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**Portraits of Children of Alcoholics:
Stories that Add Hope to Hope**

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Abstract: This literary analysis examines the emergence of children of alcoholics narratives and their growth from “resource” texts to literary subgenre. While early texts offer useful information about parental alcoholism, they are also limited. Namely, they do not adequately mirror the diversity of children, families, and problems associated with parental alcoholism nor do they offer alternatives for children whose parents do not, or cannot, seek treatment for their addiction. Literature, on the other hand, in inviting what philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to as “narrative play,” can help children learn to understand and empathize with others, nourish their inner curiosity, and, most importantly, tolerate ambiguity in the face of an imperfect world. Thus, this paper presents and examines three literary narratives about children of alcoholics: Gary Paulsen’s *Harris and Me* (1993), Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), and Tom Robbins’ *B is for Beer* (2009). By providing characters and situations with which they can identify, these stories possess potential to validate the feelings that children of alcoholics often experience. At the same time, by offering models of strength and hope, these stories can also help broaden and awaken new perspectives so that children of alcoholics might envision a different life for themselves and reject the pattern of self-victimization and the cycle of alcoholism. Humor, a dominant feature throughout all three narratives, is identified as an especially effective means of discussing this topic with younger audiences. Teachers and librarians can draw on this examination to better guide their selection of texts for young readers, especially for those who are burdened by parental addiction and/or family dysfunction.

Keywords: children of alcoholics, alcoholism in literature, young adult literature, children’s literature, humor, bibliotherapy

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (2012), 7.5 million American children, 10.5 percent of all children living in the U.S., have lived with a parent with an alcohol disorder in the past year. Although it is difficult to determine whether or not children of alcoholics are left with unique emotional problems, these children are nonetheless at greater risk for depression, anxiety disorders, cognitive problems, parental abuse, and neglect. They are also, according to the same survey, four times as likely as other children to develop drinking problems themselves. In response to these dismal predictions, it seems obvious that there would be a collection of literary works that would help children of alcoholics cope with their situation. Until recently, however, most novels depicting children of alcoholics were either literary works meant for adult readers or informational books meant to educate children and adolescents about the dangers of alcohol.

When the Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) movement began to build momentum during the 1980s, a series of texts for children began to appear. Many of them are described in a 1987 article in *Childhood Education: Infancy Through Early Adolescence* (Fassler). Most of the titles mentioned in this bibliographic essay are informative workbooks—texts that adults can use to discuss alcoholism with children—rather than engaging narratives that children would want to read on their own. Exceptions include a few picture books. For instance, LeClair Bisell's and Richard Watherwax's *The Cat Who Drank Too Much* (1982) depicts the story of an alcohol-addled cat: "Once upon a time there was a cat who drank too much. It started innocently enough – just a little with meals..." (p. 1). Black-and-white photographs illustrate the cat moving in-and-out of his addiction, from "passed out" (p. 12) rock bottom to the doors of AA (p. 19). Interestingly, the word "alcohol" isn't ever actually used in the story, although back matter

includes references to Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and the National Council on Alcoholism. Clearly, the story is about alcoholism. Why not say so?

Kevin Kenny and Helen Krull's *Sometimes My Mom Drinks Too Much* (1980), another title included in this list, is less reticent to use this term but it nonetheless follows the same structure. The story is told from the perspective of Maureen, the daughter of an alcoholic mother. Maureen describes several episodes (in the home, at school events) where her mother embarrasses, saddens, or angers her on account of her addiction. The story does a fair job at depicting the feelings a child of an alcoholic might experience—anxiety, guilt, confusion—but is also limited in that it describes the best-case scenario. Maureen's father is able to take Maureen aside and reassure her that her mother's alcoholism is not her fault, and in the end Maureen's mother is sent to a treatment center. Like *The Cat Who Drank Too Much*, this story concludes with the best possible outcome. While ideal, such endings offer little comfort and guidance to the child whose alcoholic parent does not admit his or her problem, who does not seek help, or who *cannot* seek help. Furthermore, because these stories tend to reflect white, middle to upper class, two-parent households, they do not adequately mirror the diversity of children, families, and problems connected with parental alcoholism.

While most of these texts are no longer in print, the "Books to Read" listed on the "Just 4 Kids" page of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics website are similarly disposed. The list includes mostly workbooks and a few stories. Nancy Tabor's *Bottles Break* (1999), a picture book that uses a handwritten typeface and cut art so as to appear to be written and illustrated by an actual child, at least acknowledges that not all alcoholic parents will find treatment, but the message, "treatment is the solution," persists. Another title, Jeannine Auth's *Emmy's Question* (2007), differs from all of these texts in that it is a full, novel-length story, but

it is also extremely sentimental, didactic, and predictable. Like *Sometimes My Mom Drinks Too Much*, it portrays a white, middle class, two-parent household that has the resources to seek treatment for Emmy's mother.

