

BOOK REVIEW

*March 8, 1994
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Bragdon, Allen D., ed. *Can You Pass These Tests?* New York: Harper & Row/Perennial Library, 1987. 317 pp.

Douglas, Jack. *A Funny Thing Happened to Me on My Way to the Grave: An Autobiography.* New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1962. 181 pp.

Exman, Eugene. *The House of Harper: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing.* New York: Harper & Row, 1967. 326 pp.

Harrison, Sue. *Mother Earth, Father Sky.* New York: Doubleday, 1990. 274 pp.

Hugon, Paul D. *The Modern Word-Finder.* New revised edition. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1934. 420 pp.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* 1916; repr. New York: Viking Press, 1964. 253 pp.

Macdonald, Malcolm. *The World from Rough Stones.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974. 570 pp.

Needham, Walter. *A Book of Country Things.* Recorded by Barrows Mussey. Brattleboro, VT: The Stephen Greene Press, 1965. 166 pp.

Verne, Jules. *Le Tour du Monde en Quatre-Vingt Jours.* With introduction, notes, direct-method exercises, and vocabulary by Alexander Green, Ph.D. 1872; repr. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1926. 301 pp.

The writers of *thirtysomething.* *Thirtysomething Stories.* New York: Pocket Books, 1991. 431 pp.

Most of you probably came today expecting to hear a book review, and you will not be entirely disappointed. But you know how sometimes you start watching something on TV thinking it is a documentary, and it turns out to be an extended commercial? In the trade, those are called “infomercials,” and that is what I plan to give today.

As you undoubtedly know, I serve on the board of the Friends of the Fairhope Public Library as publicity and membership chairman, and I hope to perform both those functions today, first by publicizing our upcoming used book sale and then by encouraging you to join the Friends so that you can attend the Book Sale Sneak Preview for members only—but more about that later.

As you can see, I have brought quite a stack of books with me today, and those of you who picked up one of the handouts have a list of the books in that stack. These are the books—more or less—that I bought at the Friends book sale last year. One of these books was actually one of Mother’s finds, and I think one or two of these books may be purchases from a previous year, and these may not be all the ones I bought last year, as I didn’t record them individually, but they will serve my purpose, which is to illustrate the bargains available at the sale.

Before I talk about these books, let me explain something about my book-buying habits. For the most part I *don’t* buy books. Perhaps I should amend that to say that I almost never buy books just to *read*. I read about 100 books a year, and almost all of those are either checked out of the library or given to me by people who do buy books. When I buy a book, it is likely to be a reference book, usually in my field of editing or desktop publishing. Occasionally I buy an anthology with the idea of passing it on to the library. But I don’t ordinarily buy novels (hardback or paperback) or any other book that I will read only once. To me, that is what a library is for.

Furthermore, I really *try* not to buy books at the Friends book sale. Every room in our house (except the bathrooms) has at least one bookcase, and they are all full, full, full! Since I find it difficult to get rid of books, I try not to acquire them. But, hard as I try, I always succumb to the overwhelming temptation at every hand at the Friends book sale.

Starting at the top, *Can You Pass These Tests?* is a perfect example of the kind of book I like to find at the book sale because it’s the sort of book I’d like to read—or at least look at—but wouldn’t want to pay \$10.95 for, and the library would be unlikely to get it because it’s paper-bound. When I see it for a dollar, though, I can’t resist it. I am always intrigued by tests—when I was in high school, I used to say that aptitude was my best subject—and all of these tests are intriguing: they cover subjects from real estate salesperson, which I happen to know something about, to baseball umpire and ballroom dancing instructor, which I’m sure I would fail. Probably what attracted me to the book, though, was the promise of tests for copyeditor and proofreader—the last time I took such tests, I never heard from the publisher again, so I was eager to find out what I’d done wrong!

