

Coming of Age in America

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly..." (I Corinthians 13:11-12)

Coming of age, especially in a small town, has always been a favorite theme in American fiction. In fact, stories depicting the American coming of age practically constitute a separate genre, complete with its own narrative formula and distinctive voice. From Mark Twain to Sherwood Anderson to Larry McMurtry, the loss of innocence and community has been chronicled for each succeeding generation.

Coming of age fiction, sometimes called "literature of initiation," usually describes the passage of a young protagonist from ignorance to knowledge, from naivete to worldliness, or from innocence to experience. The passage itself may be smooth and relatively uneventful, but more often it is bewildering or even traumatizing. The young character, in the course of the story or novel, learns something that he did not know before, something already known by the adults who surround him. That "something" may represent the discovery of evil, behind which lurks the assumption that to know good and evil is to lose the joy of innocence. The youth then seeks to come to terms with this knowledge and begins to achieve self-understanding. Thus, the initiation involves an important discovery about the self or about the world and a resulting adjustment to life or society.

Because initiation fiction centers on a variety of experiences, the initiations themselves vary in effect. Critic Mordecai Marcus has divided initiations into types according to their power and effect. "Tentative" initiations lead only to the threshold of maturity and understanding, but do not definitely cross it. Such stories and novels focus on the shocking effect of experience, and their protagonists tend to be very young. "Uncompleted" initiations take their protagonists across a threshold of maturity and understanding, but leave them struggling for certainty. These experiences sometimes involve self-discovery. Finally, "decisive" initiations carry their protagonists firmly into maturity, or at least show them decisively headed toward maturity. These experiences usually center on self-discovery.

The readings in this series have been chosen for their remarkable portrayals of adolescent initiations. The publication dates span nearly fifty years, from 1940 to 1987, and the settings range from a small town in Oklahoma during the Depression years to New York City in the early 1950s. Although lifestyles have changed dramatically from the 1930s to

today, young people still face the same hurdles of uncertainty, disillusionment, and even violence. They still reject adult values with the same forcefulness with which they embrace the values of their peers. More often than not, they still emerge from the coming of age process as reasonably adjusted adults. However, it's the narrative of the "passage" that concerns us. With an exploration of these threshold experiences will come remembrances of our own particular initiations and insights into those of the characters.

The Silver DeSoto

by Patty Lou Floyd

Life in the small town of Dixter, Oklahoma, during the Depression and Dust Bowl years seems flat and gray to Betty Jane Bledsoe, the narrator and observer of this town and her family. Living with her grandmother, Nanna, Betty Jane is a child just giving up naps at the opening of this collection of stories, yet by the end she is a young woman enduring the rigors of sorority rush as a freshman in college.

For Betty Jane, growing up involves coming to terms with family secrets and finding her own place both within and beyond Dixter. Her world is a matriarchal one revolving around her mother, grandmother, and several other strong women. The few men seem weak and passive--"Depression eunuchs," as Betty Jane's mother describes them. The girl understands that their passivity has something to do with the times. Betty Jane's own father is mysteriously absent, accounting for one of the secrets never discussed with her. The stories of her mother's divorce, her grandfather's drinking, her auntie's sickness and death, even her own mother's surgery and impending death--all are forbidden topics in Betty Jane's household. Somehow she must penetrate the shadowy adult world on her own.

As is common in initiation fiction, Betty Jane narrates her own story, allowing the experiences to unfold gradually as she grows up. By seeing events through her "innocent eyes," we feel ourselves maturing along with Betty Jane; as her vision unfolds, so does ours. An older and wiser narrator might feel bitter or sentimental about the past, but author Patty Lou Floyd captures perfectly the movement from ignorance to knowledge by using this youthful narrator. We are never allowed to see or hear more than Betty Jane herself does.

The eight stories shift in time between Betty Jane's childhood and adolescence, recreating all her family members who have died. In "Secrets," the first story, Little Auntie is brought to Nanna's house and carried to bed, bringing with her none of her previous exuberance and playfulness. No one explains to Betty Jane that her young aunt is dying, and she wonders what "terrible thing" she herself has done. Silence is likewise the response to her grandfather's death. However, the most poignant moment occurs in the

third story, "When Mother Played Moonshine," as Betty Jane faces the death of her mother. Only fourteen years old, she is unable to understand Nanna's bitterness at God, whose "mysterious ways" had taken two daughters from her. It is only later that Betty Jane derives some comfort in her grief. The title story, "The Silver DeSoto," describes her friendship with Bob Wyant, whose father owns the luxurious car. Both teenagers have recently lost their mothers, and they escape together for frequent rides in the silver DeSoto. Through their mutual need and understanding, a secret bond is formed that helps them survive.

