# BUBBA'S BOOK CLUB

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The books I read are chosen by what seems at the time to be "natural selection"—the simple criteria of picking up the next volume that feels "most likely to please." Sometimes, though, a sequence of books turns out to share an unexpected theme. These five reviews are presented in the order in which the books happened to be chosen (from my endless "books to read" shelves), and the common theme that emerged is "heroes."

That's an awfully difficult word, of course—overburdened with freight, wide-ranging and elusive to define. Like the Supreme Court justice who famously declined to define pornography, but only stated, "I know it when I see it," I may know a hero when I see one, but when people are called heroes for nothing greater than playing with a ball, hitting things with sticks, or just *looking* good, I will have to try to define the qualities of what I mean by "hero." (The word "essay" is appropriate here, in the sense that *essayer* is French for "to try.")

Perhaps in earliest youth a hero is someone you want to *be*; then later—once you might have learned to "be" something or other—a hero is someone you want to be *like*. (That's where the term "role model" comes in, I guess.) Later still, it might be how you wish to be remembered—even if just by your children, or your dog (thinking of the worthy aspiration, "I want to be the person my dog thinks I am").

My childhood notions began with a comic-book hero, Spiderman, who was my favorite because, unlike any of the other deadly serious, godlike superheroes, he cracked jokes, made mistakes, and had troubles in his personal life. When his actions led to tragedy, Spiderman was made to realize, "With great power there must also come great responsibility." The movie version made Spiderman less stoic, less cool and ironic, and the motto was streamlined to the tagline: "With great power comes great responsibility." Still equally true, of course. A hero may have a rare gift, whether slinging webs, balls, sticks, or literary fiction, but the gift does not make the hero, even the kind in comic

books and action movies. The "responsibility," clearly, is morality, *integrity* (about which more later), and a living hero is always a work in progress—"only as good as your last performance." The final state can only be achieved by paying the Unacceptable Price, and I guess that's why so many of our heroes have to be dead—"The only true hero is a dead hero." No hero-worshipper wants to be embarrassed by revelations of their hero's cheating, sexual depravity, or hypocrisy, as of course it makes *them* look foolish.

The fictional hero as an idealistic projection of superhuman perfection might be called, for clarity's sake, an "idol." Thinking about the difference between idols and real-life heroes, a phrase that occurred to me was "feet of clay." The expression describes a flaw, defect, or the simple *humanity* in a hero, and I was curious about its origin, so I looked it up. Apparently it comes from a story in the Old Testament: King Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a giant idol with a golden head, silver arms and chest, brass thighs and body, and iron legs, but feet of common potter's clay. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the clay feet of the idol showed its vulnerability, and from that omen, prophesized the fall of his empire. (Those Old Testament prophets were always such a *downer*. And not having their prophecies written down until long after the fact—many centuries later—they could be made *accurate,* too. We don't get prophets like that anymore.)

In modern usage, "feet of clay" often refers to the nature of a hero's fatal flaw, or Achilles heel—the key to his downfall. Sometimes, though, the notion is just a revelation of what had been unrealistic expectations: "It was then he learned that his idol had feet of clay." Some people definitely *behave* like heroes, and that is no easy thing, but it doesn't mean they're anything more than mortal human beings. As Nietzsche put it, "Human, All Too Human." Heroes just try harder.

As I described in the previous edition of this department, often being "good" simply means "behaving better than we are," and it takes a lifetime of those moments to make a hero (or much more rarely, one *big* moment, like the kind I outlined in our song "Nobody's Hero" (1993), when a hero "Saves a drowning child," "Lands a crippled airplane," or "Cures a wasting disease").

Here follow some thoughts on hero-hood, as seen through the shifting lenses of a sequence of books.

