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Subject: THANKS for THE RAFFLE BABY, from a voracious reader

An out-of-state friend and I talked about THE RAFFLE BABY on the phone for an hour and a half (and still aren't finished). Then she asked me, "Would you please WRITE DOWN some of the things you said?" I did--and those 7 pages are this attachment. By the time I had finished, I realized I'd also written a different sort of THANK YOU LETTER TO YOU--so why not SEND it TO you, right?

Linda Cornelius

READING STORY AS A RECEIVING: Ruth Talbot's novel THE RAFFLE BABY

Author Henri Nouwen has said, "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place." Any good writer offers hospitality, creating a space—for delight, for thinking, for engaging with the story's characters and ideas. Then the reader-guest can ENTER IN, or RECEIVE, what is offered.

But as a guest in a home where you didn't yet know the host well, have you ever felt ill at ease, trying to figure out HOW to "enter in"? The host is responsible for creating a space where you can feel comfortable with him/her, even delighting together. After all, the host has invited you in order to honor you, to feed you with food and conversation.

A friend, who knows me well, recently extended hospitality by sending me a book, and the novel's author extended hospitality by writing her story so I could enter in. I didn't know of this author, Ruth Talbot, nor of her novel THE RAFFLE BABY. I knew almost as soon as entering through the door of the first paragraph, this author desired to honor her readers: this writer had spent time in choosing words, choosing themes, choosing characters, and choosing organization to prepare a place for me. And I wanted to linger there, in that place. Just as a child says to his parent when a favorite book ends, "Read it again," at the last page, I wanted to start at the beginning to revisit this tale of suffering and beauty, of myth and reality, of the wonder of life.

I was enthralled. You know what it's like when you've visited a beauty-full place or person and someone asks you what it was like—but you can hardly find the words? I sat there with THE RAFFLE BABY in my lap wondering, "How on earth did Ruth Talbot DO this, put all this together? She DOES so many things in the telling, and yet it is so unified." It is a woven tapestry, all the threads considered, none wasted, and no

threads tangled. This is what's called ART, or even a well-lived life: bringing all the elements together so they are not disconnected fragments but a unified whole.

And it is really important to ask not merely what a writer is SAYING, but what that author is DOING. A plot summary is one thing, creating interest in the facts, but to see HOW a piece of art has come into being is another thing, creating appreciation and gratitude in the reader. A book well-woven gently leads you to SEE, thus to FEEL and experience.

There is a literary theory that a story has three parts, teller, listener, and the story itself, and in a way, the story NEEDS the listener to be complete. In fact, in Talbot's story, the narrator directly says he needs us. We're invited in to figure out why; he isn't about to TELL us exactly why because then we would not be part of the story. We help "write the story" in this way.

DOING is an important word here, and exploring what the author has DONE, and WHY, leads to actual reading, entering into the story. Since it's more than a plot summary, more than the facts. . . Real reading looks for COHERENCE. Real reading is SLOW reading.

Paying attention, slowly observing even just the very first paragraph, look at what we notice and ponder:

"I must establish up front—to prevent any dashed hopes or misplaced anger—that I am not the raffle baby. Please do not be discouraged by this for I promise you: fairytale, lullaby, soliloquy, myth. As you will discover, I am a man of precision. I give you words. But only the ones you need. Hold out your hands. There. Now. Let's begin."

"Whoa!" I thought, "This author is really going to take me somewhere! I want to GO along," was my reaction. What has that beginning DONE, how kindly and interestingly it has invited me in. Oh, the gift of WORDS, the best gift of all. But this narrator is a wise host, looking through the eyes of the reader: what does the reader NEED? There is not one unnecessary word in this book. Although this is surely a book about Self, yet it is not self-centered; after all, the words are "Let's begin, not "Let me begin." This is a trustworthy host, a caring host. And I am ready to receive, I do hold out my hands.

(And in one paragraph in one book, I have even learned a deep truth for my own life: hospitality is giving in such a way that receiving is the desired outcome. Hospitality says, "I'd like to get to KNOW you.")

(Actually, I keep thinking of another Book, the Bible, Jesus as host, come to offer hospitality, as he says in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come unto Me, all you who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I love that mystery you feel when one book speaks to another book, and they both speak to your life. Such a delightful thing, this expansion of what it means to live in this world.)