By the time that Betty Jane leaves Dixter for college, described in the final story, "Second Best," we know that her initiation into adulthood has been "decisive." She may still have some difficult lessons to learn, such as accepting the continued absence and disinterest of her father. However, both her sense of humor and her compassion for those less fortunate demonstrate that she has acquired the survival skills for adulthood.

The Catcher in the Rye

by J.D. Salinger

Although we encounter another youthful narrator in Salinger's classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, the process of growing up for Holden Caulfield has been decidedly more uncertain and traumatic than for Betty Jane Bledsoe. In fact, Holden is recuperating from "this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas" in an unnamed sanitarium as he retells the events of those few days. During the course of his narration, Holden details the stupidity, indifference, and general "phoniness" of practically everyone with whom he has come in contact. From his roommates and fellow students to his parents and his teachers, everyone has been a disappointment to Holden. Perhaps it is his inability to notice those same imperfections in himself that has earned him a special place in literature.

The most noticeable quality of *The Catcher in the Rye* is its language. Rather than the mature language of an author looking backward, Salinger uses the actual "voice-rhythms" of an adolescent who is intent upon making us understand what has happened to him. His fear of slipping into phoniness himself leads him to repeat over and over, "I really mean it" or "It really does." He also resorts to a variety of "vulgar" or "obscene" words, a tendency which led to this novel's being recurrently banned by public libraries, schools, and bookstores. Underneath his rebellious language, however, is a sensitive adolescent struggling to communicate. Unfortunately, as a teenager he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him; as a sensitive teenager, he cannot even get through to others his own age.

In today's psychological language, Holden might be said to be experiencing an "identity crisis." He is scornful of all established authority figures and conventions as "very big deal," and even among his peers he finds no one he can tolerate, much less emulate. After describing his schoolmate Robert Ackly as pimply, dirty, disgusting, and hasty--as well as having a terrible personality--he tells us, "I wasn't too crazy about him, to tell you the truth." This understatement is typical of Holden's reaction to almost everyone he meets. Only his dead brother Allie and his ten-year-old sister Phoebe escape his scathing indictments. Curiously enough, it is the precocious Phoebe who confronts Holden with perception of his "real trouble." He doesn't like anything that is happening. When she asks him to name something that he'd like to be, such as a scientist or a lawyer, he responds with his desire to be "the catcher in the rye." Apparently his one goal in life is to stand in a field of rye and catch playing children in danger of running over a cliff. The impossibility of realizing this goal in the real, everyday world signals Holden's idealism and rejection of traditional pursuits.

No one can deny that Holden represents the classic portrait of "the crazy, mixed-up kid," but it is certainly debatable whether he has achieved any degree of insight into his painful growing up by the end of the novel. His former teacher, Mr. Antolini, tells him: "You're going to have to find out where you want to go." However, self-knowledge seems to elude Holden. The most he can bring himself to admit in the final chapter is "I sort of miss everybody I told about." Is this confession the beginning of wisdom for Holden Caulfield? If so, we are left with the feeling that he will turn out all right. Perhaps he has learned that the world can be loved in spite of its imperfections.

The Catcher in the Rye, then, focuses on a crucial phase in Holden Caulfield's life, the point at which he crosses the line from innocence to experience. He is hunting for his own adulthood, but doesn't want to lose his childhood. His ambivalence results in confusion and rebelliousness, both of which are recognizable stages in the process of growing up.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

by Carson McCullers

Published in 1940 when Carson McCullers was only 23, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* focuses on the lives of four characters who surround the deaf-mute John Singer. The least communicative of them is Biff Brannon, who seems content to observe the customers in his all-night café and file them away for later speculation. The second member of the quartet is Jake Blount, an itinerant socialist who dreams for social reform baffle most of the workers whom he strives to activate. The third individual drawn to Singer is Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a black physician who has long since driven away his wife and four children by his harshness and inflexibility. However, it is the fourth and youngest member of this quartet, 13-year-old Mick Kelly, whose story interests us the most.

Through her "conversations" with Singer, Mick reveals both a courageous and a rebellious spirit as she moves from childhood into adolescence and adulthood.

Although Mick Kelly does not narrate her own story, as did Betty Jane Bledsoe and Holden Caulfield in the previous two novels, we nonetheless gain a privileged view through the eyes of a girl whose dreams for the future seem destined to fail. Growing up in a large family in the deep South of the 1930s, Mick is burdened by the care of two younger children, by poverty, and by frustration of her ambition to become a musician. She is irresistibly drawn to Singer, who lives upstairs in the shabby boarding house run by Mick's parents. His attentive silence and thoughtful eyes entice her to confide her secret dreams as well as fears, none of which she shares with her taunting older sisters or her preoccupied parents.

