could detect a pungent odor, but Tripod was not smelly. I suspected I had neglected part of my morning “Marine shower” routine and continued my wandering.

A man’s voice, wise and gentle, said “He has to want it.” Squiggly lines were wandering over the cover of the book that had spoken.

“Want what,” I asked.

“Don’t be obtuse,” it said. “Art. Music. Words. Happiness. Pain. Love. Rejection letters.” The voice trailed away as the wandering squiggles firmed up. That parade of golden squiggles staggered into my arms.

I was beginning to have quite a load, so I took my somewhat forced selections to the counter.

“Is that it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the voices aren’t done with me.”

She smiled in a way that made me suspect books occasionally spoke to her, too.

I wandered a bit more, but nothing invited me to pick it up. A squabble broke out between a dry history of the 18th Amendment and how-to book about home brewing. The brewing book ended the argument by breaking out in a lusty version of I Like Beer.

Tripod politely asked for the dog treat she knew I was hiding in my pocket, and as I finished our quiet ear scratching session I handed a credit card to Tripod’s caretaker and signed away a few more dollars of my dwindling fortune.

As I opened the door a chorus of voices whispered “See you again soon.”

“Indeed you will,” I replied, “indeed you will.”