

# REVIEWS & MORE

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**A REPORTER'S GUIDE: REPORTING ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.** By BETSY SOUTHALL. Edited by STEVE WISEMAN & JAN LILLY-STEWART. The West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council ([www.wvddc.org](http://www.wvddc.org)), Charleston, West Virginia, 52 pages, 2004.

**Reviewed by Christopher D. Ringwald**

THE BEST GIFT GIVEN ME in graduate school was an assignment to “live in” with the subjects of a long news article we were to report and write. I chose to profile a handful of people 10 years after they were released from Willowbrook State School, the notorious hospital which once held 5,000 children and youths who were mentally retarded. Under the Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975, most of these moved to community programs such as group homes and apartments. One was Martin Seigel.

As I entered their world I learned many of the prescribed “do’s” and “don’ts,” usually in terms of language. I learned to examine my conceptions and prejudices. The best check on false or damaging notions, however, was to know well some people with mental retardation.

I walked with Martin through his daily rounds—the bank, lunch, errands—and spent time at his job and home and I began to fret less over the terminology that preoccupies people who work in the field. Why? Because he was now a person, not a client and not “a person with.” He was, indeed, mentally retarded, if only moderately. But he was “Martin” more than anything else. Our relationship, and eventual friendship, began the moment I saw him as truly human.

As a reporter does, I often double-checked names, dates, sequences or quotes that he mentioned during our long sessions together. That can annoy anyone. At the time I probably thought, “Hey, he’s handicapped—I’m sure he’s got time on his hands.”

And so once more I called his apartment and asked for him. This time Martin picked up the phone and skipped hello. Instead, he yelled at me, “What is it now?!” At that moment, Martin stepped from object to subject, from “person with” to a man with moods and emotions, a man with whom I and my family are still friends. That’s the best instruction to covering people with disabilities: get to know one or two well and over the years.

Not every reporter will get to spend days with an impaired person. Yet almost all will write about people with physical, mental or developmental handicaps. Usually this will come on a slow weekend when the Special Olympics come to town or when the local nursing home organizes a “dance-a-thon” for residents who use wheelchairs.

It remains the responsibility of reporters to report accurately, fairly and thoroughly on the news and life of the immediate community and outside world including, yes, people with disabilities. *A Reporter’s Guide: Reporting about People with Disabilities*, written by Betsy Southall and published by the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council, is a useful, direct and mercifully terse set of instructions for journalists who want to cover people with physical and mental problems.

One virtue is its guide to the basics of disability law—court cases, legislation, initiatives—and definitions both informal and statutory. Another virtue is its high-order critique of stigmas, many of which originate in the social service world. “If a [disabled] person’s life seems atypical, it is because they must adapt their life to the services and supports they receive,” Southall writes, rather than having services fitted to the life he or she wants. Great point. It’s also a great area for journalistic investigation. Therein lies one of two peculiar blind spots in this book.

Many of the news articles or broadcast segments regarding people with disabilities originate in a press release or advocacy campaign by an agency

that serves people with impairments. Who else invites us to the Special Olympics? Or to visit the sheltered workshop? Or to cover yet another rally demanding more funding for social services? Step lively, here come the buses full of retarded people! Take a picture—don't they look cute in their agency-issued t-shirts and baseball caps with political slogans? Reporters should cover the many ways caretakers—and policy-makers and researchers and consultants and families—create and perpetuate stigmas. That would be more useful than another broadside at society's sins against marginalized people.

Drawing on the work of Wolf Wolfensberger (1998), *A Reporter's Guide* summarizes the negative life experiences and common stereotypes about devalued or handicapped people. For most reporters, this will be eye-opening. But it's another missed opportunity. While the guide encourages reporters to see beyond these experiences and stereotypes, it fails to steer them to covering these as news stories in and of themselves. The many forms of "death-making" of devalued people are a fruitful and original area for investigation.

These blind spots are, of course, common to the social service and behavioral health establishments. Even as it implores the public and media to forego stereotypes and embrace the humanity of people with impairments, the professional sector continues to perpetuate these prejudices.

Take the instance of people with addictions. The establishment chants that these are diseases just like cancer or diabetes. It's not their fault; they have a neurochemical imbalance. It's not a moral issue, so there shouldn't be any stigma!

This mantra persuades the acolytes most of all, who are then outraged that stigma continues. In 1998, the chairwoman of the Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy declared, "We were telling people to 'just say no' when addiction is a biological event."

Really? Where is the room for the person, for choice and responsibility? Scientific fundamentalism contradicts the experience of millions of re-

covered addicts who recover through spiritual and other methods that stress personal accountability and reform. And which is more stigmatizing—having an organic brain disorder or having a behavioral problem whose solution lies in ... changing your behavior?

The same goes on in the mental health field. Now that the public is nearly brainwashed into thinking that madness is a matter only of brain chemistry, they also have lost hope in personal transformation. And so they accept the wholesale drugging of people, including themselves, for emotional and psychiatric disorders.

*A Reporter's Guide* can educate journalists who are, typically, not attending Social Role Valorization (SRV) workshops in their free time. Southall accurately critiques the media's lazy tendencies. One is the plethora of stories that profile the heroic struggle of handicapped persons. The other common variety of articles or broadcasts darkly capture "the social menace" posed by devalued people.

Often a crime suspect's homelessness is highlighted in an article's headline or first sentence. But do we ever read about a "mansion-dwelling" white collar criminal? Same if the suspect ever sought counseling or psychiatric help. Then he or she becomes "mental patient accused of assault." Indeed, I hope a new edition of this guide would apply many of its lessons to other classes of devalued people, those with addictions and psychiatric disorders.

The *Guide* has an excellent glossary, especially useful for reporters unfamiliar with various clinical and bureaucratic acronyms, and a good guide for interviewing people with impairments. Southall serves well with a list of "acceptable terms and terms to avoid" and explanations thereof. Some are sensible and thought-provoking. Yes, reporters should really consider how relevant a disability, or its specifics, is to a story. A person may be worth a profile, or his opinion worth quoting, regardless of his impairment or its accommodations.

But I remain unconvinced that "congenital disability" is somehow less stigmatizing than "birth defect," or that "handicap" is pejorative while

“disability” is not. After all, a disabled automobile doesn’t function, while a handicap in golf simply means a disadvantage. Thankfully, she doesn’t suggest “differently-abled.”

If you want to improve media coverage, remember this: journalists are typically smart but unreflective. And at local papers and broadcasters, which produce most of our journalism, reporters are often young—how to say this delicately?—know-it-alls. They are eager to impress and get ahead in a competitive business; I certainly was. Their education about disabilities usually comes from social service administrators and publicists and advocates. If reporters annoy these gatekeepers with, say, an SRV-style critique of lifewasting group home-bowling parties, they will lose access to stories and even people with disabilities.

So help journalists see the whole picture. Suggest they investigate the social service world and its complicity in all this stigmatizing and stereotyping. And then suggest that reporters look beyond the gatekeepers.

Ideally, reporters will seek out alternative sources, as Southall recommends. She could have included a few more suggestions on finding impaired people directly. One way, certainly, is to go out into any community and look around and spend time with such a person. Maybe that young reporter will find her Martin Seigel.

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**AUTISM IS A WORLD.** By GERARDINE WURZBURG (Director). 40 minutes, 2005.

#### Reviewed by Jane Barken

WOLFENSBERGER EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE, IN securing socially valued roles, of not falsely representing the person one wishes to valorize. If servers misrepresent someone’s roles, there are likely to be negative repercussions for the devalued person. This will be a question for viewers of this movie. Is Sue Rubin who we see, who we hear, or a combination of both?

The documentary *Autism is a World* is written by Sue Rubin, who is autistic. She describes herself as having been treated as mentally retarded and autistic until the age of 13, when she was introduced to Facilitated Communication, a highly controversial technique whose supporters claim enables autistic people who are unable to communicate verbally to use (at least in this case) very sophisticated language and discourse. Rubin types with one finger on a small computerized keyboard held by her servers who sometimes complete phrases by making guesses at what is intended. Viewers are shown some of this laborious process, and the rest of the time we hear the narrator. As Rubin says, “This is not my voice, but these are my words.”

