

## Close Encounters

Humans seem to crave connection to famous people, celebrities, politicians, actors, athletes. Lately the phenomenon has taken a strange turn with the frenzy given to *potentially* famous people on American Idol and various reality shows.

As a writer, I have always been a bit star struck when it comes to my favorite authors. I've collected stories about them and relished the personal connections I've had with a few. I corresponded for a time with John McPhee and had a long connection with some well known local heroes in this area, Paul Jamieson, Anne LaBastille, Barbara McMartin and Maurice Kenny.

I was strongly influenced by Edward Abbey for a period. That man could write. His journals are filled with brilliant passages, including some incredible descriptions of Edinburgh, Scotland written when he was in his early twenties. He had a real passion for life and for telling the truth as he saw it. He could also be a bit of a cad, cheating on his wives and girlfriends. At least he seemed to be honest about it. What is the point, he wrote, of books that describe a hundred different positions when all a man really wants is a hundred different women. He believed men and women were entirely different creatures and marveled that the two managed to get along at all.

I wrote to Abbey to tell him how much I enjoyed his essay *Blood Sport*, about his distaste for hunting and also his book *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. His post card reply came from Oracle, Arizona in 1988, less than a year before he died. The handwriting was frail and meandering and made me fear for his health. Still, he appreciated a fan enough to take the time, and I still treasure that post card. Abbey had two children the last five years of his life. He was full of love for them and regret that he wouldn't see them grow up. One has to wonder what those children think of the father they have virtually no memory of, their poor, driven, joyful, passionate, angry father. In truth, when they read his work, they will probably learn more about him than most people ever do about their parents.

My father, who taught English at St. Lawrence, told a wonderful story about the famous actor John Carradine. Carradine claimed to have made more than 400 movies, though probably the number was closer to 225, if television is not counted. He was a great Shakespearean actor, one of the most prolific character actors in Hollywood history and the patriarch of an acting dynasty that included four of his sons and three of his granddaughters.

Carradine came to St. Lawrence to speak to drama classes in the late 1950s or early 60s. A notorious alcoholic, the great man was three sheets to the wind most of the time, hardly able to stand. One evening at a dinner party with the President and various other dignitaries, someone tried to introduce Carradine to a young faculty member by the name of Bates. The actor couldn't understand the name, which was told to him

repeatedly. Finally, after many attempts to get him to understand, a frustrated Carradine drew himself up to full height and in a loud voice declared: "Ah! Master Bates!"

An early mentor of mine, Paul Jamieson, was the Dean of Adirondack writers and a well-known St. Lawrence figure. He was a colleague of my father's in the English Department. To our collective astonishment, Paul and I discovered that we had once been in love with the same woman. At the same time. No mean feat, given that Paul was forty-seven years older than me. Here's how it happened.

Many St. Lawrence people will remember Christa Makosky, wife of another admired SLU faculty member, Don McKosky. Paul describes Christa in his memoir, *Uneven Ground*. She was a beautiful, slim, tanned woman of about thirty at the time, who had grown up in some difficulty in her native Germany during the war. She had a charming accent, was a chemist by profession and was a talented artist. Christa became a frequent outing companion of Paul's on hiking and canoeing trips in the Adirondacks. He grew to admire her inquiring mind and her ability to appreciate the tiniest details of the natural world, as well as her artistic mindset. Eventually, Paul wrote that he thought he had fallen in love with her. But, he declared, "there was no future in it," since she was married and he was twice her age.

Also at this time, I joined Christa and her husband and my mother in renting a cottage for a week at Cape Hatteras. Christa knew everything there was to know about the sea and beach life. She explained to me in great detail the strange, prehistoric beasts that were everywhere on the beach, the horseshoe crabs. As a boy of sixteen, I developed a crush on her, as I followed her about, she beautiful and tanned in her bikini. But, as with Paul, "There was no future in it," for she was twice my age.

Thus, Paul and I were both in love with the same woman at the same time from our vastly different age perspectives. I have always thought this to be one of the most amazing coincidences of my life, that Paul, who came to mentor me as a writer and whose love for the Adirondacks influenced me greatly, should have written his memoir and asked me to review it, thus leading to the astonishing discovery of our mutual love. Paul was quite taken with this story when I first told him my own connection with Christa.

Sadly, Christa died in her early thirties. Paul's remembrance of her is beautifully written, heart wrenching and full of melancholy for a bygone era in the Adirondacks. It is well worth looking up and reading. He owned several of her paintings and includes in his essay a wonderfully humorous selection of her sketches from their outings that show just how talented Christa was.

One more story. My good friend and retired anthropologist John Barthelme told me about having dinner with former SLU president Patti McGill Peterson. Peterson had previously asked John if he could come over and make cider from the apples on her trees. At the dinner, John's wife said to President Peterson in a loud voice: "I understand John is coming over to squeeze your apples tomorrow."

Ah, those St. Lawrence presidential dinners! Someone should install a taping system like the one in Nixon's Oval Office. The best secrets are the ones that eventually get revealed.