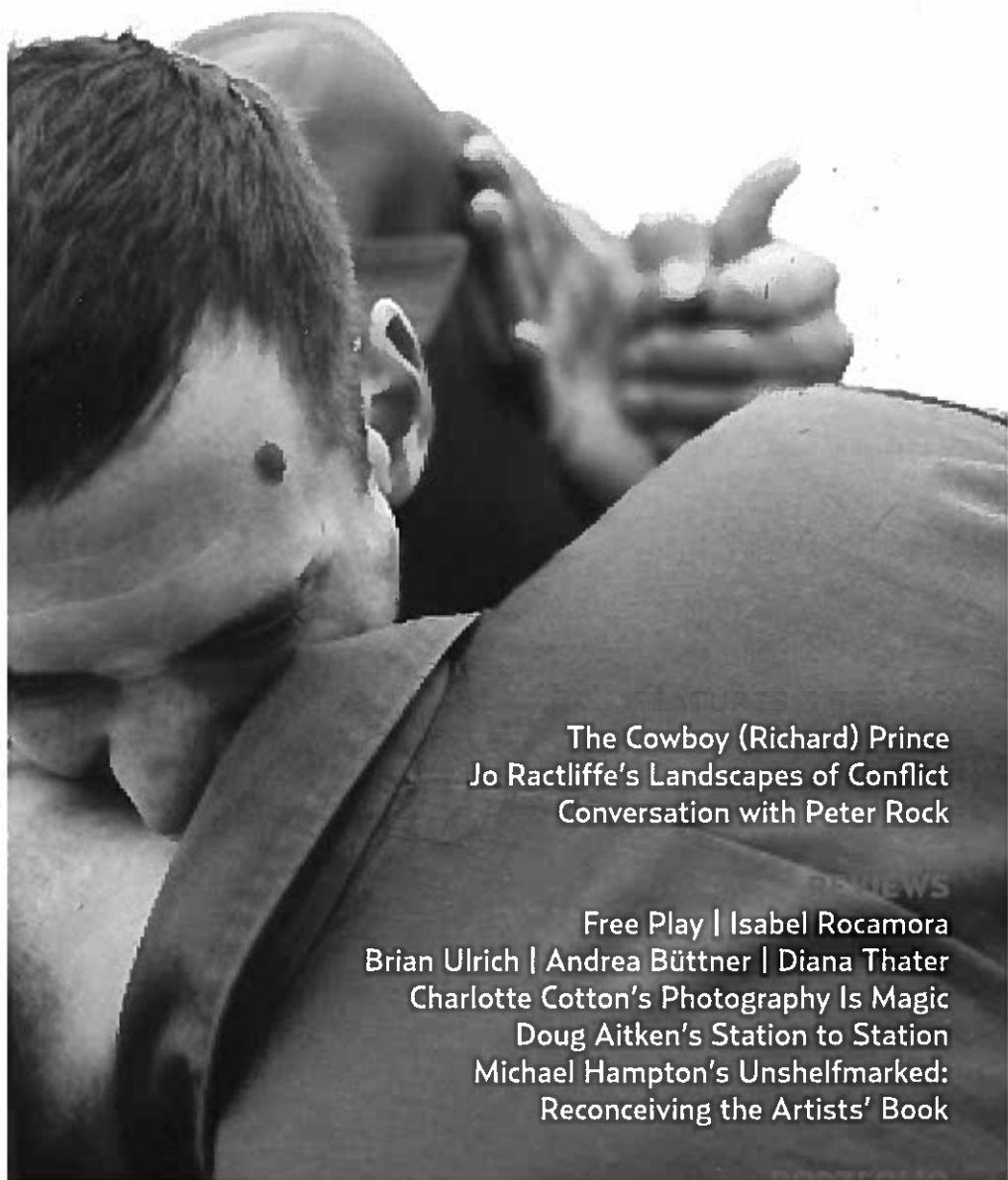


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Casting Spells: A Conversation with Peter Rock

By Stephen Longmire

The habit of speaking for pictures, bringing them to life, is as old as writing, maybe older. *Ekphrasis*, the Greeks called it. Ekphrastic poems, beginning with Homer's account of the shield of Achilles—which tells the story of creation, and everything under the sun—(re)create artworks in writing, including some that may not exist elsewhere. More recent poets have written from paintings and photographs, using them as jumping-off points to create their own worlds in words.