This documentary, which was nominated in 2004 for an Academy Award for Documentary Short Subject, would be relevant for anyone interested in Social Role Valorization (SRV) or autism, including college and university students, human service workers, and some parents. Parents of young children with autism, however, might find the movie unsettling, because Rubin has retained many of the odd mannerisms that parents might hope their children will outgrow.

Rubin is a 26 year old who describes her world, which she feels is defined by her autism. Viewers see Sue's many social roles, valued and devalued. Sue is a valued family member, shown assisting at a formal family dinner, and participating in a political discussion using her keyboard. She is a college history major, and we see her at a lecture answering a question posed by her professor, again using her keyboard. We see Sue at the racetrack, deciding which horse to bet on, and later collecting her winnings. Sue interviews an expert on the neurobiology of autism about the nature of the condition.

Sue is also shown in the role of presenter at a conference about autism, answering a participant's question about her future goals by saying that she hopes to become an advocate and write for a newspaper. In response to a request for assistance from a participant, she replies, "You can count on me." After her session, she enjoys a cocktail in the hotel lounge with her two attendants.

Sue lives alone in her own home in an attractive neighbourhood. We are introduced to her neighbour, who is described as a friend but who is also her psychologist, and has known and supported Sue for many years.

Sue also holds devalued roles. She says she was, "lost in autism for 13 years ..., acted like my worst nightmare." She was diagnosed as mentally retarded and autistic as a child, with "an IQ of a 2 ½ year old" until Facilitated Communication "rescued her from retardation," at which time her IQ jumped to 133.

Sue says a few words, and also repeats "senseless sounds—do dah dee, nay-day." She is very short. Her eyes appear to be crossed. Her mouth is often open and she presses her tongue against her upper lip, which contributes to her odd appearance. She has an awkward gait and many unusual mannerisms. She carries several plastic spoons in her hand at all times, which she acknowledges contribute to her "looking retarded" but are her comfort. She spends much time playing with the spoons in running water. She has a helmet, which she asks to put on when she feels the need to bang her head.

Sue has paid staff with her at all times and is always in the role of human service client. Some staff have been with her for more than seven years, a highly unusual occurrence in human services. Different staff support particular roles in her life—"Danny is my outlet for fun," as they go to the racetrack together. Another staff accompanies Sue to college classes. Paid staff are described as friends, and this creates the problem of language and role confusion, especially because we only see Sue with staff or family. The staff are young and attractive and have highly positive images congruent with Sue's role as a college student. However, they have a rather annoyed and exasperated demeanor when they deal with Sue's peculiar behaviour and tendency to become distracted. Their manner would strike some viewers as disrespectful and condescending. The workers, however, do appear to have high expectations of Sue and make demands that are appropriate to her age and culture.

Problems with social interactions are characteristic of autism and this does come across clearly in the movie, despite Sue's assertions that she has never felt "aloneness" and says that everyone was "great" at including her at school. Her isolation is clear. She is shown in integrated settings, such as the racetrack and school, but we generally only see her interacting in these settings with paid staff. Sue's interpretation of her social situation, and the nature of her valued and devalued roles could lead to some lively discussions about the SRV theme of personal social integration and valued social participation (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 122-124), which is carried out through valued social roles.

One aspect of this documentary is jarring, and that is the dissonance between what the viewer sees and hears of Sue Rubin, and what is narrated in another voice. Sue is an articulate writer through the use of Facilitated Communication, the credibility of which is questioned by many. Some viewers will wonder if this can be the same person. Viewers will struggle with the question, "Who is Sue really?" Many human service workers know people with severe cerebral palsy, who, despite their inability to

speak, can with communication assistance be very eloquent. In contrast, Sue is able to speak reasonably clearly with a very limited vocabulary and has odd behaviour, Rubin says herself that one of her major challenges is proving that she is intelligent and a capable student.

As a college teacher, I use this documentary to teach about autism and Social Role Valorization. This movie should promote lively discussions for teachers and students of SRV, especially in terms of establishing and maintaining socially valued roles, competency enhancement, imagery, personal social integration and valued social participation, and other SRV themes.

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**WHERE IS THE MANGO PRINCESS?** By CATHY CRIMMINS. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

#### Reviewed by Susan Thomas

THIS BOOK, BY THE WIFE of a man who suffered a severe brain injury when he was run over by a speedboat while sitting in a small motorboat on a Canadian lake, is about the first year of their life after his accident. The first few weeks of his hospitalization were spent in Canada (at Kingston General Hospital), and the author (an American) raves about the ease of dealing with the Ca-

nadian medical system which is government-run and -funded. The troubles start when she has to arrange to have her husband transported by air ambulance to a US hospital (in Philadelphia), and then subsequently has to move him to a rehabilitation hospital, and then a day habilitation center, all within about four months of his accident. Her husband regains a great deal of his mental functioning, but emerges from the coma with a somewhat changed personality, and a great deal less inhibition, both of which are common with brain injury. She also describes the effect on their family of his brain injury, his rehabilitation, and dealing with the human service system, including on their seven-year old daughter who was with her father at the time of the accident.

The book describes the typical struggle with the human service bureaucracy, and especially trying to get a health maintenance/management organization (HMO) to approve necessary procedures and treatments, as well as some awful physicians and other servers, and some wonderful ones.

Though role terms are used only infrequently, the book does talk about the phenomenon of her husband's sudden loss of roles (father, husband, lawyer/bank vice president), as well as the dramatic changes wrought in her own roles of wife and mother, and in the role relationship between herself and her husband. For instance, on p. 174, she wonders "Is Alan my spouse or my child? ... At times I become a maternal tyrant ... It's not a good role for me."

Again without using the term, she talks about the common lack of relevance and pedagogic verisimilitude in rehabilitation programs, where, for instance, her husband has to learn cooking and baking as part of occupational therapy. But he never did much in the kitchen even before his accident, he still hates baking, and as he furiously objects, "I'm a lawyer. I don't want to bake f...ing cakes!" (p. 161). She contrasts this with an example of a much more relevant form of therapy that takes "a person's previous lifestyle into consideration while planning tasks after brain injury"—

what Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998) would term role recovery. One client was subjected to weeks of being taught to make her own bed, fruitlessly. It turned out that this woman had never made her bed because she always had hired help to do so. So the agency instead taught her once again how to apply make-up, and that she learned (pp. 161-162).

On the one hand, the author is commendably honest in talking about how her husband's injury affected every aspect of their lives, including their sexual intimacy. On the other hand, she could have explained that without going into all the explicit details that she does, especially if her own young daughter, who was so heavily involved in this story, was to later read the book.

The title refers to a question that her husband asked as he was first regaining consciousness, a question which his family never understood but assumed to have been something he dreamed. This was cited as one example of the sort of reality-detached things that her husband—and other brain injury victims—often said.

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ZIMBARDO, P.G. (2004). A SITUATIONIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVIL: UNDERSTANDING

HOW GOOD PEOPLE ARE TRANSFORMED INTO PERPETRATORS. In A.G. MILLER (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil: Understanding our capacity for kindness and cruelty*. New York: Guilford Press, 21-50.

#### Reviewed by Joshua Van Rootselaar

FOR A POSITION PAYING A mere fifteen dollars a day, Phillip Zimbardo had a long list of applicants—applicants for prison (Zimbardo, 2004). On 14 August 1971, selected applicants were 'arrested and booked' by the Palo Alto Police Department and brought to Stanford University (Zimbardo, 2007). In the basement of the Stanford Psychology department, Zimbardo had constructed a mock prison. Zimbardo was, and continues to be, a Stanford professor of psychology studying the effects of prison: both the effects on the guards and on the prisoners. This was just one of many experiments that Zimbardo conducted to support his perspective on how anti-social behavior is understood and prevented. Zimbardo's situationist perspective suggests that there is no bad apple—there is a bad barrel. This perspective explains why people devalue others, and accordingly relates to Social Role Valorization (SRV).