Described early in the novel as a "gangling, towheaded youngster" of about twelve, Mick appears at first glance like a very young boy. She spends her summer days pulling her two younger brothers, Bubber and Ralph, around town in a wagon. She is foolhardy enough to climb to the rooftop of a house under construction, spreading out her arms like wings and shouting triumphantly; on the other hand, she is practical enough to know that her chances of ever owning a piano are non-existent. Thus, she contents herself with listening to concerts on the radios of families who happen to leave their windows open, and later on she listens to the radio that Singer buys for his friends' pleasure. This music she stores away in the "inner room" of her personality, calling it to mind when she needs to escape from the realities of life in the "outer room"--her father's disability and lack of work, the hunger resulting from too many people and not enough food, and the isolation that drives her to seek out Singer.

Several incidents coincide to bring about Mick Kelly's "coming of age," some tragic and accidental, and others simply inevitable. Fortunately, her sexual initiation merely baffles her with its unexpectedness and brevity, rather than traumatizes her. She thought that everyone would notice a "difference" in her, yet no one did. In her own estimation, though, "she was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not." Other, more subtle changes occur as she empathizes with the plight of her parents. One evening, for no particular reason, she suddenly knew about her Dad: "He was lonesome and he was an old man... he felt like he was cut off from the family... he felt like he wasn't much real use to anybody." Finally came a happening so important that it changed everything: she accepted a job at Woolworth's for ten dollars a week and "earned her keep." Although the original plan was for Mick to return to school in the fall, she knew that it would be impossible for her family to get along without the money.

In spite of the troubling incidents that jolt Mick Kelly into a decisive maturity, she remains a positive character. Her defiant final words, "O.K. Some good!" demonstrate her fighting spirit. Above despair, she will attempt to overcome the unfair sacrifices that society has demanded of her. Eventually her bitterness and anger may even enable her to defy the overwhelming odds against her.

The Last Picture Show

by Larry McMurtry

Growing up is not just a matter of growing older. Coming of age demands that we work through conflicts, no matter how trivial or complex, and that we develop lasting relationships. Both conflicts and decisions about relationships dominate the action in McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show*. As Sonny Crawford and his best friend, Duane Moore, experience the dubious pleasures of their senior year in high school, they become painfully aware of the passing of a time that can never be recovered. The fights that erupt and the unions that form will create decisive initiations into adulthood.

The setting of McMurtry's novel--an imaginary West Texas town called Thalia during the mid-1950s--is reminiscent of Patty Lou Floyd's small town of Dexter, Oklahoma, in *The Silver DeSoto*. Both towns offer few diversions to the local teens, most of whom spend their time dreaming of getting out and "goin' somewhere." However, one notable difference exists between the two locales: Thalia, Texas, is indeed more threatened than Dexter by the exodus of its young people to urban centers such as Wichita Falls, Dallas, or Houston, cities which offer more exciting choices. McMurtry seems to chronicle the passing of a place and time as well as the passing of youthful innocence.

Unlike the adolescent protagonists we have already encountered, Sonny and Duane are "prematurely emancipated" high school seniors, living together in a rooming house and supporting themselves through part-time jobs, though each boy has one living parent. They spend most of their time in the pool hall, the "picture show," or the local café. On weekends they share Sonny's old pickup for dates, Duane with the rich and sexy Jacy Farrow and Sonny with her boring and plainer counterpart, Charlene Duggs. The real action of the novel begins when Sonny decides that he doesn't even like Charlene and breaks up with her after a year of steady dating. Thereafter, the novel recounts the unpredictable changes in Sonny's life against the backdrop of changes occurring in the town of Thalia.

McMurtry's portrayal of Sonny and Duane is characterized mainly by their sexual needs and curiosity. In fact, all of the townspeople (but especially the teenagers) seem to be preoccupied by sex, either by the allure of forbidden sex or the boredom of routine marital sex. After Sonny becomes "available," he falls into a surprising affair with Ruth Popper, the neglected wife of the high school football coach. He continues to be drawn

by the seductive powers of Jacy Farrow, though, especially after she drops Duane and looks for excitement elsewhere. It is the conflict over Jacy's attentions that provokes a fight between Duane and Sonny. Even though apologies are made, their friendship never regains the same level of trust. Duane enlists in the army and soon departs for Korea, while Sonny is left feeling like he has been "completely erased."

With no reliable adult to guide him through the maze of troubles and changes, it is no wonder that Sonny is left feeling as empty and alone in the final pages of the novel as in the beginning. We are reminded of a poignant question that he asks Sam the Lion several months earlier: "Is growin' up always miserable? Nobody seems to enjoy it much." If Sonny's initiation is any example, then all we can count on is disappointment, loss, and confusion. However, if we're fortunate, perhaps we'll be offered the consolation of an understanding friend like Ruth Popper, murmuring, "Honey, never you mind..."

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