The novelist Peter Rock has long practiced the art of ekphrasis, though he would not call it by that name. A word he uses to describe his habit of turning to pictures for inspiration is “provocation.” His most recent project, *Spells* (2015), was provoked by the work of five photographers he invited to be his collaborators: Sophia Borazanian, Sara Lalleur-Vetter, Shaena Mallett, Peter Earl McCollough, and Colleen Plumb. Each supplied him with photographs, and he wrote stories in return. Rock calls it a “novel-within-photographs,” suggesting that the stories, some of them linked, were waiting to be found—that his job was as much archaeology as invention. A Guggenheim Fellowship, awarded in 2014, helped to finance the project, and an exhibition last fall at Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, Oregon (at the nonprofit Oregon Center for the Photographic Arts), included all forty-three photos, as well as video sequences of images with many of the thirty-one stories in voiceover narration. Blue Sky's website and The Peter Rock Project website continue to host *Spells* online. Several of the stories and accompanying photographs have appeared in literary journals (“Illuminations” in *ZZZT*, “Go-Between” in *Ploughshares*, and “To Begin Is to Start” in *Oregon Humanities*), and Rock hopes to publish the project in book form.

“Can I attach myself to a story, project myself into a picture?” asks the speaker in “Hello,” one of the first stories in *Spells*. “Is there a difference if I believe it?” It is easy to imagine Rock asking himself these questions. This is not the only time his stories have been sparked by rubbing up against real worlds outside his own. Rock's last two novels were inspired by actual events. *The Shelter Cycle* (2013) is set against the background of the millennialist faith of the Church

Universal and Triumphant, which Rock encountered while working on a ranch in Montana in the early 1990s. Adherents prepared for the end of the world by digging vast underground shelters; years later, Rock met a young woman who grew up in the church at Reed College in Portland, where he teaches creative writing and she had been a student. *My Abandonment* (2009) was his response to a news story announcing the discovery by a backcountry jogger, in Portland's wild Forest Park, of a father and daughter living in a remote camp where they had gone undetected for years, complete with a garden, library, and septic system. They were moved to a farm outside the city, where the father, a veteran, was given work and the girl sent to school, but they soon disappeared, and haven't surfaced since outside the novel.

“I've always found that a little bit of information is a good thing,” Rock says in an online video interview about *My Abandonment*, which follows him as he looks for the site of the camp. “I just started to wonder what became of them.”¹ He could be describing the way he turned for inspiration to photographs made by people he barely knew—or to the way photographs suggest whole worlds to him. In the five novels and two collections of stories Rock has published since 1997, outsiders and unsuspected lives and forces are often his subjects. This spring, his first young adult novel, *Klickitat*, will be published by Abrams Books.

This exchange occurred by email in December 2015. The participants once lived down the hall from each other, on a ranch in a remote corner of the California desert, but they hadn't “spoken” for years.

Stephen Longmire: You've said you first wrote from pictures when you worked as a guard at an art museum years ago, keeping yourself amused by making up stories about the pieces on display, remembering what you could until you could write them down on breaks. Do you remember any of those stories? Did any make it into print?

Peter Rock: There are remnants of those stories in *Carnival Wolves*. That novel came out in 1998, and I was working in the museum [the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University] around 1993 or '94. I remember the museum had a sculpture from Alberto Giacometti's *Walking Man* series (1947–60), and it was always excellent to turn the corner and see him. We had Wassily Kandinsky's *Small Pleasures* (1913) for a while, and I pulled a lot of stories out of those leaping colors.

SL: You were a captive audience, in that situation. How does that compare with your more recent experience of looking at pictures and writing about them?

PR: “Captive” is an excellent way to think about it. I was trying to free myself of the strictures of time, which is still true, and one reason to write. I chose which pieces I'd focus on. With *Spells* I also chose the images that drew me—five at a time, one from each photographer—setting aside days and weeks to stare into them and make notes. I tried not to think about what I wanted the project or any story to be, to move away from intention and let myself react. I wasn't physically confined as I was in the museum, but it was a sweet captivity. I was lost in it.



The Call of the Wild, Pennsylvania (2009) by Sara Lafleur-Vetter; © Sara Lafleur-Vetter

SL: Why did you pick the five photographers you did? You've said you wanted to know as little as possible about them, but one is a recent Reed graduate, and you mention that a conversation with another photographer prompted the project.