The next book, *A Funny Thing Happened to Me on My Way to the Grave*, has been lying on my dresser (where I pile my “waiting list” of books to be read), staring up at me accusingly for a year. I’m not sure now what impelled me to buy it, though I suspect it was the identification of the writer as “author of *My Brother Was an Only Child*,” a book which I thought I remembered my parents’ having mentioned enjoying. I did start reading this book but stopped 30 pages into it. Jack Douglas may have been the Dave Barry of his day, but this 30-year-old book was just too dated to be enjoyable. I want to stress, however, that I paid only a quarter for it, so I can’t complain of having wasted much money!

The House of Harper was another two-bit book, and so far I haven’t read any of it at all, though I did spend some time trying to straighten the covers and make it presentable. Its low price was evidently due to its having been left out in the rain. What intrigued me about it, however, aside from its subject, was the fact that it was a review copy and came with a photograph of the author suitable for reproduction in a newspaper or magazine, another photo of one of the book’s illustrations, and a little notice saying that “Direct quotation is limited to 500 words un-

less special permission is given,” and adding, “Please send us two copies of your review. Please do not release reviews before publication date.” It is interesting to note that this 326-page hardcover book cost \$8.50 in 1967. Today it would undoubtedly cost more than twice as much, but \$8.50 is more than I paid for all the books I bought at the sale last year.

Mother Earth, Father Sky was a book that Mother bought. Even though it was relatively new and in good condition, complete with dust jacket, it was priced at only 50 cents, which was quite a bargain even for what appears to be a book club edition, since it would have cost at least \$6.99 new. Those of you who remember Mother’s review of *Ride the Wind* will know that she is always interested in stories about America’s indigenous peoples. This one, set in the Aleutian Islands during the last Ice Age, told the story of a number of what we would probably call Eskimos. It was a very gripping book, and the best thing about it was that it was the first book in a proposed trilogy. Sure enough, Mother later found the second book, *My Sister the Moon*, and we enjoyed reading more about Chagak, Kayugh, Samiq, and all the other characters with their unpronounceable Aleut names.

That is the kind of book Mother can’t resist, and the next, *The Modern Word-Finder*, is the sort I’m always a sucker for, as it purports to be “a living guide to modern usage, spelling, synonyms, pronunciation, grammar, word origins, and authorship, all in one alphabetical order.” You can see from the publication date of 1934 that it isn’t very “modern,” and in fact I’ve never actually used it, but I told myself at the time that I was getting it for my daughter, and at a price of 15 cents it wasn’t much of an extravagance!

When I was a freshman in college, taking the required freshman English class, all the other classes read James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As you can see, it is a relatively slim volume, and at the time I felt put upon because my class, the honors class, had to read Henry James’s much heftier *Portrait of a Lady* instead. So when I saw this at the book sale for 25 cents, I thought, “Here’s my opportunity to remedy a deficiency in my education.” As I told John Sledge when he agreed to do a book review two weeks hence of several novels of Henry James, including *The Portrait of a Lady*, it took me 30 years to appreciate my good fortune in being made to read that instead of this. At least it satisfied my curiosity about Joyce, and it certainly delivered me from any further temptation to read *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*! Interestingly, this is the very edition that the college English classes were using, and I was surprised to find that it had just been published at that time, based on research by a Columbia University doctoral candidate that had established a new definitive text. Another interesting point—and this is the sort of thing that makes previously owned books so appealing—is that this book came from the library of Steve Mannhard, who, before he started Fish River Trees, taught English at Foley High School. Since we have been buying our Christmas trees from Steve for several years, that was an unexpected bonus.

The next book, *The World from Rough Stones*, is just a plain-old good reading book. Although from its size you might think it was one of those sagas that follows a family through several generations, it covers just one year in the lives of two couples involved in building tunnels on a railway line in England in the mid-nineteenth century. It begins on August 26, 1839, when Nora Telling and “Lord John” Stevenson meet, and ends on the same date a year later, and it is hard for the reader to believe that so many adventures have taken place in between. If you

are interested in railway engineering or nineteenth-century life, this book is highly recommended—and cost only 50 cents!