Zimbardo's article seeks to explain to its audience of mainly academics and others interested in social psychology how good people come to do bad things. The central belief endorsed by Zimbardo is that evil is not within people, evil is within society. Evil—intentional behavior that causes harm to innocent others (Zimbardo, 2007)—is a product of environmental factors; it is not a result of the person. The Milgram obedience experiments (Milgram, 1974); Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954); theories about external appearance, anonymity, and propaganda; the history of WWII and Iraq, are among the experiments, ideas, novels, and cold blooded history that Zimbardo uses to support his thesis. These primary and secondary sources give examples of how environmental factors led otherwise good people to participate in

evil behavior.

Zimbardo's article does not justify the devaluation of individuals or groups. However, the article provides insight on how to better understand the causes of devaluation. Wolfensberger discusses how devaluation is caused by negative evaluation of what is perceived (1998). Zimbardo believes that negative perception is a result not of individual morals, but of the typical values of a culture (2004). The Stanford Prison Experiment showed that cultures have roles which come with expectations and which lead to behavior. When people are assigned or assume a role, the role brings a certain status as well as social expectations.

The participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment were deemed to be normal and healthy college students. Participants were randomly assigned either the role of 'guard' or of 'prisoner.' Guards were informed that they could not physically abuse prisoners but were given no other instructions concerning prisoner treatment. After their arrest and imprisonment, the guards stripped the prisoners naked and immediately began degrading them through verbal insults (Zimbardo, 2007). The prisoners were deloused and given only a smock to wear. The smocks had a number on the front and back which served as the prisoner's sole identification.

Over the course of the experiment, guards increasingly treated the prisoners as sub human and as objects of ridicule, despite the knowledge that it was only an experiment and that the prisoners had committed no crimes. Prisoners were made

to scrub toilets with their bare hands, to ridicule their peers and, during the final evening, to participate in sexually humiliating activities. This sexual humiliation occurred after only five days. The experiment that was intended to last two weeks was terminated on the morning of the sixth day.

The evil that occurred in the prison was the direct result of the actions of the guards. Each guard was perceived differently by the prisoners. One was given the nickname "John Wayne" (Zimbardo, 2007) for his rough demeanor. Others were known as the good guards because they were not abusive or harmful. Despite being identified as the good guards, and despite holding objections to the abusive treatment of prisoners, the "good guards" made no attempts to discuss the treatment of the prisoners with the other guards, or to lobby on behalf of the prisoners. The good guards expressed dislike for the evil they witnessed, but failed to advocate for change.

Zimbardo also looks at history to support his thesis that evil is not within individuals but within culture. He gives the example of WWII and the genocide of the Jewish people. Initially only half of the men with families sent to exterminate Jewish people participated in the mass killing (cf. Browning, 1993; cf. Hallie, 1994). A few months later, over 90% of the same men participated in the killings (Zimbardo, 2004). This example of social learning over time explains how devaluation becomes a cycle within culture. It becomes acceptable to do what others are doing because cultures dictate what is morally just and socially expected.

**Since you are reading this journal,**

then why not tell someone else about it? We believe Social Role Valorization is an important tool that concerned individuals can use to address social devaluation in people's lives. As someone who shares that belief, encourage others to read and subscribe to the only journal dedicated specifically to SRV. Information available at [http://www.srvip.org/journal\\_general.php](http://www.srvip.org/journal_general.php).

The Stanford Prison Experiment demonstrated the incredible effect of role expectancies on how people are treated. People's expectations of a particular role overruled their individual morals, allowing strong role expectancies to dictate participant's behaviour. Few visitors to the jail questioned the conditions. All accepted the role authority of the guards and prison officials. The guards quickly forgot that the prisoners were fellow college students. The prisoners quickly accepted their roles and forgot that they were involved in an experiment, failing to even converse about their outside lives. The transformative effect of an assigned or imposed role illustrates the power of role expectancies and subsequently the importance of crafting valued social roles for vulnerable, socially devalued people.

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**TRUE NOTEBOOKS: A WRITER'S YEAR AT JUVENILE HALL.** By MARK SALZMAN. Random House, New York, 326 pages, 2003.

#### Reviewed by Mayah Sevink

IN *TRUE NOTEBOOKS: A WRITER'S YEAR AT JUVENILE HALL*, we are introduced to a world seldom seen by outsiders. The author, Mark Salzman, shares his experience as a volunteer instructor in a writing class in a high security juvenile detention centre. Part of the Inside Out writing program ([www.insideoutwriters.org](http://www.insideoutwriters.org)), he is brought together with at risk youth to teach them to write.

The book offers a powerful glimpse into the lives of these youth. It is highly descriptive, offering information about their day to day routine and the living conditions in the centre, as well as some details about their past lives. While not a documentary, events are portrayed realistically, and samples of the students' written work are included.

In this setting, isolation and abandonment are pronounced. To reach the centre, Salzman must pass barbed wire, alleyways, abandoned buildings, and a weedy yard bordered by concrete bunkers. A series of locked doors guarded by unwelcoming or indifferent staff separate him from a group of youth, distinguished by their bright orange coveralls. The youth remain expressionless, heads lowered, as they follow orders. Sister Janet, a passionate advocate for the youth and the writing program, is very clear about the impact of these features: "What message does that send to these kids? That they are garbage, that's what. It tells them society simply wants to dispose of them."

Life in Juvenile Hall follows the code of the street, perhaps with some softer edges. The youth

largely divide themselves across racial lines. Personal reputation and group loyalty are paramount. The youth feel it is vital to maintain a tough, unfeeling exterior. Even the slightest insult must be retaliated against to avoid further attack or encroachment.

The system adds its own devaluing elements. Activities are few. The place is overcrowded. There are frequent, lengthy lock-downs, when all are punished for one person's transgression. Psychotropic medication is routinely dispensed to any who wish it. Solitary confinement, called 'the box,' is used often, both for discipline and as a 'protective measure.' The punishment that awaits many of the youth is extreme—fifteen years for robbery, sentences exceeding fifty years for first murder offenses.

The author describes the background of the youth, noting the prevalence of abuse, poverty, parental substance abuse, absence of family. Some at least did come from caring families. Many have extensive criminal backgrounds. Most have been charged with murder. All have been influenced, or at least affected, by gang culture. Again from Sister Janet: "These children are in crisis ... Most of them never had a chance, never got the guidance and attention they needed from adults. Is it any surprise they join gangs? The gang makes them feel part of something, it provides structure, and it gives them opportunities to prove themselves."

The author includes selected other perspectives, especially those of the staff in direct control of the kids. "These kids can seem like the nicest people you'd ever want to meet, oh yes. When you hear their sad stories, you feel sorry for them, you really do. But Ted Bundy seemed nice, too." Again, Sister Janet insightfully observes: "It's crucial for them [the staff] to believe ... that the kids are not salvageable ... If the kids are monsters, then it's appropriate to dehumanize them, you see how it works? On the other hand, if you or I suggest that the kids are still developing, and could actually benefit from counseling and education, we spoil the whole picture."

Salzman's initial fear in meeting the youth, partly in response to their appearance, also reveals stereotypes prominent in today's society: "(A)ll but one of them stood taller than me ... Two of the young men were Latino, one black, and the fourth white. The white guy scared me the most. A tall broad-shouldered skinhead with tattoos on his arms and hands, I imagined he was seething with hatred for his darker-skinned classmates and would start a brawl at any moment." It is only after considerable reflection that Salzman decides to become involved.

It is within this context and despite staff opposition that the author begins his writing class with three students. They have diverse backgrounds: Kevin, from age 9 raised by his grandmother following his parents' death, now facing murder and attempted murder charges; Jimmy who emigrated with his family from Taiwan and a straight A student before he got into trouble for robbery; and Francisco, an angry, sometimes suicidal teenager who was warned against gang involvement by his family. Salzman sets them the task of writing honestly from the heart.