## *Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson*—Elizabeth J. Rosenthal

Roger Tory Peterson was my first hero, from the age of about six. My grandmother on my dad's side, the alliterative Lena Louise Lint, inspired and nurtured my early interest in nature. She gave me books by Thornton W. Burgess and Ernest Thompson Seton, and showed me her little illustrated bird books, pointing out the different species around our Southern Ontario home and letting me trace their outlines with tracing paper and colored pencils. In 1959, when I was going on seven, the Red Rose Tea company introduced a series of little cards of "Song Birds of North America," with descriptions by Roger Tory Peterson. Following Grandma's example, I started to collect those cards (difficult when my parents didn't drink tea, despite my pesterings, and I had to depend on Mrs. Pirie next door—wishing she drank more tea). I treasured those little cards with their artful, colorful paintings and brief descriptions, and seeing the name Roger Tory Peterson on them, and his photograph—taken in "the field," all outdoorsy with camera and binoculars around his neck—I decided I was going to be a birdwatcher when I grew up. My first ambition, and my first hero.

And what joy birds continue to bring to my life. A moment ago I stepped outside for a break, into our Southern California back yard, and watched a hummingbird hovering over the jasmine, a pair of black phoebes catching bugs on the wing and relaying them to their nest under the eaves, a mockingbird flickering across the yard in a flash of white wings, and, higher in the sky, a pair of crows harassing our neighborhood hawk—Rusty the Red-Tailed Hawk, I call him. For the five years we have lived in this canyon, Rusty has ruled over it, often perching on the highest bough of the chaparral ridge across from our house. My binoculars are always handy by the upstairs hall window to keep an eye on him. When Rusty has a rare "companion," in early spring, I will announce in a childish singsong, "Rusty's got a girlfriend, Rusty's got a girlfriend."

In the back of my mind, I have long harbored an outline for a children's story called "Rusty the Red-Tailed Hawk," in which the hero will save our golden retriever puppy, Winston, from a pair of marauding coyotes. Watching poor Rusty being dive-bombed by those pesky crows, and all the other birdlife flitting, feeding, and breeding around me, I had to smile. (How much of human life is made up of flitting, feeding, and breeding?)

Apart from helping to inspire my lifelong pleasure in birdwatching, in a way Roger Tory Peterson was the inspiration for an early episode of worldly disillusion, too. Those bird cards gave me the impression that there must be others in the world who shared my passion for birds—maybe everybody did. In my autobiographical book *Traveling Music,* I wrote about how I decided to start a birdwatching club, and invited all my friends to meet me at my house after school. They said they would, but when I stood in the driveway waiting for them, not one showed. I was crushed—and enlightened—for life. Sometimes heroes lead you to an understanding beyond their "mandate."

Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996) grew up in Jamestown, New York, and his love for nature, especially birds, fed his love for art in a talent for drawing and painting them. He moved to New York City and studied at the prestigious Art Students League, an art school guided by masters like Thomas Eakins and Thomas Hart Benton. Among a long list of important alumni are such artists as Winslow Homer, Norman Rockwell, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Cy Twombly—and even unexpected offshoots like children's book author Maurice Sendak and cartoonist Gahan Wilson.

In 1934 Peterson published the world's first "user friendly" field guide, *Guide to the Birds,* and its success, and that of subsequent guides to the birds of Eastern and Western North America and Europe, established him as the foremost naturalist of his time. For the first time amateurs could take to "the field," as it were, and identify the birds they saw in what became known as "The Peterson."

The eventful story of Peterson's life, his travels and accomplishments, is well told by Elizabeth J. Rosenthal, and her research is thoroughly rooted in first-person accounts—fortunately still in time to find many of his friends and colleagues still living.

The portrait she limns is largely heroic, with only a few examples of "dirty feet." Not surprisingly, Peterson's near-monomania and Herculean workload made him rather distracted as husband and father, and he could be both pathetically absent-minded and jealously competitive, anxiously watching the sales figures of other field guides.

But most shocking to this boyhood admirer was his *vanity*. Peterson was morbidly obsessed with aging, and had what is offhandedly described as "several facelifts." (A seemingly unnatural indulgence for a "naturalist"—though he is also described in oxymoronic terms as a "millionaire naturalist.") His first marriage was ill-matched,

lasting only a few years, though his second marriage to his invaluable "caretaker," Barbara, lasted thirty-two years—until he divorced her for a more aggressive, younger (and blonder) partner, Virginia. By all accounts from friends and family, Virginia had "set her cap for him," using flattery and "feminine wiles," then took over his life, and guarded him fiercely—jealously—from interruptions and distractions. "Jealously," because among those she deliberately kept away were his two sons, and other intimates from "the previous life."