I'll skip the next book listed, *A Book of Country Things*, because I want to treat it at some length. There's not much I can say about Jules Verne's *Tour du Monde* except that it represents my usual book sale optimism. I used to be a language student and teacher, and every year it seems I buy at least one book in a foreign language thinking I'll brush up my linguistic skills. Needless to say, this never happens, but the ownership of these books is a constant reproach to me. I'm going to hang onto this one, though. I enjoyed *Around the World in Eighty Days* in translation, and I loved the Todd-AO film (does anybody here remember Todd-AO? It was one of the original wide-screen technologies, like Cinerama), and *someday* when I have nothing else to read, I'll get around to reading it in the original French!

This was another bonus book—one whose previous owner I knew something about—as it had belonged to Ed Sintz, who was an active Friend of the Library for many years. Ed died last year, and so this book—and no doubt many others—came to the book sale. The Friends are always fortunate to receive such donations. This year, anyone who is interested in boating and seamanship should be on the lookout for books from the library of Jack Lucey. Those of you who knew him know that he was for many years a high-ranking officer of the U.S. Power Squadron, and Vivian, his widow, has contributed to the book sale all of his books that the Power Squadron did not want.

Despite its popularity at the time, probably most of you in this room were not avid watchers of the television show *thirtysomething*. It attracted mostly a young, upmarket audience and was the target of numerous snipes about whining yuppies. But my daughter and I used to watch it regularly and enjoyed its inventiveness of presentation, its sophisticated humor, and the fact that very real and fundamental problems were not solved by the end of the hour. The two central male characters were partners in an advertising agency, and unlike other entertainment programs that give a distorted view of police work, the newspaper business, forensic science, or what-have-you, I can only conclude that this one must have gotten most things right because my next-door neighbor at the time, who worked for an advertising agency and was about the same age as these characters, said he couldn't watch the show because it was too close to the bone. At any rate, my daughter and I agonized with the characters through business failure, divorce, cancer, miscarriage, and death, and, although the program could be dismissed as prime-time soap opera, the fact remains that we came to know and love the characters and were truly sorry when the series was canceled.

For that reason, when I saw this book, *Thirtysomething stories*, I snapped it up. I'm not sure I realized what it was when I bought it, but what it turned out to be, as clearly described on the cover, is "nine scripts from the show, introduced by their creators." I know I must have missed a number of episodes over the several years the show was on the air, but I had seen all nine of these shows and found I could visualize them vividly in my mind as I read the scripts. What amazed me was how conversational the dialogue was. I really wondered whether this was the way the authors had actually written it or if the "script" was in fact a *transcript* of what came out when the actors ad-libbed their lines. But that was one of the things that made *thirtysomething* so special: I never felt that the actors were acting; they seemed to be real people—

very witty, clever, intense people, but *real*. So this book, at 50 cents, was another outstanding book sale bargain.

We come now to *A Book of Country Things*. I was amused when one of my mother's friends, to whom Mother had sent one of the book review schedules, wrote that she would certainly try to find a copy of this book to read! Although it is possible to find at the book sale many books that are still in print, including best sellers in mint condition, I am never interested in books I could check out of the library, and this is a prime example of the sort of obscure book that one would be unlikely to run across anywhere else. The way I came to buy it is a typical book sale story, too. I was working a shift as a supervisor, and one of my duties was to replenish the supply of books. Our male workers would bring in a hand-truck full of cartons, and we would unpack them and put them out. When I came to this book, I couldn't decide what table it belonged on, and so, after walking around with it for a while, I ended up buying it!

Although it was published in 1965, it records memories stretching back more than 100 years earlier. The "Recorder's Note" explains how the book came to be.

"Told by Walter Needham; recorded by Barrows Mussey": the words are carefully chosen. This story began as a stenographic transcription of what my neighbor remembered about his grandfather. The words are still his, rearranged and occasionally condensed, but nevertheless largely verbatim.

Anyone who takes this for a piece of ordinary ghost-writing "as told to" me will be much mistaken.

All I can claim is that I thought what he had to tell would fascinate country-dwellers, tinkerers, and nostalgic Yankees as much as it did me, if we could just get it on paper.