PR: *Spells* is a private project that surfaced unexpectedly, thanks to the Guggenheim Fellowship. It arose out of a kind of procrastination. I'm always telling my students that part of their job is to figure how to use procrastination, the ways they waste time. One way I procrastinate, when I'm close to finishing a project, or think I am, is to cast around on the web for potential cover images. I know from experience the publisher will humiliate me, then change the cover at the last moment, for "marketing reasons," claiming it's too late to discuss it, but I still do it. It's probably a meditation on the project, or the process of writing it, moving toward being separated.

The Shelter Cycle was originally titled *The Raccoon and the Letter* (and changed for "marketing reasons"), so I was looking for images of raccoons. I came upon one by someone named Peter McCollough, and sent him an email saying, "Can I use your image to show my publisher, who will later, at the last minute, not use it?" and he said "Sure." And then, later, he wrote and said, "Hey, I'll trade you a

print of that photo for a copy of the book," and I said, "That's a very bad deal for you; let's do it."

When he sent me the print, he also sent a bunch of snapshots that he thought might be interesting to me—I don't know why—and a very intense letter. It was a private communication from one stranger to another, full of big artistic questions—"When did you know this is what you were supposed to do?" "When something goes wrong in something you've made, how do you recognize that, and how have you reacted?" "When do you know when something's finished?"—interspersed with questions about love, and others like "Can you build a house with your hands?"

If someone I knew had written me this letter, I probably would have laughed it off, uncomfortably, but coming from a stranger it felt like destiny speaking to me. At that moment, I was enjoying relative success. I'd published *My Abandonment*, a book that people beyond my family actually read, and the film option was picked up, and suddenly there was an expectation of what I might write next, rather than the typical, "What, another book already?" from my agent and publisher.

I decided to set aside fifteen to twenty minutes each day to try to answer Peter's questions. More for my own sake than his, though of



Harbor (2008) by Shaena Mallett; © Shaena Mallett

course I sent him my reply. Amid those answers I wrote about how I had worked as a security guard and wrote stories from the artworks in the museum. As soon as I wrote that down, I thought: That's the kind of thing I should be doing now. Something that is a reaction—I don't know what it is going to be—something that allows me to push my voice and write in different registers, in ways I haven't.

Peter is one of the photographers in *Spells*. I told him my idea, and asked if he'd help. He made a list of photographers, and I had one too, and then I spent a month or so looking at images, bodies of work. I'd had a similar book cover conversation with Colleen Plumb, and her obsession with animals in captivity resonated with me. Sara Lafleur-Vetter did go to Reed, where I teach, but I didn't know her. She recently graduated from journalism school at Berkeley; she's in Cairo now, and has lived in Russia, and some of the more distant landscapes are thanks to her. Shaena Mallett and Sophia Borazanian brought their own atmospheres, and I could see stories in their images. Shaena often brought the wilderness, while Sophie brought the people, the city.

Peter has a remarkable sensibility, and is distrustful of photography, preferring to make films or videos, or to paint. He fought in Iraq, in Operation Desert Storm, as a Marine, and then came back to study photography. He's shot for the *Wall Street Journal*, been an editor at *Wired*, but is restless in a way I admire. He knows Shaena and Sophie from school, but I didn't know that when I selected them.

SL: Did you consider any other photographers? Did any say no?

PR: It was a long list of potential photographers. The first five I asked—and it was a vague invitation, merely saying I wanted to write from their photographs, to collaborate, that I

didn't have any idea what form it would take, or if it would ever leave my basement—replied so enthusiastically that I knew it was a sign. I didn't want to know anything about the photographers or the places or people or times of the photographs. I wanted my reaction to be similar to the way we all react when confronted with a photograph we know nothing about. We wonder, *What is happening? Who is that? What just happened? What could happen? What sort of weather is this?*

Once I'd written several dozen stories, the project had its own weather and atmosphere, and I was in contact with the photographers with some frequency, so it became less important to keep my distance. In the five or so years since I started, I've met them all except for Sophie, and spent time with them. Amazing, generous, strange