We all know such patterns occur in messy old real life, and when I mentioned these events to my wife Carrie, you may imagine they gave us some interesting "discussion points." I thought of the similar case of Ernest Hemingway, whose beloved first wife, Hadley, invited her "friend," Pauline, to stay with them in Paris. Pauline was said, even by Hemingway, to have "stolen him away," and when that second marriage became strained (not surprisingly—imagine the bitterness of a man who feels he has been seduced away from the proper love of his life), another predator came along in search of what here in Los Angeles is called the BBD (bigger better deal).

Such unfortunate betrayals—as they almost always are to at least *one* party—do certainly happen, and according to intramural discussions, where the blame should rest seems to depend on how much the pursued one *resisted*.

In any case, none of these unfortunate flaws is a deal-breaker for an admirer of the man's work. And whatever the circumstances and psychological framework, Virginia was undeniably devoted to Peterson and his professional life. She shared that life not only by taking infinite care of him and his business affairs, but collaborated in the updates of his field guides by working on maps and organizational material.

Roger Tory Peterson died a month short of his 88th birthday, lamenting not only the loss of his life, but the loss of all his *knowledge*. He explained to a friend that he wished he could download the contents of his brain to a CD, so that others could *start* with the benefit of his knowledge, rather than having to acquire it all over again for themselves.

I was delighted to come across that thought, because I *recognized* it—deeply, for I had felt it and written about it before, in a context that involved birdwatching, too. In my above-mentioned book, *Traveling Music,* I described joining a birding tour in Big Bend National Park that was guided by an elderly volunteer, Bernie, whose wisdom and

enthusiasm were infectious and delightful. I began a passage about that day with this journal note:

> Thinking with regard to Bernie and all his knowledge of birds and nature and local history—you just start to learn a few things, and you get old and *die,* and all that dies with you. Aging is just *wrong!*
>
> For me, and all other "good people."
>
> Knowledge, experience, wisdom—all *valuable,* more than youth and ignorance.
>
> But then there's lots of ignorant old age too . . .

> Bernie just seemed like one of the good ones, regardless of age, and the ongoing loss of people like him seemed a terrible loss to the world. I remember when I heard that Frank Zappa had died, for example, I shook my head and thought, "The world *needs* Frank Zappa." I felt the same way when other people who had made a positive mark on the world were taken away, no matter how long they lived: Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra, Edward Abbey, Georgia O'Keeffe, Walt Disney, Martin Luther King, my grandma, my daughter, my wife, several good friends, and on and on forever. Not just that it was a shame these people had to *die,* but that the rest of us had to do without them.

The accomplishments of Roger Tory Peterson changed the world around him for the better, and he inspired a generation of naturalists to take action and do their own part. As one significant example, he was a prime mover in the campaign to ban DDT, thus narrowly saving so many large birds of prey—eagles, ospreys, falcons—from certain doom. Typically, in the relation of manmade poisons to nature, it had been a difficult mystery to solve—or to *prove*—and the findings were resisted beak-and-talon by the chemical companies and their toadies in government and respected universities. (Another lesson conveyed by this biography is that when a university's agricultural department is sponsored by, say, a fertilizer and/or pesticide company, its stance on science and nature might be skewed.)

Eventually it was proved that the DDT moved up the food chain from insects to birds, then acted on the females' chemistry, causing their eggs to grow too thin-shelled to protect the young. Happily, once DDT was banned, in 1972, the birds began a slow recovery, perhaps best exemplified by the removal of the bald eagle from the Endangered list, in 2007.

On a wider environmental canvas, stretched over his entire lifetime of active campaigning, Peterson was always there to contribute his support, or a piece of writing, to any crusade to preserve a little of the natural world for generations to come. Like another great artist and nature-lover, Wallace Stegner, he was generous to the *world*.

Peterson's admirers and colleagues called him the Great Man, while closer friends used his chosen nickname (after his favorite bird), King Penguin.

King Penguin had feet of clay, yes, but it still seems fair to say that those dirty feet were attached to a Great Man.