It's not every day you find someone who has practiced the accomplishments that went with log cabins (such as the one Gramp was born in in 1833), and who can explain them as if he were showing you how to saw and nail your first board. Since Vermont is the next-to-youngest New England state, life there a hundred and twenty years ago was probably much like that of Connecticut, say, in 1750. Walter Needham, through his grandfather, gives you a long look back.

I merely had the luck to live near him in Guilford, and the sense to ask questions.

A brief aside about the history of the manuscript: the first version of it was written just after I returned from duty with the Marine Corps in World War II, and part of it appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*; but no book publication followed. I moved to Europe.

It then lay neglected and ultimately forgotten by its custodian at a learned society until Stephen Greene rediscovered it in the fall of 1964 and asked Walter Needham to bring it up to date. Nearly twenty years of added perspective may

have served to make it the more unusual as a living voice from an American frontier that is gone, but that through Walter Needham's talk will perhaps be a trifle less soon forgotten.

Mussey's expectations about the interest the book would generate must have been fulfilled, as the copy I have is the fifth printing. One reason for this is the accuracy with which Mussey has captured Needham's speech. In addition to being an author and publisher, Mussey is also a linguist. We are told that "he has translated some sixty books, so it follows that his presentation of this narrative faithfully retains the individuality of the speaker."

But the subject matter of the book is also fascinating. As an authority on early Americana, author of several books of New England history, and editor of *Yankee Life by Those Who Lived It*, Mussey was well qualified to set down and organize this material. After a page explaining the "People Talked About" and a map illustrating the "Places Talked About," in the first chapter, "Gramp," Mussey has Needham begin by telling a little about himself and explaining his reasons for talking about his grandfather:

I was always Grandpa's boy. He brought me up more than anyone else until I was a dozen years old. When I was sixteen I run away from home, and got as far as Indiana; afterward I come back. People sometimes ask me why I didn't go west and grow up with the country. I tell 'em, because Vermont is where I've been treated best, and oftenest.

Since I was sixteen I've always made my own living, never had a dollar from anyone, or ever owed anyone. I've been an automobile mechanic, and I've assembled electrical gadgets in a factory, but mostly I'm just an old Vermont Jack-of-all trades.

My knowledge of doing things was from Gramp, from the way he done things. You see he lived in the time when everything grew in the woods, and he could make anything out of wood. When I come to think back about Grandpa, I see that in his young days he hardly bought anything except maybe from the blacksmith. He was born in a log cabin; he was a farmer all his life; they grew their own wool, and dyed their own cloth, and made their own tallow dips and their own ink, and cut their own quill pens. They framed their own houses, and quarried their own slate. An old Indian taught Grandpa about medicinal herbs, and I still remember some of the things he learned. This story is just going to be the country things that he taught me; I think they'd ought to be put down before they're forgotten altogether.

The subjects he mentions here are amply treated in the succeeding chapters, which are entitled "On the Farm," "Sugaring," "Doing with Stone," "The Animal Kingdom," "From the Woods," "Grandpa's Tools," "What He Had to Buy," "Around the House," and "Indians."

The first chapter sets the stage by describing the kind of man Gramp was. Walter was his favorite grandchild. The rest of his grandchildren "was afraid of him because he roared so." But Walter and his grandfather seemed to get along. Needham says, "I don't know why his roaring or

anything never bothered me, but I just didn't mind at all." His grandfather used to give him little jobs to do.

His main object was to teach me how to do things, not so much to get the things done. About the first job he give me was to paint the cellar door. He mixed up some red ochre powder and oil, and told me to go down and get started.

I went down cellar and looked at that door, and it had just had a fresh coat. So I come back up and told him the door didn't need painting.

He said, "I didn't ask you if the door needed painting or not; I told you to paint it. When you work for other people, do what they want, and not what you feel like doing yourself."

That's a thing some people just can't seem to learn, but thanks to Grandpa I've never had any trouble working for somebody else, not even in the army.

Having introduced the subject of the army gives Needham an opportunity to tell some of his grandfather's anecdotes and tall tales. Evidently the man was quite a raconteur.

