

FLIPPING POINT

THOUGHTS ON "WHY BOTHER?"



BARRY R.
NORMAN

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Having just turned 59, author Barry Norman is dealing with the most existential crisis any of us can have - the desire to continue. Dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts for most of his life has made him wonder if there is a connection to his brain function and the events that have dotted his life. Now, with no family left except his 15-year-old diabetic and blind dog, Scooter, he pondered the need to bother anymore with continuing. So, he embarked on a stream of consciousness period of writing to see if there was any pattern in his life that could give him clues to how he has felt and how he is feeling right now. He flashes back and forward among the years of his life, and finds both the humor and agony of the events and relationships that have made the biggest impressions on him. But, has it given him any answers?

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Barry R. Norman

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Mendoza Line

I turn 59 today. As long as I can remember, I thought that 60 would be the maximum – kind of like the Medoza Line for me. As a teen, I always used to say “give me a fast 40.” Getting old was for suckers – a Game of Life that had no real winner, and playing it that long would only result in my becoming everything I loathed – a slow walking-driving schmuck that was always too damn hot or too damn cold and walked around on legs that looked like two seven irons in a golf bag.

Nope. Not for me.

And now that I’m a year away, and I have no family except my true soul mate – a soon-to-be 15 year old blind, diabetic schnoodle named Scooter; no friends and a business that just might be on its last legs, I thought that this might be a good time to keep a journal or a diary or whatever this is. Not that I think my random musings will be of any interest to anyone, and that is making a Peter Leap of Faith that anyone will actually see this – but it might help me figure out the famous Talking Head line from “Once in a Life time” – “Well, how did I get here?”

I am currently writing this in the hollowed “office” of my little one-screen, movie theater in Brunswick, Maine. It’s located in the Tontine Mall, which sits on what once was the Tontine Hotel – Brunswick’s pre-eminent hotel from 1828 – 1904 when it burned down. It later became a garage for a local car dealership until converting to a movie theater in 1979. I bought it in 2010. It’s 5’6” ceilings has already caused me to have one surgery and undoubtedly will lead to several more unless my childhood prediction makes that all moot. Hopefully, if anyone is reading

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this, they won't skip to the end to see if the final chapter is written in blood with the final word trailing off like the line of a heart monitor just before the last breath. Truth be told, that is possible. Hope I haven't given anything away.

Where's the Party?

I could never get Peter to go to parties. I thought this would change once we got our driver's licenses but the pattern remained the same. We would be setting up one of his Avalon Hill board games which simulated various, World War II battles such as Battle of the Bulge or Guadalcanal, which would actually take longer the game itself. I would casually mention a party that I got wind of.

"So Peter, there's a party tonight. Wanna go?"

"Sounds good to me."

That actually meant no. Peter had multiple methods of saying no without ever uttering the dreaded word.

"There is a 94.2% chance of us going.

No.

"It has definite possibilities.

No.

Of course there was no break in our game set-up, and eventually, as Peter destroyed my army at Bastogne or St. Vichy, I would try a more emphatic approach.

"So do you want to go or not?"

"I don't want to go. You go."

Played again. No way a geek like me was going anywhere without back up – not in high school, so this game-within-the-game would be repeated ad infinitum with nary a party attended. But Peter's mom always kept lots of ice cream, whipped cream, nuts and

jimmies on hand for massive sundae consumption, and as I was often exiled from my house without supper by my step-mother, having this haven for gastronomical gluttony next door was a life saver. So if the downside was that no party would ever be attended (for the most part – we did have some interesting gadflies in our social circle in which party attendance was not a tooth-pulling affair), the upside to banishment sans food was that I always ate better there than at home, without the soul-crushing exposition of my personality which was always step-mother's favorite dinner conversation.