## *Bill Bruford: The Autobiography*—Bill Bruford

Around the time of my thirteenth birthday, my heroes changed from birdwatchers to drummers. Gene Krupa and Keith Moon were early examples, but by the late '60s the "playing fields of rock" were beginning to fill with so many great drummers: Ginger Baker, Mitch Mitchell, John Bonham, Michael Giles (one of Bill Bruford's predecessors in King Crimson), and dozens more.

Bill Bruford found early success with the English rock band Yes, early favorites of mine, and his playing on their first five albums was a strong influence on me in the early 1970s. As a struggling nineteen-year-old drummer recently moved to London, working behind the counter of a souvenir shop on Carnaby Street, I would pound the Sweda cash register in time with Bill's drumming on *Time and a Word* and *The Yes Album*.

And it wasn't just the *drumming* that inspired me—in those days, with those bands and those musicians, it was about their entire approach to what they did: the philosophy, the purity, the sincerity, the *integrity*. The genre called "progressive rock" is much maligned today, of course (to quote a previous review on another topic, "for complicated political reasons that we needn't get into right now, thank you"), but at its best progressive rock stood for an *honesty* that is rarely present in popular music today.

"Never mind the bollocks" was a defiant tag of the punk movement that detoured rock's fashions to a more simplistic, concise, and *confrontational* approach—which assuredly has its place—but all the same, notwithstanding the overblown introversion some "prog" bands spiraled into, and the gimmicky, clichéd preciousness of some of the

pretenders, the essence of the music—its drive—was a dedication to making the best music you could. And that ought to have its place, too.

In those days the words "artistic integrity" did not evoke a sneer, as they might now—if not a stare of blank incomprehension. Sometimes I'll catch myself describing that quality, or its lack, to explain why I don't admire a certain performer, and realize I might as well be talking to a wall. "Catch myself," because I should know better by now. Some people—a *lot* of people—simply don't get the distinction, even if they believe they love music. Many others just don't care.

It's not something I'm particularly bitter about, because professionally I have managed to prosper despite waging that battle. So I crow not as a victim but a victor, in spite of all I continue to rail against. But in the face of public opinion (if that's not another giant oxymoron), it carries no weight that you might have devoted your life to making music as well and as honestly as you can, and your experience empowers you to identify all of the "tricks" employed by "pop artists" (almost always a giant oxymoron) to attract the casual listener—simple beat, sentimental or "party time" lyrics, banal chord combinations, trendy production gimmicks, and lots of repetition. You learn that if you find yourself talking to somebody who admires a certain musical "stylist," one you know to be a carefully packaged *commodity,* you don't bother to explain how that music had been specifically designed and manufactured with that sole aim in mind: to be "liked."

You might hear, "Well, what's wrong with that?"

That's a hard question to answer—why does integrity matter? One analogue that occurs to me is that I don't think anyone would admire a *person* like that, who did and said whatever was necessary just to be *liked*. Such a person couldn't possibly operate that way with any *integrity,* and even if we didn't see that transparency at first, eventually we would.

So much popular music—almost all of it—is specifically designed *not* to say anything, or mean anything; not to carry any heartfelt message through passionate playing and singing, but simply to be *liked*.

Perhaps there's nothing wrong with that, for those who do indeed "like" it, but it's the *fraud* that offends me. The pretend "rebels" who dance on the strings of sleazy producers;

the shallow divas who simply do what they're told, sing the notes and words put in front of them, and pretend they mean it.

And it's not just music, and it's not just the creators: it's the *audience*. Readers of formulaic novels don't care that those books have been shaped, paragraph by paragraph, to appeal to a particular reader, and thus they—the readers—are nothing more or less than the "lowest common denominator." People who line up for blockbuster movies merely trust that their shallower desires will be properly catered to—mild titillation and a few fights and car chases. TV viewers don't care that they are being "marketed to"—*pandered* to, not forgetting that the definition of "pander" is "pimp"—not only in the commercials, but in the cheap, cynical content.

The Roman satirist Juvenal described the social decline of his people with a memorable phrase, "Give them bread and circuses and they will never revolt."

Apparently burgers and "American Idol" have the same effect.

"Give the people what they want" is enough for some, even the summit of their aspirations, but others would like to do better than that. Bill Bruford is one of those.