One reason that these stories fall flat may be that they are written by medical doctors, social workers, and school teachers—*not* fiction writers. Many of them contain good *information*. But, lacking complex, well-developed, and believable characters, interesting plots, and engaging language, they are not especially *good stories*. They are limited in their ability to arouse emotions the way that good literature can—suggesting perhaps, that, like many other genres, this one started off awkwardly, prioritizing its didactic function over its artistic one. Yet, as philosopher Martha Nussbaum notes, literary forms—especially novels—by arousing powerful emotions and inviting readers to place themselves in the characters' experience, help readers develop a form of imaginative thinking and feeling about others that is essential for social life (Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 1995, ch. 1). Because emotions have a narrative structure—"The understanding of any single emotion is incomplete unless its narrative history is grasped" (Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 2001, p. 236)—reading literature allows one to vicariously experience the lives of others. According to Nussbaum, this "narrative play" (p. 237) can provide children with several benefits: the ability to understand and empathize with others, a means of strengthening and nourishing their curiosity, and, most importantly, courage and forbearance in the face of an imperfect world (p. 237). "This project of understanding . . . militates against depression and helplessness, feeding [the child's] interest in living in a world in which she is not perfect or omnipotent" (p. 237). Stories such as *Sometimes My Mom Drinks Too Much* and *Emmy's Question*, however, do not contain complex characters with pasts; there is no narrative history that explains their present selves. *Why*, for instance, does Maureen's mother sometimes

drink too much? Lacking in literary quality, these stories do not fully invite this narrative play. Rather, in depicting children as powerless, they may instead reinforce feelings of depression and helplessness among children of alcoholics.

While there are many examples in American literature that portray children of alcoholics, contemporary American literature on this topic tends to be written for or marketed toward adult audiences. For example, a number of memoirs have recently taken up this topic: Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Tobias Wolf's *This Boy's Life*, Mary Karr's *The Liars Club*, and Jeanette Wells' *The Glass Castle*. But there are very few good stories that portray children of alcoholics that are written for and marketed toward readers who are under the age of, say, fourteen. Consequently, this paper examines three American literary narratives (one intended for an elementary audience, one for a middle grade audience, and one for a young adult audience) that exemplify this emerging literary category. They include: Tom Robbins' *B is for Beer* (2009), Gary Paulsen's *Harris and Me* (1993), and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). Although their audiences vary, all three of these stories depict children of alcoholics who are able to cope with their parents' alcoholism despite the fact that their parents do not get better or seek treatment. These characters can offer readers comfort and connection with others (albeit fictional others) as well as provide models for identity as they learn to confront and tolerate the ambivalence in their lives.

Before delving into these examples, however, it is helpful to define what I mean by "a portrait of a child of an alcoholic." It would be presumptuous and wrong to ascribe the same characteristics and habits to all children of alcoholics. In fact, many popular assumptions about their behaviors, such as "feeling different from others, putting up a false front, being reluctant to stand up for themselves and failing to enjoy life as much as they would like" (Goleman, 1992),

are so vague that they could apply to anyone. Furthermore, research does not even support these claims. Rather, according to Dr. Kenneth Sher, a psychologist at the University of Missouri and the author of *Children of Alcoholics*, “The most significant revelation about COA’s that the research community has established is how difficult it is to make valid generalizations” (Sher, “Psychological Characteristics,” 1997, p. 248). It is true that COAs are at increased risk of becoming alcoholics themselves and that this risk does appear “to be a function of both genetic and environmental factors” (Sher, p. 247). Sher also states in an interview that children of alcoholics tend to have “greater impulsivity, rebelliousness, a propensity to take risks, low self-esteem and a tendency to depression” (Goleman, 1992). However, none of these traits are, per se, a direct result of growing up with an alcoholic parent. As Sher explains, “In general, parent psychopathology is associated with a wide range of behavior disorders and offspring maladjustment. Consequently, although COAs might be at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, this does not imply that such outcomes are specific to COAs” (Sher, *Children of Alcoholics*, 1991, p. 34). In other words, where alcoholism exists, often other types of family dysfunction exist as well, a pattern that is depicted vividly in some early works of American literature.

For example, in their article, “Children of Alcoholics in Literature: Portraits of the Struggle” (1990), authors Timothy Rivinus and Brian Ford identify several characters from American literature they think model both courage and forbearance in the face of growing up in a chemically dependent family. They suggest that writers Mark Twain and Betty Smith have “drawn on their personal experiences for their fiction” (p. 15) and their works, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, “presage both the mutual help movement for children of alcoholics and the professional interest in their plight” (p. 15). In other words, they

hold that the creative act of writing has helped these writers come to terms with their own pasts while the works themselves have engaged, and continue to engage, readers' empathetic imaginations. For children of alcoholics, they provide characters with whom they can identify and, for other readers, a means of understanding their struggle.