Within the class, he establishes a culture different from the detention side. It is racially mixed, first names are used, honest and open expression is expected, and the work is valued. The instructor models this honesty in sharing his feelings about difficult experiences in his own life. The results are surprising. The students' writings reflect a depth of feeling and thought that far surpasses the author's usual experience in mainstream writing classes. Spelling and grammar aside, he admits to Sister Janet that "(I)f my college students had made this kind of effort, I might still be teaching."

The class provides an opportunity for personal growth as the young writers develop their thinking. The class exercises clarify and reinforce some of their positive aspirations. Their self-esteem grows as they take a risk in sharing their work. In the class, relationships that cross racial barriers and gang membership are possible.

The program is also remarkable in its ability to establish valued social roles, such as student and writer. Within this powerfully dehumanizing setting, there are few roles—high school student, messenger, staff assistant—that confer any positive status. The impact of these new valued roles of writer and student is reinforced as staff, surprised at the abilities demonstrated, begin to refer new people to the program. Some even become involved themselves.

Like many worthwhile programs, it is pressured to exceed its abilities. At one point, class size grows to an unmanageable eighteen and includes some students with little or no interest in becoming writers. The central purpose and value of the program is greatly diminished, and the author takes the necessary steps to contain this.

The book also demonstrates that, for all its positive effect, the program is limited in what it can achieve. It does not result in different system outcomes for the youth. Many will still face lengthy terms in adult prisons. The program does however provide at least some with greater competence and an increased sense of self worth. This is clear with Kevin, who begins a lifelong sentence with great dignity.

THIS BOOK IS HIGHLY RELEVANT to Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998). It offers rich material for analysis, especially welcome as such settings are unlikely to host a PASSING evaluation! It reveals the scope and depth of devaluation powerfully at work within a human service setting, including the process of wounding, social marginalization through devalued roles, physical and social distantiation, loss of autonomy and relationships, service imposition on the youth of a deindividualized personal appearance, experiences of mortification, and heightened vulnerability. The power of settings to shape expectations, images and roles is apparent. The service uses a model of group management and lacks relevant potency. The book illustrates the far-reaching and devastating consequences of individual and sys-

temic unconsciousness. It shares examples of life wasting and death making.

*True Notebooks* also shows how valued roles can lead to greater access to the good things of life (Wolfensberger, Thomas, & Caruso, 1996), even in a highly restrictive setting, and even when those good things are limited to a specific context. The book describes aspects of both image and competency enhancement. It highlights the importance of high expectations, a positive mindset, and interpersonal identification. Salzman's text offers an example of the effort needed to make a difference for devalued people in a highly controlling service and under extremely challenging conditions.

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Sevink, M. (2008). Review of the book *True notebooks: A writer's year at juvenile hall* by Mark Salzman. *The SRV Journal*, 3(1), 59–61.

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**NEVER LET ME GO.** By KAZUO ISHIGURO. Vintage Books, New York, 288 pages, 2005.

#### Reviewed by Brenna Cussen

THE 2005 NOVEL *NEVER LET ME GO* by Kazuo Ishiguro, author of the award-winning *Remains of*

*the Day*, is set in the late 1990s in England. The narrator of this work of quasi-science fiction is a woman in her early thirties, Kathy, or 'Kath' as her childhood friends call her. She describes herself at the outset of the book by her profession: she is a 'carer,' and her patients are 'donors.' Kathy's memories of her childhood at Hailsham, a private boarding school, and of her close friendships with her classmates Ruth and Tommy, make up the bulk of the story. But what initially seems an innocent account of companionship and romance begins to intrigue the reader as Kathy alludes to secrets about the school and its charges. Ishiguro's calculated revelations through Kathy's voice allow the reader to unravel the mystery behind the school at the same pace as the students themselves.

The riddle of the novel is revealed as Kathy revisits the moment when she and her classmates were finally told who they were and why they were created. One of their teachers, tortured by the deception she had helped to perpetuate, informed the teens that they were clones who were created for the sole purpose of donating their vital organs to 'normal' people. The children, though sober, were not at all shocked by the news. As Kathy painstakingly attempts to remember why, she concludes that throughout their time at Hailsham, they must have been constantly "told, but not told."

Ishiguro carefully constructs every word of *Never Let Me Go* so that the overall effect of the narrative is chilling: he brilliantly portrays the very real human behaviors and social structures that could plausibly lead to such a revolting scenario. He diligently and purposefully illustrates a society in which there are very clear distinctions between lives that are valued and lives that are not. Ishiguro clearly conveys that the clones are seen by the outside world as merely a means to the end of curing the diseases of 'valued people,' who in turn do everything they can to obscure the humanity of their 'donors.' To drive home this point, Ishiguro inserts a scene where Ruth tearfully and bitterly expresses the truth of their origins: "We're modeled

from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from ... if you want to look for [our models], if you want to do it properly, then look in the gutter. Look in rubbish bins. Look in the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from." Ishiguro recognizes that even a 'decent' society might very well accept the harvesting of body parts if the source of those parts could be viewed as non-human.

In the same vein, Ishiguro's characters use 'detoxifying' language in order to bury the unspeakable truth—the best illustration being the use of the term 'completing' to replace the word 'dying.' In Ishiguro's England, clones don't *die*, as they were never considered *alive* in the first place. Clones *complete*. Even the word 'clone' is not used to describe the main characters, whom their teachers call 'students,' even when they are grown adults. One former teacher emotionally refers to Kathy and Tommy as "poor creatures."

Ishiguro's mocking use of the terms 'donor' and 'donation' by the characters' guardians gives the impression that the young people have chosen to selflessly give of themselves, when in fact their lives have been manipulated by a society that will ultimately murder them for their body parts. Sadly, even the main characters themselves adopt such detoxifying language. Kathy proudly refers to herself as a 'carer,' implying that she provides care to her patients, though she is actually complicit in their deaths. Ironically, she keeps even her best friends comfortable and calm until the end, so that the doctors can more easily remove their organs.

Perhaps the most sickening use of detoxification in the book is when Kathy describes how donors are showered with compliments and congratulations when they are about to donate their fourth, and presumably final, organ. She tells of how even the doctors who are about to kill their 'patients' first shake their hands and congratulate them for making it so far.

AT THE END OF THE story, Kathy and Tommy attempt to get a 'deferral' from their former school officials, believing that if they can prove they are in love, they can add two extra years to their lives. They are crushed to learn that such a deferral does not exist. Instead, they discover the true story behind Hailsham, that it was an experiment by activists who had tried to give clones a decent upbringing, and perhaps even save some of their lives by demonstrating to the world that clones had souls. The experiment had failed, but, in the climax of the novel, the headmistress explains to Kathy and Tommy how their existence came to be:

*After the war, in the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly, there wasn't time to take stock, to ask the sensible questions. Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum. Yes, there were arguments. But by the time people became concerned about ... about students, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought into existence at all, well by then it was too late. There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neuron disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And*

*if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter.*

UNFORTUNATELY, MANY REVIEWERS OF ISHIGURO'S book have gone out of their way to deny that the novel contributes anything to the cloning debate, let alone the issue of bioengineering in general. A surprising number deliberately state that the book is rather a personal call for each reader to examine what it means to be human. Writing for *The Guardian*, John Harrison comments, "Ishiguro's contribution to the cloning debate turns out to be sleight of hand, eye candy ... So what is *Never Let Me Go* really about? It's about the steady erosion of hope. It's about repressing what you know, which is that in this life people fail one another, grow old and fall to pieces ... *Never Let Me Go* makes you want to have sex, take drugs, run a marathon, dance—anything to convince yourself you're more alive, more determined, more conscious than any of these characters."

Maureen Corrigan, who teaches literature at Georgetown University, gave another disappointing review on NPR's *Fresh Air*. Corrigan believes that *Never Let Me Go*, as far from an "anti-cloning polemic [as] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," is rather "a haunting allegory about our own helplessness to stop time and hold on to the ones we love."

Corrigan, like many other reviewers of *Never Let Me Go*, rushes to alleviate her listeners' fears that Ishiguro's novel might be pointing to a genuine trend in the field of bioethics. She immediately dismisses this obvious possibility as farfetched, and instead looks for the "metaphysical" significance of what she reads as a parable.