His constant, unalloyed artistic integrity is well exemplified by one of the premises of this autobiography: as of January 2009, Bill Bruford made a rare decision, and public announcement, almost unknown for an artist: He announced that he was going to *retire*—hang up his drumsticks, even before they had to be pried out of his cold dead hands. Musicians rarely do that, but in Bill's case, it reflects the same integrity that caused him to leave Yes, the band he had helped found, after five increasingly successful albums in the 1970s. Driven by restless creativity and musical curiosity, he struck out on his own, occasionally coming to rest, as with Genesis for a time, when Phil Collins first stepped out from behind the drums to become the front man. He enjoyed (to greater or lesser degree) several highly creative interludes with King Crimson, as part of one of the most influential bands—to other musicians, at least—in the late '70s and '80s.

Then there was a huge body of solo work, under his own name and a loose, ever-changing ensemble called Earthworks. Some great music was produced, and some great performances given, some of which I was pleased to witness: with the short-lived band UK in Toronto; with the self-titled quartet Bruford in London (with bass virtuoso Jeff Berlin, who would later become my good friend—see "The Drums of October"), and a

sophisticated, inspiring all-acoustic performance with Patrick Moraz at an art college in London around 1985.

That return to acoustic drums came after Bill Bruford had been one of the foremost pioneers with early electronic percussion—the price of which is harrowingly told around a concert at Madison Square Garden in which the entire setup ceased to function.

The story is rich in characters, too, and although there is no gossip to speak of, some of the musicians Bruford worked with are brought vividly to life. The abovementioned band UK is a fine example: Bill found himself paired with innovative and influential guitarist Allan Holdsworth, in growing conflict with keyboard player and violinist Eddie Jobson and bassist-vocalist John Wetton—Bruford and Holdsworth wanted to be *good;* Jobson and Wetton wanted to be *popular*. That kind of divide couldn't be bridged for long, though John Wetton did go on to achieve the kind of success he was after, with the mega-selling Asia.

When there might have been a negative side to a musical relationship, Bruford describes it without rancor or peevishness. Mainly, such people are "outed" by their own behavior rather than by a harsh description—"show don't tell"—and you can judge for yourself if someone behaves like an inconsiderate oaf (Chris Squire) or an unbearable sourpuss (Robert Fripp).

The narrative is ambitiously shaped, moving around in time with skillful transitions and associations worked around general concepts of life and music. A gentle, dry humor pervades throughout, reflecting the man I encountered when we worked together on a Buddy Rich tribute recording in 1994—an episode nicely recounted in this memoir.

In the same way that Roger Tory Peterson's story is not just for birdwatchers, Bill Bruford's story is not just for drummers. It is for all artists, musicians, music lovers, or anyone who wonders what it's *really* like to spend your life trying to make the music you love. Without question, that too is a heroic endeavor.

## *Fool*—Christopher Moore

This past Christmas, my bandmate Alex gave me a "Special Gift Edition" of Christopher Moore's novel, *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. It was, so

to speak, a revelation—a work of "serious comedy," bawdy adventures mixed with darker undercurrents of satire and insight, all conveyed on a strong foundation of scholarship and careful research. Jesus was allowed to remain the archetypal "hero" (or "idol"), but the world around him was given an earthy character of *reality*—reality with jokes. (The only bearable kind.)

Lately I have been working on an essay about John Barth's early work, his first five novels, and I see now that the developing he did through those works refined his voice toward his mature style: "serious comedy," with the same attributes just described. I would be surprised if Christopher Moore had not been influenced by John Barth, in the retelling of myth with a playful, ribald earthiness not untempered by magic. Sensual and literary, ambitious and transcendent, it is a highest-level expression of art with jokes.

Christopher Moore's latest novel, *Fool,* is a "kind of" retelling of *King Lear,* but from the Fool's point of view. Just hearing that, I was eager to read it, because whenever I am asked to name my favorite play by Shakespeare (hey—it happened once!), my answer is *King Lear*. *The Tempest* is a close second, but *Lear* is the one that has always grabbed me. I try to reread it just about every year, and find more in it every time. In the 1980s, my bandmate Geddy and I saw a Royal Shakespeare Company performance with Sir Ian McKellen in the title role, and it was an unforgettable experience.

