

“DO YOU KNOW YOUR CHARLESTON?”

I was a senior in high school when, for the first time in my life, I was exposed to authors in full battle array at a literary reception. The exposure took place in the library of the High School of Charleston, and because of that it would prove to be atypical for such events, in that the refreshments served that afternoon were nonalcoholic. Otherwise the ingredients were standard.

It was not that I was unacquainted with writers. One of my uncles was a playwright who had several plays produced on Broadway. Another was the city editor of the afternoon newspaper. They and my father had grown up with a family friend whose stories appeared regularly in magazines and books.

The authors in attendance at the high school library that day, however, were of a different kind, or, more accurately, were present in a different role. They were there as Charleston Authors. It was not only that they written and published books, but that the city of Charleston was a recognizable presence in those books.

Thereby hangs a tale, the convolutions of which I would come to understand only later.

DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR before the reception, the High School of Charleston had celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. The observance had been scheduled to close with a gala historical pageant, oratory, music, presentation of awards and honors, and conferral of diplomas upon the graduating seniors. Unfortunately the advent of a polio epidemic in late spring necessitated a city-wide ban on public gatherings involving the young, so the program had to be cancelled.

When in September of 1939 a new school year began, the announcement was made that another celebratory event was in prospect. Its theme was to be “Do You Know Your Charleston?” In preparation for it, books about Charleston would be read and discussed in English classes, trips would be taken by history classes to visit appropriate historical and cultural sites, and student exhibits would be prepared and displayed. The project would culminate with a reception in honor of Charleston’s authors. A committee of senior students would function as hosts. As editor of the student newspaper I was among those appointed to it.

A celebration of the city’s past was not of itself a remarkable activity. The slogan of the Chamber of Commerce, the nation’s oldest, was “America’s Most Historic City,” and the historical and architectural heritage of Charleston was its prime component. The title of a novel by a local author, *Look Back to Glory*, could be said to exemplify the importance of the tourist trade to the Downtown economy.

Newspaper and magazine articles made much of the continuing presence of the past. Each Sunday’s *News and Courier* displayed a feature entitled “Do You Know Your Charleston?” In the spring, when the gardens were in bloom, the Downtown streets were crowded with tourists. Antique shops, art studios, flower vendors, and souvenir stands, sightseeing tours, harbor cruises, and outdoor markets flourished.

(A sizeable segment of the local population, those who were black, would have emphatically disagreed with the notion that the city’s colonial and pre–Civil War existence had constituted any kind of historical Golden Age, but this would never have occurred to me or my schoolmates.)

I was told years afterward by a teacher who had been faculty adviser of the school newspaper that the immediate impetus was a visit to the school scheduled for later that autumn by an accreditation committee of the South Carolina State Board of Education. It seems that there was some apprehension among the faculty and administration that the curriculum being offered to the students might be, however mistakenly, thought to be insufficiently adventurous by some of those who would be doing the certifying.

The inspection committee, it was assumed, would very likely be made up of specialists holding graduate degrees in secondary education. Given that particular specialty, almost by definition a majority would doubtless

be either high school administrators in upstate South Carolina or else professors of education at the state university. The thing to do would be to arrange for a student project to take place during their visit that would impress such persons.

The obvious choice of subject, proposed by one faculty member who was himself a former semipro baseball pitcher from upstate, would be the historical and cultural glories of Charleston. A classroom focus upon these was sure to result in an abundance of student work to go on display. A reception could be staged for the city's authors, and their books placed on exhibit.

An additional consideration was that the early flourishing of arts, architecture, and letters in and about Charleston dated back well before much of the upcountry had emerged from the stump-clearing, subsistence farming era. This, along with an appearance by the contemporary Charleston authors, would not only make an impression on the visiting educators, but perhaps even intimidate them a little—though nobody put it quite that way.

SO THE “DO YOU KNOW Your Charleston?” project was announced and got under way. The results began to appear in reading lists and on classroom walls and bulletin boards. Thereafter it gathered momentum. A list of local authors to be invited to the reception was drawn up. Whenever possible the invitations were delivered in person by groups of students. Seniors would be expected to attend the reception and mingle with the authors.

By the time that the State Board of Education's certification committee arrived in early December, there were exhibits everywhere; books and publications by and about Charleston authors were on display, and classroom blackboards, hallways, and office doors were lined with book jackets, posters, and photographs.

ORDINARILY I DISLIKED being made to take part in social functions. I felt awkward and graceless at them and, when spoken to, never knew what to say in reply. This time, however, it would be different. The guests would be Charleston Authors. I was on the committee to receive them. They would be talking about their writing, telling about authors they

knew personally, and answering questions. Someone might even inquire about my own interest in writing, and tell me about books I should read.

On the appointed afternoon I was on hand at the high school library, attired in coat and tie for the occasion. When the guests began arriving, each author was greeted by the teachers and ushered to a strategic spot where that person's writings were on display. Soon groups of students and teachers were clustered about them. Tea was poured by faculty wives. Some took sugar and cream; some preferred lemon.

Several of the writers possessed what I thought was a definite "authorial" appearance; others were more conventional in dress and look. There was one author with a bristling beard, dark, deep-set eyes that seemed almost to gleam, and a resounding voice, who gestured expansively as he spoke. Another, tall and red-haired with a ruddy complexion, had an outdoorsy appearance about him. I listened in on his conversation; he was talking about alligators.