When he enlisted in 1862 he probably thought he was going in to kill Rebs, only they made him a cook instead. He was in the Battle of the Wilderness and the Battle of Gettysburg, but aside from that he spent most of the war looking for firewood....

I guess wars are quite a lot alike. The Sixteenth Vermont was pretty short of wood for the field kitchen most times, but they were only allowed to take the top rail off the fences for the fire. They'd take the top rail off a handy section. Then they'd go along again and take the top rails again. When there was just one row of rails left along the ground, those was still the top rails, so they took them.

He was a very good cook in his later years, after my grandmother died, but I don't know whether he learned to cook from what they taught him in the army, or from doing the opposite. They had beans and pork for breakfast, and pork and beans for dinner, and beans and pork for supper. He said they mostly had pork and beans.

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So far as I could tell at my age, Grandpa knew everything; he was smarter than my father, in a way. If Gramp couldn't tell me, he could make a good story.

He told me one time they was on the railroad in some sort of a supply train. It was loaded so heavy that the old locomotive could only just about draw it; and the Rebels was after them with another train on the same track. The old engine was just staggering along, and by and by the Rebels begun to catch up. They about decided they was going to lose their supplies—they'd have to aban-

don the train and take to the woods. Then one fellow got the idea that he could hold the Rebels off. He run up to the engineer, and borrowed his oil can, and then he hung off the back platform. Just as the trainload of Rebels come tooting along around a bend this fellow begun oiling the rails. The Rebels couldn't get no traction, and Gramp's crowd pulled clean away from them.

The only other close shave that Gramp used to tell me about was near Gettysburg, but not in the battle. He said the mosquitoes there was terrible big. They was pretty thick one night after supper, and an extra big swarm of them come at him, so he tipped the bean kettle over, and got under it. He had the big iron ladle in his hand. He set there under the kettle, and the mosquitoes begun drilling through to get at him. As their bills would come through the kettle, he'd clinch them over with the ladle. When he'd clinched over enough of them, they couldn't pull out, and the mosquitoes just flew off with the kettle.

When I was little I never knew whether Gramp really meant his stories, or was just stuffing me.

Another story Gramp tells is about his shotgun. Once when he planned to go hunting he found that he was out of shot. Rather than get out his bronze bullet mold and cast some more, he looked around in his shop and found a box of tacks and a broken jackknife. He put a handful of the tacks in one barrel and the knife in the other. After quite a while in the woods without seeing any game, he got disgusted and started home. As he reached the sugarhouse, he came on a rabbit sitting up on its hind legs.

He fired the barrel with the knife in it first. The knife was so heavy that it went low and split the rabbit's skin right down the middle. The skin flapped open and flew up just as he fired the other barrel, with the tacks. Those tacks spread the hide neat and tight on the back wall of the sugarhouse.

Some magazine printed this story a few years back, but Gramp told me about it when I was six, before the magazine was ever thought of.

As you can see, there is a great deal of humor in this book. But much of it is serious. In the chapter titled "On the Farm," Needham begins by saying that "people that aren't farmers don't know what the word *season* means. About all they notice is if it's warm or cold, and if they have to wear overshoes, and in Vermont maybe if the trees are turning bright red in the fall." By contrast, "Grandpa done everything by the seasons."

The seasons he describes are "sugaring," "mud time" (during which you had to get your fences mended), "turning out time," "ordinary spring work: plowing, harrowing, and planting," then haying, then the cutting of oats, "husking time," and "cider time." Finally, when the snow was on the ground and no outdoor work could be done, it was time to do the flailing and clean up the grain. Needham describes all these operations in detail, with many amusing anecdotes about his grandfather.

Every chapter in this book was fascinating to me, as Needham describes the day-to-day operation of the farm, the tools his grandfather used and what he used them to do, and how he and his neighbors made most of what they needed. The chapter on "What He Had to Buy" begins, "If you've read what went before, you know this is going to be a short chapter. When Gramp first went to farming, the blacksmith was about the only man that ever saw any of his money. As he got older, he began to buy more things, until by the time I come along he was practically as bad as a city fellow—or anyway he thought so."