Also, my favorite character in *King Lear* is the Fool, because not only is he amusing, he often seems to be the only one with any *sense*—or any decency. In Shakespeare's telling, and more vividly yet in Christopher Moore's, the Fool's morality is simple: what makes people feel good is good; what hurts them is bad. He lives by that morality, that integrity.

Most of the other characters act through duplicity, greed, and cruelty, but the Fool throws into relief the actions and motivations of his "betters," the king and other nobles, simply by recognizing, and speaking aloud, the unadorned truth. The old Quaker idea of "speaking truth to power" has always been a dangerous occupation, and in King Lear's circle, no one but the Fool gets away with it. His apparent "simplicity" allows a degree of latitude, and also a clear-eyed view of the difference between what people are saying, and what they are doing. And he is *loyal,* another heroic quality.

The author's introduction sets the mood, under the heading "WARNING."

> This is a bawdy tale. Herein you will find gratuitous shagging, murder, spanking, maiming, treason, and heretofore unexplored heights of vulgarity and profanity, as well as non-traditional grammar, split infinitives, and the odd wank. If that sort of thing bothers you, then gentle reader pass by, for we endeavor only to entertain, not to offend. That said, if that's the sort of thing you think you might enjoy, then you have happened upon the perfect story!

Among the other heroic accomplishments of Abraham Lincoln, apparently he was also a book reviewer, and Honest Abe once offered this enigmatic appraisal: "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like."

I'm sure he meant it in a *good* way. I know I do.

## *The Architects Are Here*—Michael Winter

There has to be something in the water in Newfoundland. So many great writers, musicians, actors, and comedians have struggled off of that isolated rock in the Atlantic, home to barely a half-million souls who cling to its predominantly Irish heritage of music and lyricism, while battered by harsh, often dismal weather and relentless stormy waves.

Is that the answer to its own question?

Perhaps—all I know is that from my first visit to The Rock, I was charmed by its people in general, their gentle manners and quaint, poetic rhythms of speech, their dark humor and joyful misery (talk about oxymorons—that's a *deep* one). Those fertile roots have sired and mothered a disproportionate number of gifted performers, like Gordon Pinsent, a meticulous, modest, and often inconspicuous actor who has quietly inhabited a lifetime of dramatic roles as a *career,* like a Canadian Olivier or—interesting that so many comparable actors are also Canadian near-contemporaries—Christopher Plummer, Leslie Nielsen, and Donald Sutherland.

Comedy and political satire spread from Newfoundland to the rest of Canada through the vision and talents of Mary Walsh, Cathy Jones, and the inimitable Rick Mercer—all of them now national institutions, as they should be. They are smart and funny, and exemplify that perfect combination of intelligence and humor I discovered when I first visited Newfoundland, and was introduced to a couple of fine non-fiction writers, Ray

Guy and Patrick O'Flaherty (whose quirky "guidebook" to Newfoundland was darkly titled *Come Near at Your Peril).*

In recent years, a friend who regularly attends the Writers at Woody Point literary festival in Western Newfoundland has returned with presents for me, the latest novels by Newfoundland writers, some of them simply wonderful, like Wayne Johnston and Michael Crummey, poet Randall Maggs, and now, Michael Winter.

*The Architects Are Here* is a deceptively ambitious, far-reaching novel, full of sharp observation and keen, artful writing. It is a fine piece of story telling, and the backgrounds, characters, dialogue and internal monologues are drawn with such a depth of detail and careful craft that they seem effortless. Only the highest art accomplishes that—a quote from Ovid I've cited before, "If the art is concealed, it succeeds."

In context with the heroic theme of previous reviews in this edition of Bubba's Book Club, it is interesting to note that in this novel there aren't really any heroes. If anything, the characters are generally rather *more* flawed than most. At one point in the reading, when it was revealed that one character was betraying a friend with the friend's equally amoral beloved, I had that sinking feeling, "Oh no," as if it was really happening to someone I knew. Most of these people have more than dirty feet—they're pretty much all clay.