In their analysis of *Huckleberry Finn*, Rivinus and Ford observe, "Huck is the object of ritualized physical abuse by his father. He is kidnapped, locked up, and made his father's slave . . . [and] witnesses his father's delirium tremens, hallucinations, and paranoia. He barely escapes being murdered by his father" (p. 17). Although Huck's experience is not universal (i.e., not all COAs are physically abused or have parents who hallucinate when they are drunk), it does illustrate the larger constellation of issues that children of alcoholics often face. Rather than any one cause, it is the cumulative effect of his father's alcoholism and physical abuse that gives way to Huck's passivity, low self-esteem, and depression—what makes him, in other words, the "classic" example of a child of an alcoholic. Elizabeth Prioleau adds in her article, "'That Abused Child of Mine': Huck Finn as a Child of an Alcoholic" (1993), "Almost as if he has internalized Tom's and pap's opinions of him, he derides himself repeatedly for stupidity and wrongdoing . . . he shows the classic symptoms of the child of an alcoholic: depression, low-self-esteem, passivity, impulsivity, distrust, and a compulsion to repeat self-destructive behaviors" (p. 86). These behaviors are indeed reflected in Huck's story, but surely anyone who is programmed this early in life to accommodate a manipulative parent is likely to display some of these symptoms as well.

The reason Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is such an outstanding example of literature about children of alcoholics is not merely because of its status in the American literary canon. It is also because, as Prioleau points out, "Twain tapped into a distinctive national theme—the ubiquity of

alcohol in American Literature” (p. 94). With this work, Twain reflects America’s complex relationship with alcohol, foreshadowing the Temperance Movements and Prohibition, tensions that persist to this day. In addition, and what neither of these critics mention, is the role of humor. Twain was an extremely important humorist, the leader, in fact, of America’s rural humor tradition. As a writing strategy, humor allows Twain to critique contemporary social ills while creating psychic distance between his readers and the issues. He is able to address problems critically yet, at the same time, minimize the threat of offending or alienating his audience. Through satire especially, he casts light on taboo topics and uncomfortable realities—like alcoholism in *Huckleberry Finn*. This feature of his writing is worth mentioning because Robbins, Paulsen, and Alexie all seem to follow in his footsteps. They all use humor in their storytelling. Given the fact that their stories also feature protagonists who are children of alcoholics, these similarities do not seem merely accidental.

Some background on the role of humor in coping with life stress and adversity provides some insight. Martin Rod, clinical psychologist and former president of the International Society of Humor Studies, writes, “Because it inherently involves incongruity and multiple interpretations, humor provides a way for the individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation, reappraising it from a new and less threatening point of view” (2008, p. 19). This ability to shift perspective and experience positive emotions may be fundamental to human strength and flourishing. According to Barbara Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (2001), by replacing the feelings of anxiety, depression, or anger that accompany stressful or painful situations, positive emotions, like humor-provoked mirth, can enable a person to think more broadly, and flexibly, so that he or she can engage in creative problem solving in times of crisis. Unlike negative emotions, such as fear, that *narrow* or *limit* a

person's action tendencies—usually for the sake of survival—positive emotions can actually help expand or widen them. As Fredrickson explains, “Positive emotions—including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love . . . all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources” (2001, p. 19). For example, positive emotions can offset the aftereffects of negative emotions as well as fuel and build psychological resiliency (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 224). So, cultivating a sense of humor in times of stress or suffering can help trigger positive emotions that enable human growth, strength, and forbearance. It can be used to cope—to sustain hope—in seemingly hopeless situations.

Given these functions of humor (to mitigate fear and anxiety and to engender positive emotions that enable creative problem solving and resourcefulness) it becomes clear why humor is such a useful device for telling stories about children of alcoholics, and it is no wonder why Twain, Paulsen, Alexie, and Robbins all invoke it in their storytelling. Although humor takes on different forms for each author, they all use a playful and lighthearted tone in order to present and confront challenging subject matter. In addition, their protagonists all offer different, but creative and productive responses, including humorous responses, to the adversity in their lives. Such models can help readers identify and broaden their coping strategies, encouraging them to recognize and expand their own sense of agency. This is a powerful message to send any reader, but especially a young reader who might be dealing with an alcoholic parent. Children of alcoholics, as children, are basically unable to change their situation (they can't, for example, *make* their parents seek treatment) but these stories can at least help them manage their feelings of loneliness and isolation, and provide alternatives so that they conceive of, and pursue better lives for themselves.