However, in her favor, Corrigan does pick up on a feature fundamental to the genius of the book: the dullness of its characters. "Ishiguro's characters always tend to be somewhat flat... [but] the clones may be even flatter than his other characters because they're clones," she astutely observes.

The characters in Ishiguro's book *do* come across as bland, almost lifeless, in their stilted dialogues.

Ishiguro allows each main character only one outburst of anger at the way their lives have been wasted, each an ephemeral flash of awareness that briefly uncovers a spark of life within. Other than these short-lived displays of emotion, however, even the best of friends in Ishiguro's story remain reserved in their interactions with one another. Rather than a flaw in Ishiguro's skills of character development, it is his brilliant ability to depict the behaviors of people who have never been treated as human beings. The characters in *Never Let Me Go* are valued only for the body parts they can give, not for their dignity as human beings. And as such, these 'creatures' who have always been destined for death are denied the joy of living a meaningful life.

Some reviewers of Ishiguro's book are less timid about stating the obvious. Caroline Moore, writing in *The Telegraph*, comments, "Ishiguro's fable resonates in our world, glancing at our human ability to maintain unexamined spots of moral blindness in our consciences" (2005).

Yet only one review in *The Village Voice*, written by James Browning, hits the nail on the head. He calls *Never Let Me Go*, "A 1984 for the bioengineering age, a warning and a glimpse into the future whose genius will be recognized as reality catches up" (2005).

Browning likens Ishiguro's world in which dying is 'completing' to Orwell's world in which "war equals peace and freedom equals slavery."

PERHAPS THE PUBLIC IS NOT ready to admit that Ishiguro's world is possible. They are probably less ready to admit that much of what Ishiguro offers as fiction is, in fact, a reality today. John Harrison naively asks, "Who on earth could be 'for' the exploitation of human beings in this way?" (2005). And yet the connection between this book and recent history is painfully obvious. Not so long ago, many well-meaning people dismissed the admonition that evil plans were afoot in Europe with the question, "Who could be 'for' the slaughter of millions of Jews or the disabled?" People allowed

themselves to be blinded to the truth, and so allowed the horror to continue. Today, many people are calling for the use of human fetuses in order to experiment on cures for diseases. Impaired people are prematurely declared 'brain dead' so that their parts can be harvested. Reports of people being murdered on the street for their organs are coming out of India and other third world countries. Ishiguro's world is coming true.

Perhaps most disappointing of all, however, is that Ishiguro himself, in interviews about his book, does not reveal an intention to warn his readers about the dangers inherent in the bioengineering world today. Rather, he says that the book offers an "alternative history ... in the line of 'What if Hitler had won?' or 'What if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated?'" The novel offers a version of Britain that might have existed by the late twentieth century if just one or two things had gone differently on the scientific front" (BookBrowse.com).

As his novel is set in the present, his position is understandable. Yet it is frustrating that Ishiguro does not admit that such a version of 'history' is a quite possible future. Perhaps such an interpretation is left up for the readers to determine. Perhaps the novel, as Ishiguro says, is really only "trying to celebrate the small decencies of human beings set against this dark background that's in all our lives" (Bates, 2005).

Or perhaps Ishiguro is unaware of his own genius of prophecy, a genius that Browning dismally predicted would not be recognized until "reality catches up" (2005).

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## LEARNING TO TEACH SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION (SRV)

SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION, when well applied, has potential to help societally devalued people to gain greater access to the good things of life and to be spared at least some of the negative effects of social devaluation. This is one of the reasons why it is important for people to learn to teach SRV, so that its ideas and strategies are known and available to the right people in the right places who can apply it well. Unless people continue to learn to be SRV trainers, the teaching and dissemination of SRV will cease. Many SRV trainers for example could teach lots of people how to **implement** SRV, but not how to **teach** it to others. At a certain point there might be implementation of aspects of SRV, but the knowledge of SRV itself might not be passed on to others, such as the next generation of human service workers. Teaching about SRV, and learning to teach SRV, can be done in many ways, depending in part on one's abilities, interests, resources, and so on.

Dr. W. Wolfensberger and the North American SRV Safeguarding, Training & Development Council have developed a specific model for teaching people to competently do two things: (a) teach Social Role Valorization; and (b) teach other people to teach SRV. People who can do the former, the Council calls "SRV trainers." Those who can do the latter, the Council calls "trainers-of-trainers" of SRV. The Council named this a "Trainer Formation Model," i.e., a model for forming or developing SRV trainers and trainers-of-SRV trainers. A description of the Trainer Formation Model is available if you are interested; also see the article referenced below.

To find out more about studying SRV and learning to teach it, please contact Jo Massarelli at *The SRV Implementation Project*, 74 Elm Street, Worcester, MA 01609 USA; 508.752.3670; [jo@srvip.org](mailto:jo@srvip.org). She will be able to help you or to put you in touch with someone more local to your geographic area who can be of help.

### RESOURCE

SRV Development, Training & Safeguarding Council (2006). A Brief Overview of the North American SRV Council's Trainer Formation Model (November 2005). *The SRV Journal* 1(1), 58-62.

# ITEMS TO BE REVIEWED

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IN EACH ISSUE OF *The SRV Journal*, we publish reviews of items relevant to Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory, training, research or implementation. These include reviews of books, movies, articles, etc. We encourage our readers to look for and review such items for this journal. We will be happy to send you our guidelines for writing reviews, or they are available on our website ([http://www.srvip.org/journal\\_submissions.php](http://www.srvip.org/journal_submissions.php)). We are open to reviews of any items you think would be relevant for people interested in SRV. We also have specific items we are seeking reviews of. These items include:

SOCIAL INCLUSION AT WORK. By JANIS CHADSEY. Annapolis, MD: AAIDD, 49 pages, 2008.

100 YEARS OF GOODWILL: TOUCHING LIVES THROUGH THE POWER OF WORK. By STEVE MUNDAHL. Greensboro, NC: Circe Press, 187 pages, 2002.

OLDER ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES. By CLAIRE LAVIN & KENNETH DOKA. NY: Baywood Publishing Company, 151 pages, 1999.

SAFE AND SECURE. By AL ETMANSKI, JACK COLLINS, & VICKIE CAMMACK. Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, Burnaby, B.C., Canada, 149 pages, 1997.

WOMEN ON THE ROW: REVELATIONS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE BARS. By KATHLEEN O'SHEA. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 156 pages, 2000.

THE SHAME OF THE NATION. By JONATHAN KOZOL. Three Rivers Press, 432 pages, 2006.

SHOWER. By YANG ZHANG (Director). Rated PG-13, 92 minutes, 1999.

BODY AND SOUL: DIANA AND KATHY. By ALICE ELLIOTT (Director). 40 minutes, 2006.

TAYLOR'S CAMPAIGN. By RICHARD COHEN (Director). 75 minutes, 1998.

ROLLING. By GRETCHEN BERLAND (Director). 71 minutes, 2004.

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# Valued by Love: Social Roles in Wendell Berry's Short Stories

Jack R. Pealer, Jr.

## Introduction

THIS ESSAY IS AN EXPERIMENT. I have been an informal (at least) teacher of normalization and—to a lesser extent—Social Role Valorization (SRV) for quite a few years. For even more years I've been a serious reader of modern fiction—novels and short stories. I'm the kind of reader that Canadian novelist Robertson Davies described as a member of the “clerisy.”

*Who are the clerisy? They are people who like to read books ... The clerisy are those who read for pleasure, but not for idleness; who read for pastime but not to kill time; who love books, but do not live by books. (Davies, 1990)*

From time to time over the years I've thought about the connections between the realms of SRV-teaching and serious fiction-reading. Those connections are not direct. It's likely that most fiction writers have never heard of the idea: Social Role Valorization. Many might blanch at the term itself. It has Latinate roots—not favored among writers; it lacks immediacy and vividness; it requires secondary explication that would be tiresome in a story. So, I'm pretty confident that clarification of SRV themes is not central to the purpose of most fiction writers.