Of course, the story—like any fine Art—is full of juxtaposition, things side by side, sometimes complementary points, often seeming opposites. It's those things side by

side that create pondering in the reader, leading to understanding. That first paragraph tells me what to look for as I go along this story's journey: is it a fairytale, lullaby, soliloquy, or myth—or all those things interwoven; and why?

(And because I've read many authors, I always think of what others have said in their books: J. R. R. Tolkien told his friend C. S. Lewis—who had attested that the Bible was “myth” rather than truth—in its root meaning the word “myth” meant a story that answers the questions of who am I, is there a supernatural Being, how should I relate to others and live my life. Tolkien claimed, then, that Scripture IS indeed myth--“the one True myth,” and Lewis soon became a Christian.)

Before I've left page one of THE RAFFLE BABY, I know that I should look for what this tale has to say about the nature of myth and Reality, Truth and Meaning, and how all that teaches me—in inobtrusive story form—about how suffering can be juxtaposed with beauty and yet result in meaning, joy, hope.

I'm not going to say much about the plot, the storyline of this multi-layered book. It takes place during America's Great Depression and is about three children “riding the rails” to survive, “looping” in their boxcar travels from one place to another to work, to gain food. But the tale clearly says they are not just “hungry,” but they “hunger”—for safety, for belonging, for home, for knowledge, for a non-fragmented identity, for beauty.

One of my favorite juxtapositions unfolds in Chapter Eight; side by side, two scenes, opposites of kindness/equality and ugly superiority. It is in the juxtaposition that the point is revealed: the SHOWING invites in the reader, honors the reader to have enough insight to “get the point.” In the first scene, these children, with nicknames of Sonny Boy, Vic, and the girl Teeny are offered the brief hospitality of a caring rich woman who does not look down on them; then in the following scene these actual hobo children in their tattered clothes crash a community “hobo party” offering prizes to the locals who wear the best hobo costume. Those at the party—and others in the novel—see the poor and disadvantaged as “disposable,” to be endured at best, but these party people assume these three children are just in costume. The preconceptions of the college fraternity and Elks club throwing the party do not allow them to SEE the individuals in front of them; they just create them in their own image, via their own assumptions.

The rich lady in the convertible actually SEES them, sees their beauty, their vulnerability, their need. Thus, she hospitably offers them sustenance for both kinds of hunger, physical and emotional or spiritual. She invites them into a moment of joy, living in real enchantment, and they see: COLOR! Listen:

“This woman, in a butter yellow scarf and winged glasses, smeared butter and ketchup on fifteen hotdogs, and in the time it took her to finish one we had each eaten three. She tinkled when she laughed. Despite the mustard on her chin, Teeny did not take her eyes from her own reflection in the woman's sunglasses.”

(Those last words there make the reader STOP: what reflection does Teeny, discarded by society as “disposable,” see in those sunglasses? Very worthy, cherished, in a moment of being cared for—not what she’ll find “reflected” in the words and actions of the pretend-hobos at the costume party in the next scene.)

Let’s read on: “The mustard was bright yellow, and the ketchup a heavy red I could feel in my hand. For the first time in a long time, color ceased to be a punishment. Red was not an aching back in the tomato fields. Green was not a shuck of corn that demanded to be snapped off its stalk.

“And then the woman was gone, as quickly as the hot dogs. She pressed a few bills into Vic’s hands, wiped the mustard from Teeny’s chin with a handkerchief, and patted my arm.”

Those words are beauty. Does that writing not SHOW you what caring IS? Do you not want to BE the woman in the convertible who SEES who might need a hot dog and some caring—a woman who knows what the word “gift” means? A woman who transforms a dull grey existence into COLOR.

And, again, I’m in constant awe at the coherence of every single detail in this story. RED is an important unifying color here. Teeny, this homeless traveler, this orphan in the wilderness, paints her nails with red polish. You have to wonder why, and yet your heart tells you that you know the answer. Adolescent Teeny has also found a thrown away compact and she can look in its cracked mirror and smooth her eyebrows. We’re told she’s like a magpie gathering glittery things, “Looking for silver, looking for coin. Like all of us in the jungle, I suppose.”

Obviously, the reader, on the journey of a story, doesn’t see the beginning and the ending side by side, but surely a well-woven story’s ending ECHOES the beginning. Reread the first few pages and the last, and hear; be satisfied. You walk away in wonder: with what attention the author has wrought this tale.