Tom Robbins' *B is for Beer* (2009)

When asked during an interview what inspired him to write *B is for Beer*, Tom Robbins responded, “Well children are exposed to beer all the time. Every time they watch any sporting event on TV, they see beer commercials. . . . But aside from that, and aside from beer's historical and philosophical background, don't you think that children really need to know why their daddy keeps a second refrigerator out in the garage?” (“Novelist,” 2010). In other words, children are already forming their own impressions about beer and other types of alcohol. Adults could at least help mediate them.

B is for Beer attempts to start this conversation, beginning with the book's cover (illustrated by Les LePere). An enormous glass beer stein, filled with pale ale and foaming over, is its focal point. It sits on a pedestal, as if it were a monument, on a grassy lawn. Lilliputian-sized people crowd around it—sitting, picnicking, dancing, and strolling. Two captions, one on each side of the glass, read, “A Children's Book for Grown-ups” and “A Grown-up Book for Children.” This provocative subtitle is intended, of course, to challenge the concept of “children's book.” Robbins recognizes that it is adults who are buying and reading his book and so challenges them to rethink their assumptions about whether or not beer is an appropriate topic to discuss with children: why *shouldn't* children know about something that their culture seems to worship with near religious devotion? In this way, *B is for Beer* is a call to action. It gives adults a means of broaching and discussing this complex topic with the children in their lives.

The story is told by an unnamed narrator (whose droll sense of humor evokes Robbins himself) and centers on a five-year-old girl, Gracie. Gracie lives in Seattle, “the world headquarters of drizzle” (p. 11) with her disinterested, alcoholic lawyer father and her distracted

but loving mother. Also in her life is her father's brother, Uncle Moe. Moe is a patient and attentive uncle and also a thoughtful and intelligent man. He enjoys beer (as evidenced by his connoisseur's knowledge about beer's history, production, and nutritional value) but displays a more moderate, healthier attitude toward consumption than his brother. In the opening chapter Gracie's father and Uncle Moe are watching a football game. Gracie, curious, asks her father if she can try a sip of his beer. Her father refuses but Moe lets her sneak a taste. She detests its bitterness, but is taken by Moe's explanations of beer's production and history. When he offers to take her on a tour of the Redhook Brewery for her sixth birthday, she gleefully accepts.

This opening chapter makes two claims: 1) children are capable of an intellectual discussion on the topic and 2) *not* having such discussion may be one of the reasons that alcohol is abused in the first place. Gracie's father, picking up on the thread of Gracie and Moe's conversation, barks, "Don't be talking that crap to her. She's five years old" (p. 14). He assumes either that his daughter is incapable of this discussion or ought not to be exposed to the topic of alcohol—even though alcoholism is clearly affecting her life. Furthermore, in denying Gracie a sip of his alcohol, her father makes it forbidden, giving it the power to tantalize. Conversely, in indulging Gracie's curiosity, that is, by giving her a sip of beer and then engaging her in conversation about it, Moe diminishes its secret allure. She discovers 1) that she does not even like it and 2) that beer is an inert substance that depends on the way in which it is used for its power and meaning.

In chapter four, Uncle Moe is forced to cancel their plans to visit the brewery so that he can see a podiatrist. Ironically, he had dropped a can of beer on his toe, breaking it. So disappointed, Gracie skips breakfast and returns to her room. The narrator asks,

Do you think she was overreacting? Could her disappointment really have been that horrible? No, Gracie was no crybaby wimp. Furthermore, she was hardly a stranger to disappointment as her daddy was forever—forever! forever!—promising to take her places, to play games with her or buy her things, only to forget about it when the time came. (p. 25)

Again, as children of alcoholics often are, Gracie is used to feeling disappointed, unimportant, ignored, and neglected. Moe arrives later in a taxi donning a medical boot, apologizes, and promises they will resume their plans at a later date, and in an even grander fashion: “I’m going to pick up the birthday girl in a stretch limousine. Can you dig it?” (p. 34).

Again, plans and promises are broken. First, Gracie’s sixth birthday party is cancelled due to a “three-ring germ circus” (p. 51), an outbreak of stomach flu at her kindergarten. Then, her father leaves on “urgent business” (p. 51). At least, Gracie thinks that it is a business trip because “otherwise why would have taken his secretary along?” (p. 52). Her father also fails to give her the puppy he had promised her and calls to explain that he had ordered it, but had lost the name of the pet store: “Next week, for sure” (p. 52), he promises. After dinner, Gracie’s mother serves her dessert and then goes next door to talk to her neighbor—presumably about her crumbling marriage. While she is gone, Uncle Moe calls and announces that he is absconding to Costa Rica with his podiatrist, with whom he has fallen in love. While at least Moe remembers to call Gracie, honoring her enough to provide her with an explanation, he nonetheless never does deliver on his promise.

