

Mr Alphonse Gives Away His Books

A short story with commentary on symbols used

I remember Mr Alphonse as a thin little man who always carried a book. When it was a fine day, he could be found sitting on one of the park benches reading, while we played our silly childish games.

Somewhere along time's highway I noticed that his hair had gone grey, and he had taken to stooping when he walked, which made him look even smaller. By then I was older, and visited the park only once in a while. I was preoccupied with thoughts other than of childish play. Though grey and stooping he still carried a book. This was one of my early life's constants, which only hindsight could have appreciated.

Now as I look back, with more than a concern for the present and how it can serve me, I remember how quaint it all was. Never without a book, newspaper or magazine. A favourite bench near the duck pond, squinting through thick lenses at the pages, and a smile of acquaintance when he looked at us. Is something like that possible in this suspiciously neurotic, electronic, age?

I asked my parents once, when they were alive, what they knew of him, and they said he was living in the little weatherboard house near the park when they first came to this town. He had been a librarian at the local library and lived alone. When the library was closed down and replaced by a mobile service, he had retired and stayed on in town. My mother had once taken an adult class in which he was the tutor at the local high school. Apparently he was quite an expert on the works of Henry James and American literature generally.

To us he was a pleasant eccentric. Much more so now in our world of diminishing literacy. Even then, his kind of reading, undertaken with a seriousness of purpose, was part of another world. In my case the world of my parents, or at least my mother who still read for pleasure.

One day I came home from university. My mind was haemorrhaging with the effort of studying to get the marks I needed in my Arts course, in order to then be able to get into a post-grad course with a worthwhile job at the end of it. I desperately needed a break; I was feeling convinced that I should have stayed on in town, found work, built a life in the here and now.

I saw a stack of books in the passageway and thought my mother was getting her winter stocks in early. Classic American, paperbacks mainly, with commentary. Nothing I could use as a diversion.

Mr Alphonse was getting rid of some of his books. My mother and her reading club friends had been among the first to pay him a visit and grab some great titles.

For want of anything better to do, and needing to clear my head of clever arguments I was

incapable of appreciating, I decided to take a walk, across the park to where Mr. Alphonse kept house.

By this time in my life I had imbibed a little of my mother's influence, and embraced a kind of reading. Adventurous fantasy and thrillers, where I could escape for brief periods of time from myself. I had discovered the knack of hitting a switch and becoming simply a reader. The only deplorable moment came when I had to re-emerge from the comfort of a fantasy, becoming again the original person that has to live in the actual world. In those days computers and play stations, let alone the internet, were the stuff of science fiction. Even our telephone went through a town PABX operator.

The walk did not take me long. How did we ever imagine as children, that this little park was a vast world made for heroes to have adventures? It was so damn small. The lake of our childhood was a scummy pond. The hills on which we built our forts were low undulations for unkempt flower beds near the path. Our mighty forest, a few scraggly, out of control, correas and grevilleas.

Mr Alphonse's house had an elegant handwritten sign stuck to the front of the door, announcing 'An Offering of Rare and Interesting Books'.

I knocked on the door then waited. Shortly I heard some light footsteps come down the passageway and then the door was opened. It was Mr Alphonse. He smiled when he saw me, and I felt sure it was because I was somehow familiar to him.

'You came for my books, is that right?' he asked me. He looked even smaller than I had remembered him. Perhaps it was because I had never stood close enough to him before to see how small he really was, or I had simply just grown up.

He wore an old fashioned corduroy jacket, light tan trousers, and house slippers on his feet. A golden weave scarf at his throat lent him a touch of elegance. The slight stoop of his frame made him seem even more diminished, but his rheumy eyes danced behind thick glasses, alert like a bird.

'You must excuse me, but I have been sorting books. Please come in', and he moved aside so I could enter.

I made some small talk I realise now was unsophisticated, primate gibberish, as I followed him down the passage. I told him my mother said he had a book sale, how I was looking for something to while away the time between studies, and what a large collection of books he must have. The passage was lined with built-in shelves floor to ceiling, most of them empty now, and they must have once held an incredible number of books.

'I see you've sold quite a few of your books already'.

'I have not been selling them, although a dealer friend of mine in the city who specialises in mail orders has made some judicious choices', he said, eyeing me over his glasses, 'but I keep some less popular but still very interesting books in here', indicating a large room at the end of the passage.

