Writerville, USA: The cusp between town and country

Below is the blog from David Kipen, National Endowment for the Arts’ literature director, who recently visited Oak Park to promote the Big Read program through the Oak Park Public Library. It was posted Thursday, Sept. 27:

Two things I learned in Oak Park, Illinois: 1) roughly a third of the world’s fresh water is in the Great Lakes, and 2) roughly a third of America’s creativity grew up or flowered in Oak Park. OK, I’m exaggerating, but it’s not just Oak Park-reared Ernest Hemingway, the Big Read of whose (A Farewell to Arms) recently brought me to this idyllic village on the outskirts of Chicago.

Just check out this honor roll of American writing, born or bred in Oak Park (deep breath): Charles Simic, America’s new poet laureate; poet Kenneth Fearing, whose mystery novels include The Generous Heart (my boss’ favorite) and The Big Clock, later adapted by Jonathan Latimer into a terrific film noir with Ray Milland and Charles Laughton; Charles MacArthur, who co-wrote The Front Page with Ben Hecht and once, when writing for the Chicago papers about a dentist accused of taking liberties with his female patients, improvised the headline “Dentist Fills Wrong Cavity”; Carol Shields, who wrote The Stone Diaries and other lovely novels; Edgar Rice Burroughs, who created Tarzan and improbably gave my boss the reading bug with his novel Princess of Mars; and, so you shouldn’t think Oak Park’s distinctions are strictly literary, Frank Lloyd Wright. Not bad for a town Hemingway chided for its “broad lawns and narrow minds”—though if you can cough up a provable citation for that quote, still-skeptical Oak Parkers will stand you to lunch.

Why would so much talent cluster in one place? According to local Redd Griffin, there’s a theory in Malcolm Cowley’s definitive book A Second Flowering to the effect that the best writers come from the penumbra between town and country. There, the young artist grows up equidistant from, and responsive to, big-city sophistication and natural beauty alike.

I say if you really want literary greatness, see to it that your father goes bankrupt. I’m serious. Fitzgerald, Dickens, Steinbeck, Nabokov, Hemingway, quite probably Shakespeare—each of these had his social awareness sharpened from an early age as a failure’s son. Anyway, that’s my hypothesis and I’m sticking to it.

The Oak Park Public Library and its partners are showing visitors and their neighbors such a good time this month, yet here I am muttering away about genius clusters. My two days in Oak Park began with a screening of the 1932 A Farewell to Arms, expertly intro’d and outro’d by genial film studies prof Doug Deuc-

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Calm down. Things OK in River Forest, says Trustee Susan Conti

Oak Park stories

Jay Ruby’s work helps locals understand themselves

Editor’s note: In anticipation of the 40th anniversary next May of the passage of Oak Park’s landmark Fair Housing Ordinance, we’re beginning a monthly discussion of the continuing challenges diversity poses for our village—based on the work of Temple University anthropologist Jay Ruby, who recently completed an extensive “ethnography” of his former hometown, titled “Oak Park Stories.”

By BOB TREZEVANT

What is it about anniversaries and reunions that catches our attention? For one thing, they keep us connected to the history we are a part of and the sequence of stories that just keeps unfolding. For another thing, they provide benchmarks against which we can measure changes that keep our stories interesting. In other words, they lead us to reflect on our experience and wonder what might happen next.

Take the year 2008, for example. In the spring of next year, just a few months from now, Oak Parkers will be marking the 40th anniversary of its fair housing ordinance, passed by the Village Board of Trustees in May of 1968. The vote came after weeks of heated debate and stormy public hearings, as noted by local sociologist Carole Goodwin in her definitive book, The Oak Park Strategy: Community Control of Racial Change (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

The trustees’ momentous vote in 1968 had itself been preceded by the formation of the Village Community Relations Commission in 1963, which marks its 45th anniversary next year as well.

That commission, as noted by Goodwin, was created in direct response to an incident involving the Oak Park Symphony Orchestra in which a newly hired black musician was first prohibited, then allowed to play.

The threat of housing resegregation occupied the public’s attention. Oak Parker Roberta (Bobbie) Raymond (OPRF grad, 1955) stayed in Oak Park and became the founder of the Village Community Relations Commission, which in 1963 passed the Fair Housing Ordinance, which in 1968 became federal law.

That is why the 2008 anniversary is so important. It’s a time to celebrate the gains we have made, to enjoy the journey and to appreciate that, while there is much more to be done, we’ve come a long way.

CAPTURING DIVERSITY:
Jay Ruby left Oak Park after high school vowing to leave its stuffy, restricted ways behind. He returned 35 years later to find a much different place.

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and first director of the Oak Park Housing Center, which opened in 1972, 36 years ago next May. Raymond, and others supporting the work of what is now the Oak Park Regional Housing Center, facilitated profound changes in the sociological profile of Oak Park, from racially exclusive to ethnically and socially diverse. As a result of these and other efforts, Oak Park became a nationally recognized model for integration.

