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Northwest Writers at Work: Peter Rock

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By Ann Robinson, The Oregonian

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Peter Rock is deep in a ravine in Forest Park. It's raining hard and everything is green and wet and slippery. Rock is talking about how it's difficult for people to fit into society when they've been living on its fringes.



"You can't just expect them to live what we think of as a normal life," he says. "What's normal for us isn't normal for them."

Somewhere near here, a man and his daughter spent four years living in a homemade shelter. They had a vegetable garden and a rope swing and a creek where they bathed and stored their perishables. The father, a college graduate and Vietnam veteran, home-schooled his daughter using old encyclopedias.

Their camp was only a few hundred yards above Saint Helens Road. It's around here, somewhere. Rock thinks he might have found it when he was poking around a few years ago, but everything grows back fast and the camp was so well concealed it took police several hours to find it after off-trail runners discovered it in 2004.

A police dog found the man, whose first name was Frank, and his then-12-year-old daughter, Ruth, hiding nearby. She was clean and well-behaved, smart and devoted to her father, who thought Forest Park was better than life on the street. Something about them struck a chord with people who wondered how they could live in deep woods so close to the city. People donated thousands of dollars to a fund set up for Ruth's education, and a Portland police sergeant arranged for them to live on a horse farm in Yamhill County. An editorial in The Oregonian said "their story deserves to be turned into a children's classic, like 'My Side of the Mountain.'"

Five days later, another story appeared in the newspaper: "Resettled from park, father, girl slip away." Frank thought he saw TV news helicopters above the horse farm and worried that Ruth would be called "the Forest Park hillbilly" when she started school. None of the Portland TV stations sent a helicopter to the horse farm, and the minister of the church Frank and Ruth were attending said he had "a feeling they have gone under again."

Five years later, no one knows what became of them.

"What is our reality, and what is theirs?" Rock says. "Is this a happy story? Is this a good life for her? How did they live? How did they escape? It kept bugging me and bugging me."

Some stories do that to you. Rock, who teaches creative writing at Reed College and is the author of six books, read about Frank and Ruth (police did not release their last names to protect their privacy) in the newspaper and couldn't get them out of his mind. He wandered through Forest Park for days, imagining their lives, and read encyclopedias and Golden Books to get inside Ruth's mind and Thoreau to get inside Frank's. He bought a toy horse in Chinatown because it was something like Ruth might have carried around and named it Randy. He kept it next to his computer and used it as a talisman while writing a novel called "My Abandonment" in the voice of a 13-year-old girl who lives with her father in Forest Park.

"Sometimes you're walking through the woods when a stick leaps into the air and strikes you across the back and shoulders several times, then flies away lost in the underbrush," Rock's novel begins. "There's nothing to do but keep walking, you have to be ready for everything and I am as I follow behind Father down out of the trees, around a puddle, to the fence of the salvage yard. It's night."

A stick leaping in the air and a stone rolling uphill might represent reality to a girl who grew up in the woods with a father who saw helicopters coming after them. Forest Park has shadows unseen by the runners and mountain bikers who stream down Leif Erikson Drive on weekends. There are packs of wild dogs that tear through the trees, and drug abusers who build fires in places where the law doesn't reach. It's no place for a child, even one who reads the Bible and tests above her grade level.

For months, Rock was drawn to Forest Park like iron to a magnet and lost himself in the steep narrows off Saltzman Road and the Balch Creek drainage. He took the few known facts about Frank and Ruth and blended them with the case of **Elizabeth Smart**, the Utah girl who was abducted by a crazed drifter and held for nine months in 2002-03, and that of Opal Whiteley, the woman who published a diary in 1920 that she claimed to have written as a child in Oregon. From there, all Rock needed was a healthy dose of his own imagination and a way to take his voice out of the story and replace it with that of a girl whose knowledge and experiences are wildly different from her peers.

Immersion is Rock's method of feeling what he's writing, and it doesn't stop with a walk in the park and the purchase of a toy horse. This is a guy who wrote about medical testing ("The Ambidextrist") and electrocution addiction ("The Bewildered") from the inside out and keeps images of the all-seeing eye of the Church Universal and Triumphant -- the subject of his next book -- all over his office. He got copies of the psychiatric tests Ruth might have been given after the police found her and imagined her answers in "My Abandonment":

"There are two people inside that house who are sitting next to a fire and they're warm and maybe playing chess together. They can hear the whistle of the wind and maybe that ghost hugging down on the roof but they're safe in there. They get up and look out the window at the storm since it's scary and beautiful and everything that they need they have even if the storm keeps up."