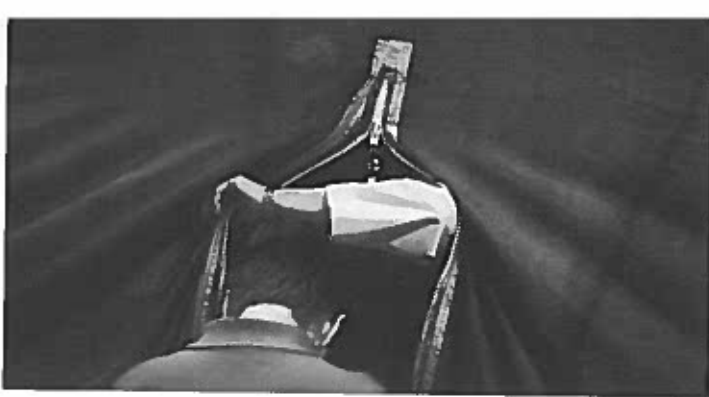
people. It's fascinating to hear how the stories I've pulled from their images often resonate with something intrinsic to the situation or the taking of the photographs.

I asked for twenty-five or thirty images and said, "I don't want what people think are your best photos, but the ones that you feel most strongly about." Some sent thirty, some sent one hundred, but I just proceeded, five at a time. Often the images that caused me to choose a photographer—the thrilling, startling ones—didn't find their way into *Spells*. As I went on, what I had written had an effect on my choices.

SL: On Blue Sky Gallery's website, you suggest "One way to think of it is that the stories . . . were already embedded in the photographs." Is this what you mean when you call *Spells* a "novel-within-photographs" on your website?

PR: I tried not to treat the photographs as *photographs*—not to consider them as artifacts, or wonder who took them, or muse on cameras or the gaze—but to see them as glimpses into other worlds, and then I tried to enter those worlds. I wanted to suggest that the relationship between the photographs is a continuous narrative, that they're bound together by a story, but that the stories arose from the images. The images came first and are not illustrations.

I just wanted to write some stories. These days I teach the story and write the novel. To write well, I have to be deeply confused, or in flux, and write my way out of that. With stories, I've become so dangerously adept at talking about technical matters, structures, decisions; too self-conscious. I also wanted to write in different registers. Much of my work in the past ten years has been about trying to let the prose be less apparent or



Hole in the Earth (2007) by Peter Earl McCullough; © Peter Earl McCullough

showy, to let it disappear. I wanted to push the language a little—to write prose poems, tales.

I wanted to remove intention from what I was doing—to just take one step at a time. This is also related to teaching. I needed a project that would allow me to write in smaller increments, while teaching full time, where fifteen to twenty minutes could be a productive amount of time. With *The Shelter Cycle*, I had this one-thousand-page manuscript, and I'd go down to my office and look at it, shed a few tears, and then come back upstairs.

Once I had twelve or thirteen stories, connections started to suggest themselves, repetitions began to emerge. Many of the pieces don't relate directly to the more realistic narrative of Naomi, Sonja, and Alex, but I believed they were part of the same weather, or atmosphere, or world. The danger when writing stories that are linked is worrying about larger coherences in a way that hurts the internal tension and focus of the stories. I struggled with this in *Carnival Wolves*. The last stories, written when I knew the structure, seem too anxious about making connections, rather than developing their own obsessions.

Decisions about where the larger story went, and the images I chose as I moved forward and sideways, were determined by the pool of images I had. It's beyond coincidence how many dogs and bears I had from these five photographers, and the sheer number of seemingly decapitated bodies, heads cut off by a photograph's frame. So these were repetitions, rhythms that I gathered, wrote my way into.

The images presented challenges, and these became opportunities. If the characters were going to repeat and continue, that put pressure on the images of people. I had so few of the same person, I had to account for why characters looked different in different stories.

SL: You speak of the stories becoming a collective whole, but also say you want readers/viewers to be able to begin with any of the images/installments—a digital way of reading, more web-like than linear. How do you see the project as a whole?

PR: I don't have a sense of it having to be just one thing. It can be accessed in any number of ways. While there is a chronology, a series of causes and events, part of the project's nature is to play with time, to ask: "Why not the effect before the cause? Do shadows have to be cast by bodies, or might they be independent? What about ghosts? Do dreams generate dreamers?"

It's a project that can be entered at any place that a reader/viewer finds intriguing, followed in any direction. Perhaps one

A Conversation with Colleen Plumb

Stephen Longmire: How did you first hear from Pete, and how did he see your work?