Reunited

And reunions? Next year also marks the 55th reunion of the Oak Park and River Forest High School class of 1953, Jay Ruby’s graduating class. A contemporary of Bobbie Raymond, he left Oak Park after graduating, planning never to return to the social and cultural restrictions he found here. Ruby went on to earn his Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA and became the founder of the visual anthropology program of studies at Temple University in Philadelphia. Ruby’s professional resume can be found at http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby. His separation from Oak Park and his extensive field experience would make it possible for him to later see the village with fresh eyes.

But for a long time, indifferent to his high school reunions, he remained unfamiliar with the changes that were taking place here. Through a professional encounter with a classmate, he learned about his 35th reunion in 1988, so he and his wife Janis decided to return to the village out of idle curiosity. Janis was immediately impressed by the village’s beauty.

Ethnography

Jay’s response was to become curious about his home community from his professional perspective as an anthropologist. After reading Goodwin’s book in the mid-’90s, he became convinced that Oak Park would provide an excellent venue for a full ethnographic study. The changes in his hometown seemed so significant that he wanted to understand what had happened and why. He also knew such a study would serve as the culmination project of his 40-year career. By the time of his 45th reunion in 1998 he had planned the work and started the interviews. It also became an extension of Jay Ruby’s own story in Oak Park.

The study required spending extensive periods of time in the community. He sat in on numerous meetings and events, conducted wide-ranging personal interviews, selected specific residents for video interviews, and collected all the relevant scholarly documentation related to the topics that arose from them. From 1999 to 2005, he and Janis spent six summers and one sabbatical academic year living in the village, the amount of time necessary for a true ethnography.

The sequence of reports that resulted from this creative period can be viewed at http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp. The completed work was published as Oak Park Stories on four CD-ROMs and one DVD in 2006. He has since deposited 12 boxes containing all his research materials with the Historical Society of Oak Park-River Forest for use by scholars and any other interested individuals.

The Oak Park project forced Ruby to solve the professional challenge of, as it were, studying his own people. Traditionally, the inherent lack of objectivity would seem to undermine such a project’s validity. But contemporary ethnographers now acknowledge such objectivity was never possible in the first place. Instead, they embrace personal reflexivity, in which their own familiarity with the subject actually strengthens the research. It is just this kind of community reflection for which Oak Parkers are notorious. Ruby simply has a much larger context to place us in—and he has no personal political agenda.

Innovative format

The format of Oak Park Stories is also innovative. Rather than writing a conventional book, Ruby knew that by using CD-ROMs he could combine written text, photographs, and video, thus creating a digitally diverse ethnographic report. Each disk can be used interactively on a computer, combining a book length text, a photo essay, and film, all viewed at the user’s discretion and enhanced by internal links. A clear table of contents appears at the beginning of each story so the user can enter the story from any one topic and continue at will. Each of the four CD-ROMs and one DVD can be purchased separately or as a set from Documentary Educational Resources by phone at 617/926-0491, by e-mail at docued@wwwder.org. The complete set is available at the Oak Park Public Library and at the Historical Society.

Five ‘stories’

Oak Park Stories presents diversity in the village from five different perspectives, told in the form of portraits. The first, “The Taylor Family Portrait,” depicts a middle-class, African-American family whose members exemplify the history, values, and aspirations needed to sustain racial diversity in the village. The second story, “Rebekah & Sophie,” portrays a family that lived through the gay civil rights battles of the ’80s and ’90s, staying in Oak Park to advocate for and raise their family in one of the most gay-friendly communities in the nation. The third story, “Dear Old Oak Parkers,” profiles three generations of a traditional white family whose members helped to actively transform the community into the integrated, gay-friendly place it has become (my own participation is included in this story). The fourth story, simply titled, “Val” (the only DVD in the series), is a 30-minute video interview with the owner of the local record store Val’s hall. She muses about the changing role of such independent stores and about the counterculture scene in the village. And the fifth story, “Oak Park Regional Housing Center,” portrays that unique organization which has for almost four decades spearheaded the village’s quest to achieve and maintain a geographically integrated community.

In the next several months, other local writers will react to one of these five stories in Ruby’s series. The writers will be chosen because of their familiarity with the subject and their active involvement in it. The purpose is not so much to preview or review the work itself but to share their knowledgeable reflection on the story in the light of their own experience. The hope is that each writer’s response will then stimulate others to respond in writing to the issues that surface. An even better result would be the generation of both private and public discussions that generalize from the stories and keep their import moving forward, helping us to wonder just what might happen next.

Bob Trezevant is a 30-year resident of the village, a member of the Historical Society of Oak Park-River Forest, a member of the housing subcommittee of the village’s Diversity Task Force in 2000, and a participant in Ruby’s study.