Rock downplays the lengths he goes to get inside his stories. His wife, a doctor, wouldn't let him do any drug tests. He's definitely felt some electric shocks, but during his time as a ranch hand, not while researching "The Bewildered." The Elohim of Truth, those big round eyes from the organization founded by **Elizabeth Claire Prophet** and her husband, are silently questioning him, he joked. "Are you writing our book?"

"I'm not an autobiographical writer," Rock says. "Autobiographical writers write well from their experiences and their personality, and I've always failed at that. I don't really know these people, and that's what makes them interesting."

Rock is 41 ("a young 41 -- I teach 21-year-olds") who grew up in Utah and took an unconventional route to tenure at Reed: No MFA but experience working at a cattle ranch and teaching at Penn and Yale. No coming-of-age novel but books and stories about isolation and alienation and love. Characters appear in one book and reappear in another; the connections between "The Bewildered" and "My Abandonment" are enough for a term paper, if not a thesis, and Rock will help with the research. The plots are realistic but not everything is real.

"His stories are all so different, yet they all touch on life on the fringe," says Adrienne Brodeur, his editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "They're all Pete Rock."

Rock is friendly and earnest and disarmingly open, candid about his creative process in a way that comes not from the classroom but an inner confidence. Back in his office, he joked about being reimbursed for Randy the toy horse ("Reed pays me to be curious") and explained how he wrote a list of rules about writing in a girl's voice that made it into "My Abandonment" and how that helped him overcome his distrust of child narrators.

"I've always found child narrators to be manipulative and precious, but they can convey a sense of wonder," he says. "They don't necessarily understand everything that happens to them, but the reader might. ... When I was writing this book I had to make some technical decisions about emotions and one way to do that was to limit the vocabulary. I wrote some stuff about commas -- 'commas are a place where you breathe' -- that ended up in the book, in her voice. Just laying out the rules like that changed a lot for me."

What Rock wrote was: "A comma, that is a place where you breathe, or think, which is how breathing and thinking are the same. They collect, or are places to collect. A semicolon is a strange kind of thinking that I don't understand. It is more than one sentence inside one sentence. It makes more sense to me just to let each sentence be a sentence. Father says both pieces on either side of a comma add up to the same thing, even if one side is just a list. Some of the things I need to write about: Randy, the lookouts, bodies, names, Nameless, people when they think they're alone, snow, trampolines, helicopters."

When Rock was a kid, his father read aloud to him. A favorite book in the Rock household was Ursula K. Le Guin's "A Wizard of Earthsea." Rock had Caroline, his child narrator, read it and quoted a passage in "My Abandonment." He was delighted when Le Guin read it and engaged in a friendly e-mail exchange about his use of the present tense. Le Guin provided a wonderful blurb: "This beautiful, strange novel takes us into the foreign country where those called homeless are at home, the city is wilderness, and the greater wilderness lies beyond."

Among many other things, "A Wizard of Earthsea" is about naming and the magical power of names. The hero, Sparrowhawk, has a true name known to only a few. In Rock's story and in the events that inspired it, there are issues with names everywhere you look. Remember, the police withheld the full names of Frank and Ruth from the public. In "My Abandonment," the father calls himself different names to different people and Caroline might not be her real name. Elizabeth Smart initially gave her name as Augustine after being rescued and when told her real name replied "thou sayest." Opal Whiteley thought she was descended from French royalty, not humble origins in an Oregon lumber camp, and called herself Francoise d'Orleans.

Rock's narrator, Caroline, reads a passage from "A Wizard of Earthsea" that might have been written by Thoreau and reflects on it and on her life in Forest Park:

"The magic in this place is all about naming, knowing the real name of a thing or person. Then you can control them. And a thing can be changed into another thing as long as it is renamed and the spell lasts."

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That was an interesting read. What a coincidence as well - I am reading "A Wizard of Earthsea" by Ursula nowadays. Great book so far, at least in my opinion.

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