At this point, the story takes a surprising, fantastic turn. Gracie, who is “too hurt to stamp her feet or throw things, too angry to weep” (p. 56) decides instead that she will reach for a beer. She pops one open, drinks it all, and proceeds to jam to Aretha Franklin while jumping up-and-

down on her bed. Of course, she immediately becomes sick, crawls into her bed, and passes out, at which point the Beer Fairy graces her with a visit. The Beer Fairy, the “fairy for beer” (p. 63), explains that she can usually be expected whenever “a substantial quantity of beer is being consumed” (p. 63). When Gracie asks the Beer Fairy whether or not she helps people who drink too much, the fairy responds,

Oh, if they’ve become pleasantly glad and dizzy, I might take steps to ensure that no real harm befalls them, I might enhance or even participate in their celebration; but should they happen to turn aggressive or nasty or stupid, which isn’t uncommon, I’m more likely to kick their butts. (p. 64)

An absurd, comic figure, the Beer Fairy allows Robbins to take up the potentially disturbing topic of alcoholism. The fairy is a comforting intermediary, who gives Robbins the freedom to pursue this discussion and explore its implications. At the same time, she serves his didactic purposes as well.

After a brewery tour, the Beer Fairy attempts a refined explanation about why people drink beer and how such a habit can develop into alcoholism. She begins, “Something you’ll never learn in school *or* in a brewery . . . is that there is also a Fifth Element. That’s right, another basic component of reality, one that’s as nourishing as Earth, as shifty as Water, as invisible as Air, and as dangerous as Fire” (p. 92). The fifth element is loosely defined as “transcendence,” “magic,” or “divine energy” (p. 93) and is “a mixture of pure love, unlimited freedom, and total, spontaneous, instantaneous knowledge of everything past, present and future—all rolled up in a kind of invisible ghost-sheet enchilada that can be periodically smelled and occasionally tasted, but rarely chewed and never, never digested” (p. 93). The fairy explains, “Beer, if it’s just the right amount—not too little and definitely not too much—may on occasion

transport one through that crack and carry one close enough to the gates of Mystery so that one's granted a quick but entirely rapturous peek inside" (pp. 96-97). In these passages, the fairy attempts to explain the euphoric, Dionysian excitement of intoxication, the way that drinking can help break down one's inhibitions, giving way to self-forgetfulness, freedom, spontaneity, creativity, or a state of transcendence—all the reasons why one might be inspired to drink. In this way, Robbins' story is unique. Unlike the informational books of the 1980s, he not only offers an explanation for *why* people drink but also a substantive, nuanced explanation that accounts for why drinking might be *good*.

Significantly, these positive effects of alcohol are juxtaposed with the negative effects when the next chapter depicts two men, emboldened by alcohol, attempting to rape a woman. Invisible to the assailants, Gracie and the fairy intervene on the woman's behalf. Once the men are subdued, the fairy explains to Gracie,

You've just witnessed how beer can contribute to vile behavior. If one is rude, beer can make one ruder; if one is a slob, it can make one sloppier; if one is mean, it can make one meaner; if one's dumber than one looks...well, you get the picture. Beer can lead weak men to think they are mighty, and foul-mouthed women to believe themselves amusing or hip. Worse, if one is cursed with an addictive personality, it can bring on the serious disease of alcoholism. (p. 106)

Thus, *B is for Beer* manages to be didactic without over-simplifying, scaring, or pushing the "treatment" solution on readers, as earlier narratives about children of alcoholics have.

In fact, the story's ending is anything but conventional. After many "brain skinning, milk-souring" (p. 114) arguments, Gracie's parents divorce, her father leaves, and she and her uncle move in with Uncle Moe. The narrator concludes, "And did they live happily ever after?"

No, nobody ever does—at least not totally. But whenever [Gracie’s mother] was blindsided by bad days, as most of us are from time to time, she’d make a point of refusing to take them too seriously, and that, dear reader, is the next best thing to everlasting happiness” (p. 124). In presenting a complex, realistic ending, Robbins gives his readers hope, but not false hope. Gracie’s dad, a self-centered philander, does not suddenly become a better person. Neither does he quit drinking. Her parents also do not magically reconcile their differences. In Costa Rica, life is not perfect either, but it is better. Not because the adults stop drinking (because they don’t) but because they are a much more loving, supportive, and attentive family to each other. In the end, Gracie learns how to tolerate ambivalence, ambiguity, and imperfection in living. By extension, so can the reader.

Gary Paulsen’s *Harris and Me: A Summer Remembered* (1993)

This hilarious, picaresque novel takes place on a rural farm during the early 1950s and is told from the perspective of an eleven-year-old, unnamed narrator. It begins,

Meeting Harris would never have happened were it not for liberal quantities of Schlitz and Four Roses. For nearly all of my remembered childhood there was an open bottle of Schlitz on a table. My parents drank Four Roses professionally from jelly jars—neat, without diluting ice, water, or mix.