Smoking Prohibited; Except This One Time

I love everything about cigarettes even though I hate everything about smoking. As a kid, I hated watching my mom smoke but loved getting her cigarettes from a machine when we went out to eat. She would give me 30 cents to get them from the vending machine near the bathrooms. You drop the money in and then pull on a handle so far you would end up in the next room, and then a small, barely discernible “thump” would let you know that the pack descended like the Times Square Ball if it was made out of marshmallows. And her brand was the distinguished sounding Parliament. I loved watching all of the cigarette ads on TV back when the government didn’t care if you ended up coughing a lung up during your tax audit. The Marlboro Man could make a straight kid like me fall in love with the sight of pure, male virility. Benson & Hedges had these cute ads that were really a Commie plot to indoctrinate us to the metric system by claiming that their cancer sticks were just a “silly millimeter longer.” Even Fred Flintstone hawked Winstons. And the only thing I liked more than the cigarette ads were the anti-smoking ads. Tony Curtis would give this beatific smile while he claimed, “I quit . . . cigarettes, that is,” as he eyed the long-stemmed gal that passed in front of him. One ad would have me looking at the screen dreamy-eyed as it depicted the glorious relationship between father and young son – doing everything together – painting the house, skipping stones and finally relaxing lakeside as dad reached for his pack of butts, followed by junior, all the time voice-over would chant, “like father, like son . . .” My dad was an OB/GYN and we never did anything together. His beeper made damn sure of that. So if

smoking was something that would bring us together, I was all for it, even if it meant developing a hacking cough by age six.

Except my mom's smoking bothered the shit out of me. She had lupus and my early memories of her going outside were her wearing a hat that made a sombrero look like a yarmulke. When I was 8, the family moved from West Medford to Winchester just so we could get a ranch house as her varicose veins meant that she couldn't climb stairs anymore. Winchester, in the late 60's, was something of a neo Nazi enclave and I was the only Jewish kid in the entire school, and had my little ass kicked almost daily to that little inconvenient truth. My dad formed a faux group called WASP – Winchester Association of Semitic People.

But not long after moving to Winchester, my mom suffered a heart attack and not long after that, she died of a brain hemorrhage. Years later, my dad blamed the Cumatin she was prescribed after the heart attack, but I always blamed her smoking habit. She died at age 49 – 11 days after my eleventh birthday. My older sister developed the habit at a young age, and SHE died at age 54 from breast cancer. So as much pleasure cigarette procurement and advertising gave me, I never tried them.

Except once. My eighth grade girlfriend made me. My dad had remarried and created our new, nuclear family with his wife's two kids – one my age and one two years older. David was my age and like his older brother, was an exceptional athlete and much bigger than I was. So after I declared that I would no longer be going to private school (necessitated by the incessant beatings), we entered the 8th grade together and my first two girlfriends were girls that he dated first. I figured getting his sloppy seconds sure did beat the frustrating longings spent in one year of all male private school.

So I'm hanging out with Paula in my room and she decides to light one up, which freaked me out considering it took very little

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prompting for my dad to smack me around or my step-mother to declare my Damien-like presence in her home. But I was also massively impressed by the balls she had, considering my lack figuratively and literally. She then turns the butt around and tells me to take a puff. When I sheepishly decline, she said that I would not be able to kiss her again until I did. So my first subjugation to blackmail worked and I took a drag, hoping I wouldn't do the uncool cough attack like you do on your first bong hit. I can't remember if I did or didn't but I am assuming on that front that my subconscious is doing a major job of repressing.

30 years from then, I have moved in with my sister in Florida after the disintegration of my 2nd marriage. She was in remission from her cancer and I thought it would be good for me to get out of Atlanta and my crappy job at Cartoon Network (just because it sounds cool, there is no making the job of Prelog Coordinator sound anything but drone-like), and to help my sister out who had gone through her second b out with cancer in 25 years.

I was looking for a job and went to the local stereo store chain, Sound Advice, as I like being around audio equipment. They pointed me out to the manager – a huge man of about 300 very loose pounds. After a short discussion that didn't seem to go anywhere, he was about to dismiss me when I picked up on his accent and asked if he was from Boston.

“No, but my wife is. Maybe I picked it up from her.”

“What part of Boston?”

“Brookline.”

“Really, that's where I'm from. Did she go to Brookline High School?”

“Yes.”

“When did she graduate?”

“1975.”

“OK – that’s my year, too. What is her name.”

“Paula.”

“Oh no. Was her last name Eismann??”

“Yes.”

“OK. She was my 8th grade girlfriend. The only puff from a cigarette I ever took, she made me!”

He immediately got out his cell phone, hit a button and handed me the phone. A woman’s voice answered.

“Is this Paula Eismann?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Barry Norman.”

Oh my God. My 8th grade boyfriend that I forced to take a puff from a cigarette!”

Nothing is so elating than to be remembered for something so long ago and so trivial in the context of things.

I didn’t get the job.

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