But the chapter I enjoyed perhaps the most is the one on "Sugaring," which tells you everything you could want to know about the old-time production of maple syrup and sugar. First Needham describes how maple syrup is graded, the highest grade being so clear and colorless that it is hard to sell to outsiders who think they know what maple syrup should look like. The lowest grade is as black as molasses. After speaking disparagingly about maple syrup produced elsewhere and sent to Vermont to be put up under a Vermont label, Needham adds that his grandfather would have been uninterested in these distinctions; he didn't use syrup at all, preferring maple sugar, which didn't take up as much space and didn't ferment. What syrup he needed would collect anyway in the hollow created by scooping out sugar. Moreover, he used maple sugar only as a convenient commodity.

I imagine Grandpa would always have preferred white sugar if he could have got it. It was a rarity in Vermont when he was young; when he was old, and living royally, for him, on his Civil War pension, I know he used white sugar.

Needham's introduction to the product, maple syrup, is followed by a meticulously detailed description of exactly how it is made, including the exact size and shape of the buckets, the tapping irons and augers used to tap the tree, the spouts—both metal and wood—and how they were made, how to tell where to tap a tree, collection methods, and how to make the syrup, sugar, and even sap beer. He then goes on to more modern inventions—fancy maple sugar and maple cream or maple candies.

You might think he had told you everything you needed to know to go into business, but he concludes like this:

In talking about sugar, I find I've done just like the old fox-trappers back in the woods. You would hire one of them to teach you how to trap foxes, and he'd tell you everything real careful, all the details that would catch the fox, only he'd leave out the one point, such as not touching the trap with your bare hands and leaving your scent on it. I've told enough so that you would know better than the city people I heard of over in Whitingham, that was going to go into sugaring on a big scale and do it right. They bought all the best equipment, fancy evaporator and everything, and they was going to get their money's worth—said they wouldn't just play at it like the farmers up here, they was going to do it all year round.

I warned you about that. But there's one thing I left out. Some of my neighbors here don't quite find out about it until they're as much as seven years old. I do know of one prominent local citizen that was told, when he was about

big enough to toddle, that he could have one tree to make his own syrup. He picked a beauty, too, a great big one right near the house, only he couldn't seem to get no sap, and finally he had to bring his grandfather out to see what the trouble was. Probably the boy was just absent-minded: the tree he picked was an ash.

His idea was about the same as a big outside concern I knew of that bought up a bankrupt sugar business somewhere in the northern part of the state. They was high-powered fellows that knew how to get up advertising that would make your mouth water. They had the most beautiful colored labels and pictures fixed up that I ever saw. They was going to make a real going concern out of it.

They sure would have, too. But they must have got hold of some fellow like me that forgot to tell them everything, because judging from all these beautiful advertisements they calculated to get most of their syrup from hemlocks and ash trees, and not from sugar maples.

If you enjoy reading about how things were done in the old days, you would find this book as fascinating as I did. And, as you can see, the narrator's sense of humor made it all the more enjoyable. I would be willing to lend this book to anyone who is interested—right after I get it back from my mother's friend.

I've showed you ten of the books I couldn't resist at last year's book sale. Possibly none of them would have appealed to you. But I can practically guarantee that you will find something of interest because the variety of books available at the sale is much wider than you could find in any bookstore—and the prices are decidedly more attractive. The sale begins at 9 A.M. on Thursday, March 17, and continues through Sunday. The hours are 9 to 5 Thursday through Saturday and noon to 5 on Sunday. If you're looking for the best prices, you'll want to come at 3 P.M. on Sunday, when you can fill a whole grocery bag for two dollars. If you're looking for the best selection, you'll want to come earlier. If you want a good selection and don't want to have to fight the opening day crowds, your best bet is to join the Friends of the Library so that you can come to the preview on Wednesday night. I have membership forms right here, and if you fill one out and turn it in today, I will hand you a personal invitation so that you can get in next Wednesday night.