They were, consequently, vegetables most of the time—although the term vegetable connotes a feeling of calm that did not exist. They went through three phases of drunkenness: buzzed (happy), drunk (mean as snakes), and finally, obliterated (Four Roses coma). (p. 1)

In these opening paragraphs, the reader can immediately sense the novel's lighthearted, irreverent mood despite its serious subject matter. While they reveal the narrator's unhappy home life, they also reveal his sense of humor. He describes his parents' alcohol abuse and his roving lifestyle with deadpan matter-of-factness rather than helpless self-pity.

Because his home situation becomes "something of an impossibility" (p. 2), the narrator is sent to live with his distant relatives, the Larsons, for the summer. The Larson family includes Knute, who is his second uncle, Knute's wife Clair, their daughter Glennis, and their son Harris, as well as their hired farmhand Louie. Even though the narrator has only met the Larsons once before, he is unconcerned about the move because he is a member of a military family, has moved often, and is accustomed to long stays with extended relatives. So inured to this nomadic lifestyle, he makes nothing of the fact that it is the deputy sheriff, rather than one of his parents, who takes him to stay at the Larson's place.

Upon first arriving at the Larson's home, he "pretend[s] to be shy" (p. 5), which reveals his reflexive distrust of others and his initial distrust of the Larsons. While he does not mention his parents, he admits, "In spite of having done this many times I felt suddenly lost, alone. . ." (p. 10). In this scene, readers can understand and perhaps identify with the narrator's feelings of loneliness and isolation. A product of neglect, he has had no one to mirror back his existence, to help him define his identity and sense of self, or to make him feel loved and important. To add to this, the narrator's already fragile sense of self has likely been shattered time and time again as his parents, in a "mean as snakes" state of mind, have blamed him, dismissed him, or insulted him for no reason.

Harris Larson helps the narrator overcome these feelings by extending his friendship and by leading both of them into fun and harmless "trouble" (p. 71). Harris, who bears a strong

resemblance to Huck Finn, says, “We heard your folks was puke drunks, is that right?” (p. 7). Harris’ older sister Glennis rebukes him for his insensitivity to which Harris responds, “Well you can just blow it out your butt, you old cow. You ain’t no grown-up to tell me what to do. How the hell am I supposed to know things if I don’t go ahead and ask them?” (p. 7). Harris’ colloquial language, his constant swearing, his bib overalls, and his rough and tumble, rule-breaking, mischievous ways all conjure Huck’s image, and he provides a natural complement to the reticent narrator.

Harris walks the narrator through the routine of farm life and teaches him how to feed animals, milk cows, and mow alfalfa. Their days, however tiring, are also clearly mixed with pleasure and mischief. They take breaks to enjoy Clair and Glennis’ cooking. They play. For instance, they catch mice for Louie (who uses their pelts to dress the miniatures he carves); they trade dares for “dourty peectures” (p. 6); they jerry-rig a bicycle into a motorcycle and try to take it for a spin. By the end of the summer, it is obvious that the narrator is not only comfortable on the Larson farm, but also at home there: “Summer days fed into summer nights full of fireflies and the smell of lilacs around the house and back into days where the farmyard became a whole way of life. Any concept of an outside world was lost in the endless games and new ideas Harris conceived” (p. 71). His new friendship allows him to forget his troubled past and embrace the joy, stability, and security that his Larson home affords.

The only incident that interrupts this picture of domestic happiness takes place away from the farm, during a visit to “Town,” really “a scattered collection of huts thrown in the middle of nowhere” (p. 83), where the family goes for music, dance, a Gene Autry picture (which is always the same), and orange pop. It is also where people go to drink. Although Knute and Clair do not seem to be drinkers, during this episode the narrator narrows in on Louie right away, who he

finds “drinking beers whole just as fast as Clel the bartender could bring them” (p. 87). Later he adds, “I did a little quick figuring and decided that if he’d been drinking at the same rate all along he was probably well into twenty or thirty bottles this time” (p. 91). Apparently, this is typical Louie behavior; Harris tells the narrator early on that Louie will “pee hisself later” (p. 87), which indeed Louie does. Surprisingly, this scene does not conjure any other thoughts about alcoholism or the narrator’s parents—perhaps because Louie does not act “mean as snakes” when he is drunk. Rather, he passes out “stiff as a ramrod, his hands still holding the last bottle of beer he was drinking” (p. 92). Knute has to carry him to the truck before driving them all home. Still, the fact that he makes such a studied observation of Louie is in itself telling. It betrays his feelings of anxiety around alcohol.