And I haven’t even told you who the Raffle Baby IS. You’ll find out on your own.

This tapestry or “quilt” of a story is not a simple creation. Not only do details of beauty, of books and libraries, of identity become woven together, but at least three predominant patterns or THEMES do the weaving: Geography/typography, Story, and Identity (particularly the story of the outsider vs. the story of belonging). These three focal points, then, sew together the overarching theme of Journey (wandering in “loops” of endless “middle” one day like the next vs. destination where there IS a beginning, middle and end). Throughout literary history, stories have been about Journey and Orphans. Why? You *know* the answer when you think about it.

Looking into a book’s structure, we readers can think, too, of the metaphor of Dance, each part intricate, yet all the parts creating a unified whole. My goodness, a cohesive LIFE is like this: not merely a SERIES of stages or parts, but an overlapping, one part moving from or leading to another part with some kind of coordination. But if the reader

has led a “fragmented” life, I think this book brings hope, some glimmering clue to ponder, some clue about how the parts need not remain in pieces.

Yet there’s that question: WHY does the narrator and the story NEED US? Is there no dance without us?

But we so much need the host, the writer, to lead the way, to invite us into the dance of the story--and we must be AWARE of HOW the dance steps are choreographed. She has made preparations for us to enter, in her creation of words and themes. Take the Theme of Geography/Typography, for instance, the lay of the land the journey traverses:

As early as the first two pages, the vulnerable narrator trusts us to hear, “I have stood at the edge of an ocean, though it was too far away for me to touch.” Interesting that the inability to touch, or fully comprehend, is equated with a far- away OCEAN—so interesting that only a couple pages later, we are again gently alerted to this theme of geography (and travel) related to comprehension of life. Of the narrator’s depressed mother, abandoned by his father, our storyteller says, “And I was frightened of her. Frightened of the uncharted geography of her temperament. Frightened of her many minefields and those grand sweeps of no-man’s land. . . . Her intentions were obscured by a harsh topography. I did not have the legend to traverse her, so I simply existed on the outskirts of her despair.” And, entering the story, I ask myself, “When a person does not give me the legend to travel the map of who they are, how do I go about trying to understand them?”

The geography metaphors take us further into the journey. When young Sonny Boy enters a store, wandering the new territory of abundance, it is “as if I were Louis and Clark exploring a new wilderness of motor oil, penny candy, cheap writing paper, and tobacco. I walked that mercantile terrain until I was finally ejected for soiling the comic books with my filthy fingers.” Later, the reader is directly asked, “Is it not true that the landscape of our lives changes depending on the company we keep?” All words of geography therein. Likewise, Talbot clearly threads in the themes of Story and Identity/Belonging, and all three themes work together in her created story. A well-told story is like a well-lived life: not just a series of plot details in a chain of first, then this, BUT themes consistently unfolding to make sense of—purpose OF—those details.

Again, I am bowled over with wonder when I see more “layers upon layers” in the telling of THE RAFFLE BABY. Not only is Ruth Talbot extending hospitality to her readers, but this story itself is inherently *about* hospitality. On the journey to find a home, a belonging in which to find one’s Self, will Sonny Boy, Vic, or Teeny be offered hospitality, a home to “enter in” and belong, a place in which to be called by name because you are worthy of loving protection? After all, “hospitality” actually is “an offering of a place of refuge, respite,” a place to BE one’s deepest self; the word’s root meaning is “love for strangers.” Someone has said of a hospitable welcome, “I entered as a stranger; I left as a friend.”

What a hospitable author is Ruth Talbot to spend so much time preparing the details so we can follow along on this journey of book without stumbling, even seeing our own lives IN the story that, at first, might have seemed so different from our own. Someone once said that we read to find out that we are not alone. Are we all in the same story, just traveling the terrain of life on different roads?

THE RAFFLE BABY can be categorized as “historical fiction,” yet it is not just “history” of three abandoned children during the Depression. I read MY quite different history into the story, and very much the history of an actual orphan dear to me—and the agony of her mother who doesn’t know where she has gone. And in a way, it is not even “fiction,” and I don’t say that because it is loosely based on an actual event that made the papers. Does it sometimes take a created “story” for us to see that our own lives are True Story?

All I can finally say to you, Ruth Talbot is “THANK YOU” for offering us this gift. I hope you write another book: I want to come visit again.