'I was sorting and boxing them, but you are welcome to look and take any you want. What's not taken, I will give to the University or the State Library. As an ex-librarian I know it will cause them no end of annoyance, having to sort through boxes and boxes in order to find the titles they deem worthy of adding to their august collections!'

He chuckled at this act of premeditated mischief.

I wondered why a librarian would need to have so many books himself anyway, and when I asked him he just said that he loved books. They were his companions in life.

The stacks of books in the lounge room were mostly tacky thrillers, some going back to the early days of paperbacks. The brown and yellowing paper gave off a distinctive smell of dry decay. Some of the books were clearly pulp thrillers, with large staples holding together their contents between lurid covers. Perhaps a collector might be interested.

In an adjoining room he showed me a large collection of grade school readers, French grammar and vocabulary, studies of famous authors, some of whom even I recognised, and some histories. They went back years and he had multiple copies of some of them. A veritable cultural history of the sublime and the commonplace. The kinds of things not even teachers would keep. Some of his books were the sort you sometimes still see today in charity bins or recycling stations. Mouldy books of no intrinsic value that he could not bear to throw out. Giving them away must have been some kind of defiance, but I was too dumb then to imagine what that could be.

I asked whether he had anything more modern, but he said his dealer friend had been quick and taken the best of what he had. I could not see anything remotely interesting to me, but then I spotted a set of Edgar Rice Burroughs fantasies – the Martian and Venus series – plus some other pulp writers, so I picked them up and a couple of other books – an introduction to Shakespeare and his time, and a guide to writing essays, which I thought my mother or someone in her endless study-circle would like.

I asked him how much they were and he looked at me askance. 'Why nothing of course. I said I am not selling them. What's the point? As long as they go to a good place they are yours to take'.

He surely meant to be kind, recognising how valueless my selection had been. He had well-bound hardbacks with lofty titles, written by lofty authors, the kind I came across in the university library and sometimes was forced to read – the price for doing an Arts Degree. History was fine, as was

sometimes philosophy, but the minor in literature was simply an act of sheer endurance on my part. Mr Alphonse had many of those kinds of books, but they did not appeal to me and besides, he had boxed many up to go to the State Library.

So why the sign outside? I supposed an offering meant a sale, but it was an offering, just a simple meaning. Quite a few people must have made a killing here, and I thought to myself that I should look more carefully at what he had on offer.

My curiosity and a scintilla of decency made me ask why he was giving them away, and didn't he know he could make some money from an actual sale?

He avoided answering for a while and then asked me whether I read, a silly question I thought, given that I was here at all.

'It is not a mechanical act, you know? What do you read, exactly?' I told him thrillers and fantasies. Escapist reading.

'Marvellous in its way, absolutely marvellous! It's a pity you were so tardy. I had some gems here earlier'. He shuffled over to a chair where he had been sitting before I arrived. He held up a paperback he had been reading, with a bookmark half way into the book. 'This is a good one by Dickens, I think his best. I loved it when I was your age. I will save it for you when I finish. Come by and collect it tomorrow'.

'Thanks. I will'.

'How do you read?' he asked me again, sitting in an old chair and beckoning me to another dusty twin. I wasn't sure what he meant, and said something inane about when I needed a break from study. He meant something else.

'When I read, I try and create the world of the story in my mind. Whatever I read, even non-fiction. When I have put the book down, sometimes after I have long finished it, I can visualise the places and the characters. Good books will stay with me for a long time. Some become part of what I am'.

'You mean like in a movie?'

'Not quite, but close enough. It's a movie that's all around me', he said sighing, lifting his chin and describing a half circle. Maybe inside me is a better description. It suffices.'

I looked around the room. At the old classics and tacky books that were left behind. With this stuff? Surely not worth the mental effort, and I said so. The arrogance of my youth stuns me these days.

He was emphatic: 'With anything. Anything I can get involved in. Otherwise I do not bother to get

past the first pages'.

It must make him a slow reader. If you include thinking, time for reflection, its a wonder he had time to read more than a fraction of his books. He explained that he created the worlds, stimulated by the writer, (and a poor writer could only ever provide an initial, inexact starting point), and developed it as he read.

'It becomes an ethereal embrace, of my making. It possesses me while I read'.