The hero this time is the *author,* Michael Winter, and others like him. In these times, it is surely a heroic challenge to go around writing literary novels—some would call it futile. That authors like Winter, and his fellow Newfoundlander, Wayne Johnston, actually get their books *published* is almost more heroic. (I'm beginning to suspect that kind of thing might be easier in Canada than in the United States—perhaps the Canadian arts foundations are more generous. It certainly seems that a lot of worthwhile work gets published there even if it has only marginal profitability. I'll be investigating that suspicion in the future.)

Tying together concepts discussed about the previous artists, something as simple as a clean and honest approach to one's work is heroic. Single-minded and dedicated like Roger Tory Peterson; operating with complete artistic integrity and restless creativity like Bill Bruford; wielding the weapon of humor—being smart and funny—like Christopher Moore and his characters.

These are heroes for our times.

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*—Harper Lee

And finally, a hero for all time: Atticus Finch, in a novel for all time.

Sometimes readers get together and discuss topics like, "What's the greatest book you've never read?"

In my case, that's a very long list, and I try to chip away at them regularly: *Ulysses, Moby-Dick, Middlemarch, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and like that.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* had been near the top of that list for a long time, but in a way, I'm glad I waited—glad I *saved* it. It seemed I knew so much about the novel already, from "reading around it," as it were. I knew that Harper Lee and Truman Capote had been lifelong friends, that each of them appeared as children in the other's work, and their later relations were nicely dramatized in the movie *Capote*. I was aware of the icon-like status of characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* like the young tomboy, Scout, her father, Atticus Finch, and the "cipher" in the novel, Boo Radley. I knew their names, and something about the story, but had never read it. Lucky me.

In late 1998, when I was wandering around Northern Canada and Alaska on my motorcycle, on what would become known as the *Ghost Rider* odyssey, I visited the small Jack London museum in Dawson City, the Yukon. I got there just before closing time one September afternoon, and looked over the replica of the cabin in which London was said to have spent the winter of 1897—the time that inspired so many of his stories set in the Yukon Gold Rush.

The museum's interpreter asked me which of London's books I had read, and I told her I had only read the "hits"—*Call of the Wild, White Fang,* and some of the stories. I had only recently been introduced to his writing, via a masterly short story called "In a Far Country" that had been included in an anthology of international authors who had written about Canada, *The Wild is Always There*.

She shook her head and said, "You're lucky—you've got the best ones still ahead of you, like *The Sea-Wolf* and *Martin Eden*."

Well, she wasn't wrong, and now I understand what she meant by "lucky"—you can only experience the overwhelmingly powerful discovery of a great novel once. I felt that strongly when I finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird,* understanding why it was so highly esteemed—voted the Best Book of the Twentieth Century by one authority.

That's a decision I'm glad I don't have to make, but no question *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an all-time classic, rich with character and incident, mystery and suspense, sensual descriptions and dark humor—placing it in what is called the "Southern gothic" tradition, alongside William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and the early Cormac McCarthy.

On its publication in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was an immediate success, but Harper Lee never published another novel. Perhaps she believed—like other similarly "blocked" one-novel authors like Henry Roth and Ralph Ellison—that she couldn't equal the achievement of that one great novel. Well . . . even one is heroic enough, especially when it is *this* great.

Characters like Scout and her father, Atticus Finch, a man of perfect integrity, are enduring heroes for every generation. Scout is a sensitive tomboy, curious and inclined toward the Romantic View, and armed by the innocent honesty and clarity of youth. Atticus Finch is described by other people in the novel as being "the same at home as he is in the courtroom," and the story rests on the importance of that quality—helping to answer the earlier-posed question, "Why does integrity matter?"

Suffice to say that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is firmly constructed on that question, leaving you, the reader, to feel the answer for yourself. For Atticus Finch, and for young Scout, integrity is everything.

Those who haven't read this novel are indeed lucky, for it is something to look forward to—a rare feast of immediate pleasure in the reading, and enduring power long after. It leaves us able to hold onto the necessary belief that a hero is just one person quietly doing the right thing, at home and in the courtroom.

In the previously mentioned song, "Nobody's Hero," I wrote that a hero was "The voice of reason/ Against the howling mob"—which surely describes Atticus Finch—and that a hero was also "The pride of purpose/ In the unrewarding job," which means that on

the shop floor, in the kitchen, on the highway, or in the recording studio, integrity rocks—

And integrity rules.