Colleen Plumb: Pete wrote to me in 2012 about a photograph he wanted to propose as a cover for an upcoming book. I am not sure how he found my work. I think he came across my book, *Animals Are Outside Today* (2011). It was the most abstract image in the book. The blurred raccoon fills the frame, layered with reflections of museum lights and a vitrine from across the gallery. I feel as though that raccoon was free to roam in that picture outside of his glass house and stuffed body.

I was surprised and thrilled by his email—at the prospect of my raccoon being used on his cover. Shortly afterwards, he wrote with the *Spells* idea. I was immediately on board, captivated by the idea. Pete was proposing a cross of worlds. I am in awe of writers and their process, so to have my photographs out there in his hands, participating, was appealing to me.

SL: What did he ask of you, and what was your initial reaction?

CP: He told me about his idea. I especially remember that he wanted to challenge himself, to do something new. "The main thing is just to put myself in an uncomfortable situation, to provoke myself, to see what happens," he wrote, "but in the process I hope to make something beautiful." I was intrigued. I wondered what he'd write, which images he'd select. I loved the mystery. It was also scary because I had zero control. I like to know what is going to happen, but in this case I was open to finding out later. I sent a set of about thirty pictures. He mentioned a few, and they acted as guides—opening up my choices. It was liberating to edit more instinctively, rather than being project driven.

SL: Did the experience of this project change how you see your work?

CP: I think that the process influenced me to take more seriously some images I considered just family pictures. I have since been building that work with more clarity and intention. I was more open to images with metaphoric or emotional intentions. The work is about experiencing motherhood, being part of a family, and all of the resulting contradictions. Despair in the morning followed by utter joy and gratitude two hours later.

SL: Have you met or communicated with any of the other photographers who participated in *Spells*?

CP: No, but I'd like to. There are four other artists out there, and we are connected in this cool way. It's like our kids are friends, but the parents don't know each other.

SL: Did it change how you see the relationships between photographs and text? Between photographs and stories?

CP: I think the audio component—the actress telling the stories—is an awesome aspect of the project. It becomes a spoken word piece that blows everything away.

When I watch the video *What is Known* [from *Spells*], listening to the story, I experience something so strange, because the photograph I made of the polar bears at the San Diego Zoo becomes something else. I look at it more objectively and wonder who the people are in the reflection. I remember that day, with so many spectators in awe of the wrestling bears, pushing their giant paws against the plexiglass tank. It was a moment of conflict for me; their enclosure is one millionth their natural roaming area, but they were playing and seemed happy, and everyone was mesmerized. Zoos are such a conundrum. That encapsulated moment is the best of what zoos can offer, but there is much more to their captive life, and it's not a good deal for them at all.

The video uses a detail of my original image, which normally would bother me, but it is as if it is no longer my image, it is ours—Pete's, the video artist's who made it wave, the slow movement that flows with the story. I feel that they made it more alive. I would never have predicted that my images could look the way they do. The power of the story changes them so much. It is probably because I am close to the images and can't see them anymore, and Pete's story allows me to see them again, like I did on the initial contact sheet—the purest, first looking. Once I begin to work with an image, I have to work hard to see it, and *Spells* delivers them back to me in a deeply emotional way.

—STEPHEN LONGMIRE

will eventually experience all the pieces, and stop, or keep going. My hope is that smaller subsets also suggest the whole.

I thought of Julio Cortazar's novel *Hopscotch* (1966), about how it has different potential iterations, and how in the preface he says the reader may proceed in various directions "with a clear conscience." And of what Alice Munro says in the preface to her *Selected Stories* (1996), where she recounts never reading—or writing—stories from beginning to end:

A story is not like a road to follow . . . it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more

than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself, of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you.²

SL: Are you still working on *Spells*?

PR: My projects aren't so much finished as abandoned. At some point I can't think what else to do, or I lose energy, or my energy is elsewhere. With *Spells*, a couple of years ago I thought I was getting close to understanding it, and decided that if I wrote five or ten more pieces I'd be able to connect everything in a satisfying way. That was the only time I asked the photographers for specific images—ones on their websites, which they hadn't given me. I wrote those stories, and had a total of about fifty. After reading through them and letting them settle, I realized I had been mistaken; I didn't need more stories, I needed *fewer*. So I took out the new ones and some others that felt repetitious, or too concerned with making connections, and then things seemed to move more easily. It's better to show that something is fragmentary, rather than suggest connections that might distract a reader.