A jovial, round-faced man in a tweed coat, with a shock of snow-white hair and a red bowtie, was describing the recent premiere of the movie of *Gone with the Wind* in Atlanta, which he had attended. Obviously he knew its author personally, for he referred to her as "Peggy." When the librarian came by he kissed her on both cheeks. One of the women authors present had on a formidable, broad-brimmed bonnet with flowers on it, which as she talked away oscillated vigorously overhead. Another, a tiny woman with silvery hair in ringlets, wore a velvet gown, ear pendants, a lengthy string of pearls, and silver bracelets on both arms.

I stood by for awhile, watching the proceedings and listening to the buzz of conversation. Any expectation that I might be able to discuss writing with an one of the authors appeared to be quite out of the question. I would have had to break into the flow of what was being said, and others more fluent and bolder than I were already occupying the attention of the visiting writers. This included several who had not previously struck me as having any particular interest in books; yet here they were, chatting away as if they were perfectly at home with authors and their work and had been all their lives.

For my own part, I felt no such assurance. I kept to the edge of the group. The ability to make casual conversation was what mattered. Most of the talk was not about writing. I did hear one of my classmates ask an author whether he typed his books or wrote in longhand. The author said

that he always wrote on yellow legal pads with a no. 3 lead pencil, to which the student commented that Booth Tarkington said he used Dixon Ticonderoga pencils. I wondered how that particular student, of all people, could have known who Booth Tarkington was, much less that he wrote with a lead pencil. Later on I remembered seeing an advertisement on the inside back cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* showing that Tarkington at work, together with a statement of his reliance upon Dixon Ticonderoga pencils.

There seemed to be an offhand quality to the way that several of the authors talked, as if they were aware that they were on display and were making an effort to sound properly sociable. Most, however, appeared to be enjoying themselves and quite content to be Charleston Authors on parade as it were. If I were an author, I thought, that would definitely not be my idea of fun.

As soon as I felt that I could get away with leaving without appearing to be deserting the scene, I made my way out of the library. Outside in the hallway I encountered the faculty adviser of the school newspaper, who was chatting with another teacher and who may well have suspected what I was doing. "Taking off?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"See you in class," he told me and added: "A lot of hot air in there this afternoon."

So the afternoon with the authors turned out to be quite other than what I had hoped it might be. I had thought that the authors of books would somehow be different from other people although in just what ways I could not have said. I had assumed that the same thoughtful, informative, interesting personalities who wrote the books that I had read would be present and available in person. They would be full of information and literary talk about the craft of writing and, being Charleston Authors, they would hold forth on the literary uses of the local scene, both historical and present-day.

At least one of the Charleston Authors had indeed held forth at some length—but not about the craft of writing. Most of what he had to say was in the nature of complaint over the crassness of modern-day politicians and the wasteful iniquities of the New Deal administration in Washington. He also had things to say about the exploitation of the southern scene by certain fiction writers in order to curry favor and profit among northern audiences. Otherwise he talked about ancestors.

Not all those present had been as garrulous. What they had done was to stand in place, nod and smile, sip their tea, and be Charleston Authors. A couple of them, it was true, seemed uneasy at being there. Why then had they accepted the invitation to attend? I was not sure.

I thought about how some of my schoolmates had seemed to thrive at the event. They had chatted with the guests as if they were accustomed to the company of the authors of books from infancy on. When I thought about it, these were almost all boys I had first known when I had attended Crafts School in Downtown Charleston, before my family had moved back Uptown. Most of them lived in the historical section of town, below Broad Street, as did the authors at the reception. It may have been that as neighbors those students knew the authors personally. Yet that did not seem a sufficient explanation for their conversational fluency. If the authors had known how to function at the reception, so too had my classmates.

WHAT I WAS IN FACT responding to, without realizing it, was my first exposure to literature as a social art. I could not have sorted out my emotions at the time, and certainly not have articulated them. The phenomenon would puzzle me for years to come.

Whatever the private motives, creative and otherwise, that might have prompted the authors at the reception to write their books, they had been invited to be present in the capacity of Charleston Authors. It was like a role in a play. Presumably those who came did wish to fulfill that role, or at least had no objections to appearing in it.

Not all the authors asked had accepted the invitation to be there. So there must be some Charleston authors who did not consider themselves to be Charleston Authors. Either that, or they did not care to play the role in public.

I was sixteen years old at the time that the reception took place. By then I had decided that, like two of my uncles, I would become a writer. Fanciful ambitions to become a major league baseball player notwithstanding, it was the only thing that I had ever been able to do reasonably well, and I knew it was what I wanted to do.

The more I thought about what I had witnessed, the more dissatisfied I became with it. I had seen certain writers engaged in playing a role. Likewise some of my classmates had been playing a role. It was the need for the

performance that dismayed me, I had stood by, looked on, and been unable to take part. I had been a failure at my own role.

I was irked with myself, and not only because I had been too shy to speak up. It was because I had allowed the occasion to matter, and was continuing to do so. After all, what difference should it make to me? Surely my hopes of some day becoming a writer did not depend upon whether I had or had not said anything at a reception. If some of my schoolmates had appeared completely at ease, what was that to me?

I vowed that whatever kind of writer I might someday become, I would never allow myself to play a role in any similar event, in Charleston or otherwise. The whole thing had been vanity. There had been no point to it—and moreover not in a million years would I be able to enjoy that kind of occasion. Others might want to stand around and be admired, but not I.

It was not for me. I was not cut out for it. Oh vanity of vanities.

THUS THE “DO YOU KNOW Your Charleston?” program and its culminating social event. Whatever its impact may have been upon me either then or later, in terms of the aims of its sponsors, it served its purpose. When several months later the report of the South Carolina State Board of Education accreditation visit was released, among the items drawing praise from the inspecting team were the innovativeness of the English curriculum and the imaginative use being made of the community’s cultural resources to enrich the educational curriculum.