I think exploring such connections is worthwhile, though, because fiction—the deliberate construc-

tion of story—makes vivid the ways that people interact with each other in the world. Fiction almost always focuses on “characters” and relationships among them, and readers or hearers of stories have always been fascinated by the ways that people get along—or don't. Recently I've been reading novels or stories by such modern writers as Alice Munro, Richard Ford, Marilynne Robinson, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They all communicate through story about how people are—and sometimes how they might be—with each other. Writers intend to try to satisfy their readers, although, of course, not every reader is contented with every writer every time. Readers who share a conviction about SRV may, through fiction, play with the roles-in-action the writer portrays. In their imaginations, readers may participate in the give-and-take among characters whose social roles differ in imputed value. Those value differences show up at given moments in a story and across the duration of time that a story represents.

In this essay I want to explore the appearance of “social roles” in the short stories of Wendell Berry. For those unacquainted with him, Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer who is also a poet, essayist, and deviser of both short stories and novels. The action in all of his stories occurs in the fictional community around Port William, a very small town on the Kentucky River near its confluence with the Ohio. It's about half-way between Cincinnati and Louisville. I acknowledge right here that Wendell

Berry is my favorite writer of fiction and that I like his stories even more than I do his novels.

Berry's constant theme is community—its costs, disciplines, and rewards. Here, from the story "The Wild Birds," is Burley Coulter, a favorite recurring character, speaking his and likely the author's creed about community, as he—Burley—persuades his lawyer about a change in Burley's will. It's a change that the lawyer/friend/cousin is surprised and uncertain about.

*I'm saying that the ones who have been here have been the way they were, and the ones of us who are here now are the way they are, and to know that is the only chance we've got, dead and living, to be here together. I ain't saying we don't have to know what we ought to have been and ought to be, but we oughtn't to let that stand between us. That ain't the way we are. The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't. What has been here, not what ought to have been, is what I have to claim.*

In community, people find themselves filling up actual or possible vacancies in others' lives. Sometimes the vacancies are material. One citizen furnishes food to others for a reasonable return. Some citizens have extra living space they can sell or rent to others. Some community members have learned to do some particular things very well, and they apply those skills in ways other community members can use. And so forth across the entire membership. In the Port William community people live and are joined with each other as they are.

Wendell Berry helps us appreciate community-at-work. We don't have to get tied up in complicated terminology. Instead of studying how people live together, we're led to see, hear, and feel the working and living going on. Instead of an analysis of roles and role-behavior, which runs a risk of

oversimplifying the messiness of life-together, in Wendell Berry's stories we find memories of how specific people have acted with each other. Life in community appears to us as life is. Community reveals itself in both its joys and horrors. Let's look at five of the stories of the "membership" to see how members of the Port William community brush against one another—how they either fill or sometimes create vacancies in each others' lives. Observe, though, how community struggles to retain its own. Notice how roles that might ordinarily be devalued in another world's eyes are shaped or re-interpreted by means of the ties of blood and affection that bind Port William members together.

#### **"A Jonquil for Mary Penn"**

WENDELL BERRY GENTLY IMAGINES THE response of a loving and caring community to a member who is sick in the story "A Jonquil for Mary Penn." The story begins simply. "Mary Penn was sick, though she said nothing about it when she heard Elton get up and light the lamp and renew the fires." It is 1940. Mary Penn is eighteen years old. Her choice of Elton Penn as a husband a year-and-a-half before has disappointed her locally prominent family, who expected her "... to be married to a solid professional man, a doctor perhaps, or (and this her mother particularly favored) perhaps a minister." Her family now treats her "as if she had never lived." She and Elton have rented a run-down farm and are trying to bring life back to it.

But today, Mary Penn has the flu or something like it. This is the first time since their marriage that Mary has been sick. She feels "floaty." She is achy, feels overpoweringly tired. But Elton doesn't seem to notice. Mary has both indoor and outdoor chores. There are meals to be fixed and oil lamps to be cleaned and polished. She needs to sweep and dust the house. And there are barn chores—feeding animals, gathering eggs. And, it's a windy, cold early March day.

Wolf Wolfensberger says that one of the early authorities to describe and emphasize the power of social roles was Talcott Parsons, who wrote particularly about the “sick” role. A person who plays the sick role may dispense with “ordinary performance expectations” and may receive “treatment and caring from others.” At the same time, someone playing the sick role has obligations, including “wanting to get well, and seeking and accepting treatment to this end” (Wolfensberger, 1998).

Mary Penn struggles with her wish to set aside “ordinary performance expectations.” She senses no permission from Elton to do so. It’s hard to be sick when you know there’s so much to be done. It’s hard to seek and accept treatment when there’s a life to be led.

Finally, though, Mary Penn gives in. She sits, idle, by the stove that heats the house.

*The wind ranted and sucked at the house’s corners. She could hear its billows and shocks, as if somebody off in the distance were shaking a great rug. She felt, not a draft, but the whole atmosphere of the room moving coldly against her. She went into the other room, but the fire there also needed building up. She could not bring herself to do it. She was shaking, she ached, she could think only of lying down. Standing near the stove, she undressed, put on her nightgown again, and got into the bed.*

She sleeps. When she wakes the room is warm, a teakettle sputters, her lamps are polished, and her good neighbor Josie Tom Braymer sits by her bedside and works on embroidery, stitching a jonquil. Elton did notice her illness, did think about how to help, and did stop to tell the neighbors. When Mary awakes, she feels “wonderful.” The role has “worked.” More ... she’s received a neighbor’s help and love. She’s had rest. She’s on her way to healing.

### “Pray Without Ceasing”

WHATEVER ELSE “COMMUNITY” MEANS FOR Wendell Berry, its definition does include forgiveness. Sometimes-surprising healing—over a deed many might think impossible to forgive—reveals itself in “Pray Without Ceasing.”

One morning in the summer of 1965 Andy Catlett is greeted by a neighbor, who presents Andy with an old newspaper clipping—the account of the death-by-gunshot, in the summer of 1912, of Andy’s great-grandfather, Ben Feltner. As the story unfolds we learn about relationships among Ben Feltner, his son Mat, and Ben’s killer—his cousin Thad Coulter. Thad had re-mortgaged his paid-for farm so that he could help set up his own son as a merchant in the county seat. But the business failed, and Thad’s son ran out on his debt.

*And so Thad’s fate was passed from the reckless care of his son to the small mercy of the law. Without more help than he could confidently expect, he was going to lose his farm. Even with help, he was going to have to pay for it again, and he was close to sixty years old.*

Thad is portrayed as a “close man”—intensely private, quiet, but sensitive about how he’s seen by others. When he gets drunk and, in such a state, appears at the home of his wise and sober friend Ben Feltner to ask for help, Ben judges that the request should better be considered later, when other allies can be gathered and when Thad can think more clearly. Thad, however, interprets Ben’s judgment as dismissal. He sees outright rejection in it. He leaves, angry, and goes home for his pistol.

Thad turns from “close man” to killer when he returns. Still drunk and enraged, he shoots Ben Feltner as Ben speaks with neighbors in the town street. The rest of the story traces the roles the characters play after the explosion of public mur-

der that could blow a community apart. Violence connects to disorder. First someone must be an order-preserver—one who can begin peace-making. Just after the shooting, Ben Feltner's son Mat rushes from the blacksmith shop to the crowd now gathered in the street.

*... then he saw what was left of the man who had been his father lying against the wagon wheel ... When Mat stood up again from his father's side, he was a man new-created by rage. All that he had been and thought and done gave way to his one desire to kill the man who had killed his father.*

Mat becomes a would-be avenger. His uncle, Jack Beechum, emerging from the general store, recognizes the transformation in Mat. Uncle Jack acts to stop more violence—to restore and preserve order.

*He ran to the door. When he was outside, he saw first the crowd and then Mat running toward him out of it. Without breaking his stride, he caught Mat and held him ... He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he could think.*

Jack's order-preservation—the creation of breathing space—works. Mat, given time to collect himself, begins another transformation: from avenger to head-of-family, a role that's suddenly been thrust on him through violence.