I'm still working on *Spells* in the sense of talking about it and trying to find a publisher, but the writing is done. I'm elsewhere. Having the gallery show forced me to make some decisions about what was in and what was out, and how it worked.

SL: So far, *Spells* exists as a YouTube video (2015), with images, voiceover narration, music, and occasional graphic effects, and as a collection of images with recorded readings online, which lets the viewer/listener determine the order. It's also been a gallery show. Do you prefer one of these versions? You'd like the project to be a book. How would that be different? Why is that important to you?

PR: The gallery, the web, the performance, the book—they're all pieces of the same thing. That said, I am a book person. In my experience of making things, I only feel something is complete, that it's moved from project to product and away from me, when it's published as a book. This project confounds because of these many iterations, but also because—naively—I had no clue about the cost of printing so many color images.

I'd like to think of *Spells* as something that someone would have in their house and pick up from time to time, look through the photographs (they're beautiful!) and make up their own stories, then gradually read pieces and take it all in. It's hard to interact with it in the gallery in that way. That may happen for some people online, but not for me. I don't like to write on computers or read on them, either. They are machines.

I feel a book is less time-sensitive, more human. I like the weight, the silence, the ability to control the speed at which one proceeds. That said, both the audio and video versions do things, in terms of simultaneity, that a book cannot.

SL: *Spells* currently consists of thirty-one stories and forty-three photos. In some cases, more than one photo is associated with a story in the video. How did this work in the gallery?

PR: In the gallery, the challenge is to involve the viewer. It's a lot to ask someone to stand in front of a still image and listen to a story, streaming through a phone or some other device, for several minutes. Is it too much? This was always the question.

Early in the gallery process, we found Matt Eller, who did the video work, and John Askew, who did the sound design and engineering. There was a moment when we thought the entire show would consist of videos, but it was so labor intensive, for people who weren't getting paid. So we picked a subset of stories, and I suggested other images from the show, and a few I hadn't used, to incorporate. I like the videos, but I see them as a window into the project. They include only ten stories, but it takes an hour and a half to listen to them. The whole project might take five or six hours, as a film.

In the gallery, there was a big room with all the images and instructions about how the stories could be accessed. There was a smaller room with a projector playing the videos. There was a loop of ten stories, and a menu that allowed you to jump to any of the other nine.

I was consistently blown away by how forgiving and generous the photographers were. Everything I asked, they eagerly gave. I started to understand why when Matt and John started working on the videos and score. They'd send me emails at 2:00 a.m., devoting so much time and attention to something I'd put together. I think the photographers had the same gratitude for all those hours I spent staring into their images.

SL: How important is it to you that the images you've written from are photographs?

PR: It was important. The photograph grounds something that is made up, serving as a kind of evidence. It was a helpful limitation, but perhaps in the future more latitude would be interesting. When I was a security guard, paintings—especially abstract ones—lasted longer as generators of stories.

SL: Do you tell your daughters [ages six and eight] ghost stories? It seems to me you tell them to the rest of us. Your next book, *Klickitat*,

Untitled (2007) by Peter Earl McCollough; © Peter Earl McCollough



The Hill (2009) by Peter Earl McCollough; © Peter Earl McCollough

is a young adult novel featuring girls who disappear—a familiar subject to you. What is the relationship between storytelling and writing for you?

PR: I do tell my daughters ghost stories. And read them books my dad read to me—Ursula K. Leguin's *Earthsea* cycle (1964–2001), and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56) by C.S. Lewis. And new favorites like the complete *Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1932–1943), and *The Boxcar Children* by Gertrude Chandler Warner (1924).

One thing we writers do is explore our greatest fears. I never know why I'm writing what I'm writing, or what it means, although sometimes later I have a clue. I finished *My Abandonment* while awaiting the birth of my first daughter, and that book describes my anxiety about what it might mean to be a father, to have answers, to set an example. In *Klickitat*, two sisters decide their parents are not their parents, or are unsuitable, and abandon them. That's pretty close to home.

Engaging another person, working hard to make something worth their time, is part of the pleasure of making a thing, too, so the stories I tell my daughters at night are both practice and validation, a challenge to create a familiarity that becomes unfamiliar, to surprise us all.

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NOTES 1. YouTube video uploaded by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, January 28, 2009, publicizing *My Abandonment*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABESCcZPJ14>. 2. Alice Munro, *Selected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), xx–xxi.



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