As is the case with Gracie in *B is for Beer*, the narrator finds happiness and contentment despite the fact that his situation is not ideal. This is a message all children, and especially children living in dysfunctional households, need to hear. Rather than simplify the situation and say that happiness lies in eliminating the problem (i.e., the parents’ alcoholism), this story says that happiness lies instead in looking for it, in finding the things that are good in one’s life and in making one’s own fun. It teaches the reader to tolerate ambivalence—the possibility, for example, that Louie might be a nice man *and* a drunk.

Finally, by the end of the novel, the narrator is fully transformed, able to recognize himself as someone who matters and belongs to a family. In a particularly poignant scene, the narrator sneaks into the granary, where Louie lives, in order to take a peek at his collection of miniatures. There he discovers that Louie has made a new diorama, one of the Larsons’ farm, a scene which includes a figure of him. At the sight of this, he is overcome with emotion and

begins to cry. Having internalized eleven years of his parents' abuse and neglect, he has difficulty recognizing himself as someone who matters and is worthy of love and family.

This ending is one of the reasons that *Harris and Me* is such a successful illustration of a child of an alcoholic. It is uplifting despite the lack of resolution with respect to his parents' alcoholism. When the summer ends, the deputy sheriff returns to collect the narrator and return him to his parents, and he gives the reader no reason to hope that he will be returning to an improved living situation. But, at least he returns with his memories of the Larsons. At least he returns with hope. Later, he receives a package from Harris—the figure in Louie's diorama—and he concludes, "I held the mouse-furred little statue for a long time, rolling it in my fingers, then I put it on a windowsill where I could see it while I drifted to sleep that night and dreamed of horses and farms and corn and girls with blond hair and Tarzan and Gene and a bicycle that did a hundred miles an hour, carrying a freckled boy in bibs..." (p. 157). The figurine symbolizes his hope, the fact that he can now dream of alternative possibilities for himself and also feel worthy of them. This hope gives him agency; he knows that he can flourish in spite of his parents. In this way, he provides a model of hope and courage for readers, especially readers who are confronting similar family dysfunction.

Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007)

Like the narrator in Paulsen's *Harris and Me*, Alexie's fourteen-year-old Junior is also a child of alcoholic parents who has a decidedly self-deprecating sense of humor. Written somewhat like a diary, the novel's opening entry contains two cartoons that Junior has drawn of himself. Both exaggerate his physical features: his "big feet and pencil body" (p. 3), his crowded mouth and disproportionately large head, and his government-issued black plastic nerd glasses.

In the second cartoon, he draws three speech balloons: “LOVE ME! LOVE ME! LOVE ME!!!” (p. 6) they say. Although indicative of his low self-concept, these drawings also reveal his self-awareness and resilience. The creative act helps him cope with his anger, his insecurities, his loneliness and isolation and also gives him a sense of self-worth. He explains, “I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats” (p. 6). Through humor, writing, and creative expression he preserves hope.

Because, otherwise, hope for Junior is in short supply. Living on the poverty-stricken Spokane Indian reservation in eastern Washington State, Junior has difficulty imagining a better way of life. He explains, “It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor” (p. 13). Adding to this problem, and because of it, alcoholism ravages his entire community. Junior’s parents are “drunks” (p. 16), his best friend Rowdy’s parents are drunks, his dad’s best friend Eugene dies in a drunken duel, and his sister Mary dies because she is passed-out drunk when her trailer catches on fire. The reason Junior depicts himself begging the world to “love him, love him, love him” is because there is no one in his present life capable of loving him in the way that he needs and wants. Virtually everyone he knows is defeated, self-involved and/or battling his or her own insecurities and feelings of worthlessness. No wonder he reacts so emotionally when his reservation teacher, Mr. P, while encouraging him to leave the reservation, tells him “You are a good kid. You deserve the world” (p. 41). Sadly, to imagine a better way of life, Junior, like Paulsen’s narrator, has to leave his home and “go somewhere where other people have hope” (p. 43). He had to leave the reservation to add his hope to somebody else’s and “multiply hope by hope” (p. 43).

Junior transfers to Reardan High School, a “rich, white farm town that sits in the wheat fields exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez” (p. 45). And, despite a rough start, unreliable

transportation, and constant feelings of guilt, he flourishes there. He makes friends who he can relate to and who can challenge him intellectually and emotionally; he becomes a basketball star; and he gets good grades. Because of these experiences, Junior is later able to realize that, despite his parents' alcoholism (particularly his father's), they love him the best that they can. This love may not always be ideal (as when his father disappears for a week on a drinking binge), but this imperfect love nonetheless gives him strength. He reflects,

Ever since I've been to Reardan, and seen how great parents do their great parenting, I realize that my folks are pretty good. Sure, my dad has a drinking problem and my mom can be a little eccentric, but they make sacrifices for me. They worry about me. They talk to me. And best of all, they listen to me.