'Fascinating'. That was the word of choice in those days to feign interest – like 'cool' is today among people as ignorant as I was then. 'I don't think I visualise much at all, except maybe the heroine'. My joke didn't have the pleasant result I hoped it would. He looked sad.

'That's a pity. Perhaps you are still too young. Words are like seeds from which worlds may grow. Each reader can create the world anew by each proper reading, subtly and perhaps even glaringly different on each occasion. But it is the reader that recreates this world, sometimes in a form and with subtleties which are a surprise even to the writer, as many have told me over the years. A good reader can return to a world that has been created time and again, and at times with such a frightening intensity, that it makes the present world we live in seem like the shadow realm. But you are right. It does take time, a diminishing quantity...'

He was starting to lose the plot, I said to myself cleverly, given we were talking about books and reading. I was looking for a way to get away, back to my parents' house with my hoard of escapist reading. But his momentum picked up again.

'...and I find I go back to the worlds of my favourite books, trying to relive them again, keep them vivid. Perhaps not so many books are needed after all. But I am obviously becoming boring and you must have better things to do than listen to old Alphonse's ruminating. Besides, I have more books to shed and more librarians to annoy with donations!'

I was not sorry to be leaving. I thought I was either out of my depth or he was way past eccentric and into the realms of the truly nutty. Old age I guess. I took as many of the books as I wanted and he gave me a box to carry them in. I was excited by my findings after all and did not give Mr Alphonse much thought after I said thanks and goodbye.

I learned much later that Mr Alphonse had died soon after he had given away his books. Such a thoughtful and tidy man, and of a habitual frame of mind. He knew he was going and naturally I, and probably not just I, was too stupid back then to understand what he was doing by giving away so much a part of himself.

I left town after I graduated. Annoyingly I became the very thing I abhorred in those years – a

teacher. Most of my fellow students took studentships in those days and I fell into teaching by that route after my first year at university. After a post in Melbourne, marriage, children and a divorce later, I found myself back in the old town in which I had been born. Middle-aged and desperately counting the days to early retirement, I am now teaching students at the local High School, students who with some rare exceptions, think I'm an old dill, force-feeding them a curriculum they neither like or respect.

Where I sit I can look across the room to the set of books I was lucky enough to receive from Mr Alphonse – the pulp thrillers I now can't bear to read anymore, although funnily enough, their alien world and characters still inhabit my mind.

A good reader, in Mr Alphonse's definition, can return to the world they have created, time and again, and at times with such a frightening intensity, that it makes the present world we live in and no longer relate to, seem like the shadow realm.

I also have the book he had promised to send me on my shelf. I had forgotten about it and as an adult was glad my parents had saved for me. I can see why it was one of his favourites and I kept the bookmark in the place he had left it. Dickens's 'Great Expectations'.

I suppose he never really needed to finish it again because it lived inside him.

Symbols used in this story

The main symbol is the book or books generally, as they comprise someone's collection. The presence of Alphonse and the continuity of the past in memory as against the reality of that past. The act of giving away of books and the act of reading. The diminished size of Mr Alphonse. The return of the narrator.

Books are symbols of life, not as mere aspects but of a whole life from beginning to end. As stories, they are often self-contained worlds or realities.

The act of immersing yourself in a book is to achieve a transcendence. The act of reading is the immersion and the establishment of this other reality as part of what you are. This is why Alphonse asks so pointedly of the immature narrator, whether he reads.

The presence of Alphonse and the park and environs are symbols of the world of the young, warm and comforting, much greater than they actually are; their changed appearance is a sign of growth on

the part of the narrator, growth but not necessarily more true than the past impressions this park and the constancy of Alphonse suggested.

The giving away of books is a symbol of Alphonse's end; the books are his world – his being in fact – which he intends should live on after him. He has no need of them because his world is ending. The giving away is a sign of passing on a part of yourself – your meaning or being – to the world you leave behind. The narrator in his immaturity, does not understand this, although he senses that something important may be going on.

The diminished size of Alphonse, and the park and environs, are symbols of the fading away of life and approaching death. First comes diminution, loss of force and power, then death.

The return of the narrator, the passing away of things, his acquired understanding of life and what Alphonse was actually trying to say to him, his glimmering that he is also approaching an ending, and like Alphonse, the reading he has done may serve to succour him – these are the intended meanings of the return of the narrator – whom I deliberately left nameless.