Thad Coulter, the killer, is sobered by his violent act. He quickly feels remorse but cannot, of course, retract what he has done. He becomes an abject fugitive.

*The walking and the water drying on his face cleared his mind, and now he knew himself as he had been and as he was and knew that he was changed beyond unchanging into something he did not love.*

Thad surrenders himself to the county sheriff and is placed in the county jail—from fugitive to prisoner—where he hangs himself on the second night of his confinement.

Meanwhile, on the evening after Ben Feltner's murder, a crowd gathers in the Port William street and, seeking authorization, moves to the Feltner front yard. They want approval from Mat to go to the county seat—to the jail—and to visit immediate retribution on Thad Coulter.

*For what seemed to Jack a long time, Mat did not speak or move ... Jack's right hand ached to reach out to Mat. It seemed to him again that he felt the earth shaking under his feet, as Mat felt it. But though it shook and though they felt it, Mat now stood resolved and calm upon it ... The voice, when it came, was steady:*

*"No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do that."*

*And Jack, who had not sat down since morning, stepped back and sat down.*

So, Mat completes the conversion from avenger to forgiver and peacemaker—a conversion that's necessary if community is to be preserved, and an example of what might be termed Berry's recurrent theme of valorization-by-love. And, Mat's grandson, Andy, 53 years later recognizes the value obtained by Mat's act:

*I am blood kin to both sides of that moment when Ben Feltner turned to face Thad Coulter in the road and Thad pulled the trigger. The two families, sundered in the ruin of a friendship, were united again first in new friendship and then in marriage. My grandfather made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness.*

Peace and comity are companions, and it's the forgiver—or the binder-up—who makes such

companionship possible.

### ***“Thicker Than Liquor”***

NEWLY MARRIED ATTORNEY WHEELER CATLETT receives a mid-day long distance call that splits him from thought about his bride and his new life and thrusts him into the demands imposed by love, family, and community. Wheeler’s Uncle Peach (full name: Leonidas Wheeler) is at the bottom end of a “spell” of hard drinking. The hotel in Louisville calls Wheeler, whose near future must then feature rescuing Uncle Peach and bringing him home. It is 1930. The phone call pushes Wheeler from roles as young husband and beginning professional into the role of family caregiver.

Uncle Peach is a trial to his family—the “black sheep.” Wheeler has long argued with his mother, Dorie:

*“To hell with him! Why don’t you let him get on by himself the best way he can? What’s he done for you?”*

*Dorie answered the first question, ignoring the second: “Because blood is thicker than water.”*

*And Wheeler said, mocking her, “Blood is thicker than liquor.”*

*“Yes,” she said. “Thicker than liquor too.”*

So Wheeler drives to the station, takes the inter-urban car to Louisville, and locates Uncle Peach in a cheap hotel near the stockyards. Wheeler faces the job of getting his uncle back home. The job—being Peach’s rescuer—immediately exposes Wheeler to its hazards. After a struggle to get Uncle Peach dressed, out of the hotel, to the station, and onto the train, Peach gets sick in the crowded train.

*Wheeler looked for a way out, perhaps to the vestibule at the end of the car, but with the aisle full of people escape appeared to be impossible, and anyhow it was too late, for suddenly Uncle Peach leaned forward and, with awful retches and groans, vomited*

*between his spread knees. Wheeler caught hold of him and held him. All around them people were giving them looks and drawing their feet away . . . Wheeler’s pleadings with him to be quiet might as well have been addressed to a panic-stricken horse. As soon as he would be almost recovered and quiet, suddenly he would lean forward again. “Uuuuuuup! Oh, my God!” And when the spasm passed he would roll his head against the seatback. “Ohhhh, me!”*

*It was an awful intimacy carried on in public. To Wheeler, it was endurable only because it was inescapable.*

Caring for Peach introduces yet more complications. When they arrive at the local station, Peach—still sick—insists on getting his horse and buggy from the livery stable, leaving Wheeler’s car at the station. Near nightfall, when they reach Uncle Peach’s farm—not that close to Wheeler’s place—they find nearly no food, and both Peach and Wheeler need to eat. Eventually, Wheeler gets Uncle Peach to sleep.

*Once, after they had passed through yet another nightmare, Uncle Peach, who had momentarily waked, said slowly into the darkness, “Wheeler boy, this is a hell of a way for a young man just married to have to pass the night.”*

*“I thought of that,” Wheeler said. “But it’s all right.” And he patted Uncle Peach, who went back to sleep and for a while was quiet.*

*Later, Wheeler himself went to sleep, his hand remaining on Uncle Peach’s shoulder where it had come to rest.*

*And that is where daylight found him, far from home.*

Community and family—those connections, often of blood, are, Wendell Berry says, thicker than liquor. And sometimes those connections create roles

terribly inconvenient but also terribly necessary.

### “Watch With Me”

THIS STORY COULD BE READ with profit by those who seek thoughtful responses to events like the shootings at Virginia Tech or Columbine High School. Into all the hubbub that follows such events Wendell Berry inserts this story about a community that stretches itself to keep a wayward member in its embrace. Local citizens—farmers and their families—suddenly are called to fill unaccustomed roles so they can, they hope, prevent violence and keep their community together.

The year is 1916. The wayward community member in “Watch With Me” is Thacker Hample, more customarily known to his neighbors as “Nightlife,” for reasons the story elaborates. It’s a name Thacker Hample takes on gladly. Of Nightlife the narrator says:

*Thacker Hample belonged to a large family locally noted for the fact that from one generation to another not a one of them had worked out quite right. Their commonest flaw was poor vision ... But Nightlife was incomplete, too, in some other way. There were times when spells came upon him, when he would be sad and angry and confused and maybe dangerous, and nobody could help him. And sometimes he would have to be sent away to the asylum where, Uncle Othy Dagget said, they would file him down and reset his teeth.*

*His mind ... had a leak in it somewhere, some little hole through which now and again would pour the whole darkness of the darkest night—so that instead of walking in the country he knew and among his kin-folks and neighbors, he would be afoot in a limitless and undivided universe, completely dark, inhabited only by himself. From there he would want to call out for rescue, and that was when nobody could tell what he was going to do next, and perhaps he*

*could not tell either.*

With reference to Nightlife one of his neighbors observes, “He don’t fit the hole that was bored for him.” “Watch With Me” tells what happens when Nightlife has a “spell,” picks up a loaded shotgun from a neighbor, and walks off into the woods.

Nightlife’s chief pursuer is Ptolemy (Tol) Proudfoot, a lifelong farmer, exuberant socializer, and devoted husband to Miss Minnie Proudfoot (née Quinch). It is Tol’s shotgun that Nightlife appropriates, from Tol’s farmyard. Tol reacts by following Nightlife into the woods. He asks another neighbor to let Miss Minnie know what’s going on and to recruit other neighbors to help. Then he says, “I expect I’ll just ease along with him for a ways.” Tol fears that Nightlife may either shoot someone else or shoot himself. Neither would be acceptable. The gun is known to be a powerful one.

The other neighbors join Tol as he follows Nightlife, keeping a safe distance because of the gun. The “a ways” that they follow stretches into hours and miles.

*It was not going to make sense, not yet, and maybe not for a long time, if ever. And for a while, maybe a longish while, there would not be food or rest or comfort either ... He (Tol) said to himself, “I reckon it would be better not to have got involved.” But he knew even so that, helpless or not, hopeless or not, he would go along with Nightlife until whatever happened that would allow him to cease to go along had happened ... He thought, “I reckon I am involved.”*

The procession continues throughout the long afternoon and into the evening. Nightlife, whose role newspapers of our time would be sure to describe as “loner,” leads his followers through woods, past small farms, and down to the Kentucky River. The followers don’t, though, think of Nightlife as a “loner.” That’s a word for reporters and police departments. To the followers Nightlife

is their neighbor. He's one of their own, though an odd one. He's still a **member**—an important point of the story.