I've learned that the worst thing a parent can do is ignore their children. (p. 153)

Junior's best friend, Rowdy, who is a bully and "the toughest kid on the rez" (p. 15) bears out this observation. Like Junior, Rowdy has grown up in the same community but with less familial love and support. Indeed, the major factor that seems to separate Rowdy and Junior's fates is the amount of love in their lives. Junior's parents are more caring and nurturing toward him while Rowdy's parents (his father specifically) are downright abusive. Junior, observing this difference, thinks to himself, "My mother and father are drunks, too, but they aren't mean like that. Not at all. They sometimes ignore me. Sometimes they yell at me. But they never, ever, never, ever hit me" (p. 16).

By creating this comparison, Alexie illustrates why children of alcoholics cannot be universally defined and how it is that some are able to avoid the same fate as their parents. The reason, quite simply, is that not all alcoholics are the same. Not all alcoholics are physically

abusive or verbally caustic. Junior's father, for instance, drives Junior 22 miles so he can go to a better school; he shows up to Junior's basketball games; and he is affectionate and tells Junior that he loves him. He also acknowledges his mistakes. After his weeklong disappearance he tells Junior, "I'm sorry about Christmas" (p. 150). It's not a deep apology, but it is an apology nonetheless. He admits he has been negligent and that his negligence is wrong. Consequently, Junior is able to separate his father, the nurturer and supporter, from his father, the disappointing alcoholic. He avoids the temptation of extreme, all-or-nothing thinking—*His father is a bad man because he drinks*—and chooses instead to tolerate the ambivalence in their relationship. He recognizes that his father is self-medicating, that his drinking is not his (Junior's) fault or under his control: "There are all kinds of addicts . . . We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make that pain go away" (p. 107). But, as Junior demonstrates, there are better, less destructive, ways to manage this pain. For example, when he is sad, lonely, or upset, he draws goofy cartoons; he makes lists of "the people who have given [him] the most joy in [his] life" (p. 176); or he reads *Anna Karenina*. He does not, in other words, repeat his father's self-destructive choices because he has enough resilience to create hope for himself.

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that all three authors draw from important autobiographical details in the creation of their narratives. Robbins, on the one hand, draws from his positive experiences with drugs. In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Gregory Sinda, Robbins explains, "Psychedelics left me less rigid, intellectually and emotionally . . . The borderlands between so-called reality and so-called fantasy, between dream and wakefulness, animate and inanimate were no longer as distinct, and I made some use of this newfound mobility in my writing" (1987,

p. 231). Having grown up in a repressed Appalachian village, Robbins understood that healthy living requires tolerance and some comfort with ambiguity. Paulsen and Alexie draw from their experiences as children of alcoholics. For example, writing of his childhood experiences in the Philippines, where his father was stationed during WWII, Paulsen writes, “I lived essentially as a street child in Manila, because my parents were alcoholics and I was not supervised. The effect was profound and lasting” (1999, “True Face of War,” p. 25). And Alexie, when accepting the Horn Book Award, quipped that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was about “seventy-eight percent true” (2009, p. 26). In these ways, these stories also give credence to Rivinus’ and Ford’s argument that the creative act of writing can help writers come to terms with their own pasts and help their readers to do the same.

Alexie, in fact, admits this intention in his speech about *A Part-Time Indian*,

I’m not saying that the book encourages kids to disregard their parents and revolt and burn down buildings, but I think it encourages them to make their own decisions and to feel courageous in that. . . . It says that you can be part of your family and yet distinct from it, and that doesn’t change your love for your family, but it changes who you become. (p. 27)

These three novels offer readers, not just children of alcoholics, models for identity and models of courage. They demonstrate that children have agency, and this explains their wide appeal.

For children of alcoholics, these characters may provide an especial source of reassurance, comfort, and strength. Paulsen’s narrator, Alexie’s Junior, and Robbins’ Gracie all model “the struggle of love and gratitude against ambivalence” (Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 2001, p. 237). These three protagonists expand their inner worlds so that they can imagine alternative lives, better lives, even if—*especially* if—this imagined future is not currently present. They also

advocate embracing ambiguity, especially through humor. And, although the humor in these texts may limit the subject matter or the depth of the discussion (as there are many issues that relate to alcoholism that are no joking matter), I think these authors made this choice knowing that most readers, especially those facing similar situations, would be grateful for some comic relief. Humor provides psychic distance from problems, and this distance is needed if one is to overcome them. Although these stories may not, in themselves, be enough to suddenly transform the neglected child of an alcoholic into a self-confident, self-actualized, resourceful, fully empowered individual, they certainly add hope to hope.

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