*For Tol and the others, following him had ceased to seem unusual. In the heat and the difficulty of their constant effort to keep just within sight of their strange neighbor, who had become at once their fear, their quarry, and their leader, they had ceased even to wonder what end they were moving toward. This wild pursuit that at first had seemed an interruption of their work had become their work. Now they could hardly imagine what they would be doing if they were home.*

Shedding more regular roles, Tol and his neighbors have become nearly-silent watchers. They are Nightlife's guardians as he moves toward a future that's uncertain and likely dangerous. Night arrives. The following continues. Because the pursuers are experienced hunters and because it's summer, they have no hesitation about going on in the dark, except that they have a harder time knowing where Nightlife has gone. They fear losing him. But just as much they fear being surprised by the gun. At last, late in the night, tired, hungry, and confused, they stop to rest and build a fire. They fall asleep.

*They are awakened at dawn ... what had wakened them was Nightlife standing over them, one foot in the ashes. He was holding the gun, but not threatening them with it. It dangled from his hand as unregarded as if it has been the bail of an empty bucket.*

*"Couldn't you stay awake?"*

*They were frightened, astonished, tickled at their own and one another's fright and astonishment, and most of all ashamed ...*

After Nightlife moves on again into the woods, Tol observes, "If he hadn't found us, I don't reckon we ever would have found him." This Gethsemane-like incident, matched with the story's title, more than hints at Nightlife as an expression of the hidden Christ. See Matthew 25: "...insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." This is an almost-shocking contrast to the typically-ascribed role as "menace" or "loner."

THE STORY RUSHES TO ITS END. By morning Nightlife has circled back to Tol's farm, where the pursuit began. The wives and mothers of the processors (including Nightlife's mother), knowing what has been happening and aware that everyone will be tired and hungry, gather in Tol and Miss Minnie's kitchen to prepare food. When Nightlife and his pursuers arrive, a sudden thunderstorm drives them all into Tol's workshop. There Nightlife, still under the "spell" that began the day before, leads the men in a hymn and delivers a sermon based on the New Testament parable about the shepherd who left his flock to seek the one sheep that has gone astray. Nightlife emphasizes the point-of-view of the sheep that was lost. As the sermon ends Nightlife's "fit" or "spell" falls away, and the long pursuit ends. The narrator of the story observes:

*... Miss Minnie, I think, understood it better than everybody. She had taught at least four of those young men at the Goforth school: Nightlife, Burley Coulter, and the two Hardys. And she and Tol had been neighbors to them all. She knew pretty exactly by what precarious interplay of effort and grace the neighborhood had lived.*

Perhaps it is grace that sustains the Port William community so that it can tolerate and even glory in even its more peculiar members, turning loners into sharers at a common table.

### “Fidelity”

I HAVE SUMMARIZED THE PLOTS of the previous four stories so that I could try to spotlight the characters who live out those plots. I won't offer a plot summary of “Fidelity,” though. In part, that's because the story is long—almost a short novel—and because it includes several important back-stories. Mostly I don't want to provide a summary because I want to entice anyone who reads this essay to read “Fidelity.” My advice is, if you choose to read only one Wendell Berry story, that story should be “Fidelity.” I have imagined stories as foci for long conversations—like those at retreats. “Fidelity” is the story about which I'd most like to join others in such conversation.

Readers—and those who, like me, are re-readers—of Wendell Berry's stories probably fall in love with Burley Coulter. He is arguably the author's favorite character. Burley's niece-by-marriage considers him as she faces the likelihood of the end of his life:

*Burley was a man freely in love with freedom and with pleasures, who watched the world with an amused, alert eye to see what it would do next, and if the world did not seem inclined to get on very soon to anything of interest, he gave it his help...*

*... she knew, too, how little he had halted in grief and regret, how readily and cheerfully he had gone on, however burdened, to whatever had come next. And, because he was never completely of her world, she had the measure of his generosity to her and the others. Though gifted for disappearance, he had never entirely disappeared but had been with them to the end.*

Through nearly all of the stories and novels Wendell Berry offers Burley Coulter as a life-force. He's the leader of work-song in the tobacco fields, the hunter who stays out for days with his dogs in the woods, the faithful carer for his mother in her last years, and the leader of local celebrations—

sometimes inebriated ones. “Fidelity” tells of his illness, death, and at least two funerals, one of which is also a sort of trial.

The story also offers a clear contrast between a disappearing rural community sustained by history and family and the modern serviced world as represented by urban hospital medicine. I had a teacher in seminary, forty years ago, who strongly counseled prospective preachers against what he called “negative-positive” sermons—the kind that threaten hearers heavily but then offer a dollop of grace at the end. “Fidelity” is a successful violation of my teacher's advice. The bias in the comparison between the two worlds could not be more explicit. And that bias is revealed, at least in part, by contrasts between identities imputed to key characters.

82-year old Burley Coulter appears, from the points-of-view of (unnamed) doctors and police officers, as a “patient” at an urban hospital. To his family and friends, first scattered on farms and later gathered in attorney Wheeler Catlett's office, he is a beloved patriarch. Wheeler sums up by reflecting, “He was, I will say, a faithful man.” It's entirely clear which role is the “real” one for the teller of the story.

The police see Danny Branch (Burley's finally-acknowledged son) as a likely kidnapper who has, they believe, criminally snatched Burley from the hospital's care. Most other characters regard Danny, who goes to the hospital in the middle of the night to bring Burley home, as his father's rescuer. There's no doubt which opinion is held by the narrator.

Kyle Bode is a detective for the state police. Is he a defender of law-and-order, investigating a crime, as he seems to think? Or, is he an obstacle to a family's expression of love for a sick and dying member and a barrier to their continued life together? The storyteller is certain.

The roles that are assigned to characters in a play or story or everyday life are functions not only of the role-player's identity and actions but also of the interpretations of all those who are part of the role-player's world. Much has to do with

perception. “Fidelity” gives us an example of how drastically perceptions can differ. It also offers a glimpse of how roles can be changed in a positive direction (can we say “valorized”?) by the power of a community and its love.

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All quotations from Wendell Berry’s stories come from: Berry, W. (2004). *That distant land (The collected stories)*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: *The Safeguards Letter* (a publication of Ohio Safeguards) is an excellent resource, well worth reading. It contains thoughtful articles, stories, opinion pieces, quotes, book reviews, etc. It is available in print or by email. Contact the Editor, *The Safeguards Letter*, 3421 Dawn Drive, Hamilton, OH 45011 USA. [jackjr158@earthlink.net](mailto:jackjr158@earthlink.net). <http://www.ohiosafeguards.org/>

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**The SRV Implementation Project & Family Lives are pleased to present a lecture series to be held at the Family Lives’ Westborough, Massachusetts (US) office:**

**Ethical Topics in Medicine.** There is a growing climate of acceptance in society for medically-inflicted &/or hastened death. A series of court decisions & changes in public opinion, influenced by leaders in the ‘bioethics’ field, have brought major changes in the climate in which medicine operates. Redefinitions of the meaning of personhood, futile care, medical treatment, death, & the end of life, have heightened dangers to people with impairments, the old, the sick, & others who are devalued.

**Thursday, September 18, 2008 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm.** *Wesley J. Smith* is an attorney for the International Task Force on Euthanasia & Assisted Suicide, & a special consultant for the Center for Bioethics & Culture. Smith’s *Culture of death: The assault on medical ethics in America*, a warning about the dangers of the modern bioethics movement, was named one of the Ten Outstanding Books of the Year & Best Health Book of the Year for 2001 (Independent Publisher Book Awards).

**Tuesday, December 2, 2008 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm.** *Cathy Ludlum*, author of *One candle power: Seven principles that enhance the lives of people with disabilities and their communities*, will speak on the topic of demystifying tube feeding. Ludlum is a nationally-known author & disability activist. As a person with a disability & an employer of personal assistants since 1988, Ms. Ludlum brings an extensive background in the recruitment, hiring, & management of support staff.

**For more information**, please email Marc Tumeinski at [info@srvip.org](mailto:info@srvip.org).