



The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership

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Now in paperback for the first time, Berry's popular collection of six interconnected stories traces his Port William characters through the Depression up to the 1950s.

The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership Details

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Suzy says

Wendell Berry's stories about the "membership" of the fictional community of Port William, Kentucky never fail to astound and delight me. In a world filled with slipshod and poorly written fiction, seemingly dashed off with an eye on becoming the next bestseller or blockbuster screenplay, there is nothing reckless or mediocre about Berry's writing. Every word seems to have been weighed and considered before being placed. The pace of each of these stories is leisurely, careful ... but in no way ponderous. And the characters ... once you have read several Port William novels, many of the characters become old friends: the Catletts, the Coulters, the Feltners, Old Jack Beechum, the Penns. I have known them intimately as children, into adulthood, through births, illnesses, and deaths. They are hard working, kind, and decent people, people I wished I knew in my everyday life. Another thing that strikes me about Berry's stories is that they are entirely devoid of cynicism. There is no gratuitous anything here. They are suffused with Berry's land stewardship ethic, which he clearly considers to be inextricably linked with how people should be treated. Maybe his writing won't appeal to everyone, but personally, every time I come back to Port William I feel as if I am coming home.

Jordan Kinsey says

The beauty of Berry's prose, and the deep, guttural, DNA-level at which I connect to it, is something I can't express in words.

Sandra says

Knocked my socks off. Better go put them back on -- then maybe I can write a proper review.

Dee Mills says

Where to begin? Wendell Berry writes to my heart. He has such a way of speaking so clearly. I was totally taken with these people of Port William. I found myself stopping every so often and thinking of such people and those like them that I have known. Good people, hard-working. It rang of times past, and maybe that was part of the appeal for me. I did get melancholic with several of the stories and the effect is still with me. I imagine I will be dwelling in Port William for awhile yet.

Julie says

Ahh, more Port William stories. It's like going home and seeing the same people there again and again.

Loved this quote. Mat Feltner is 80 yrs. old and strolling through the woods he's lived near for decades - I believe I've felt this way before:

"Such a little piece of the world as he has before him now would be worth a man's long life, watching and listening. And then he could go two hundred feet and live again another life, listening and watching, and his eyes would never be satisfied with seeing, nor his ears filled with hearing. Whatever he saw could be seen only by looking away from something else equally worth seeing..." "I could stay here a long time," he thinks. "I could stay here a long time."

John Benson says

Last fall, I read all eight of Wendell Berry's Port William novels, but now thought I would complete the picture by adding the short story collections that fill out the pictures of this fictional community. These six stories cover the years from 1930 to 1967 and center on the Catlett family. As you read these books, you get to know these families and this place intimately. The stories seem to bring out some of the minor characters in some of the novels and tell their story more fully. Wheeler Catlett, a member of the community but a lawyer residing in nearby Hargrave, KY, is involved in three of these stories. He was often mentioned in passing in the novels, but now is center stage in some of these stories. I really have enjoyed getting to know this fictional place and all the families through these novels and collection of short stories.

Susan Oleksiw says

In six stories set in rural Kentucky and linked by recurring characters, Wendell Berry creates a mesmerizing world called Port William and the people who live in it. The main character in each is a lawyer named Wheeler Catlett, whose childhood on a farm, and the understanding of land and our place on it, is the window through which he views the thirty-plus years of the stories. In the first story, "Thicker Than Liquor," Wheeler learns tolerance and acceptance when called on to rescue the black sheep of his wife's family, his Uncle Peach, an alcoholic and never-do-well. In "Where Did They Go?" (1947), Wheeler's son is directed to work on a farm for the summer, an experience that his father longs to have as well. The sense of order Wheeler strives to find in the land and its people comes to the fore in "It Wasn't Me" (1953), when Jack Beechum dies and his farm is put up for sale by his daughter, who sees only how much she can get for it, not what her father had hoped would happen. An old man discovers the lay of his land one last time in "The Boundary" (1965), and everyone comes together to bring in the harvest in "That Distant Land" (1965). In the final story, "The Wild Birds" (1967), Wheeler is nearing retirement, and thinking all that comes to mind at such a time, when his rougher cousin Burley Coulter comes to him with nephew and niece to ask to have his will drawn up. When he names his heir, Wheeler is surprised and tries to talk him out of it. But Burley is determined, and gradually Wheeler is persuaded. In the persuading the fullness of Burley's life is understood, and through that Wheeler and Burley see each other without the coverings of place and history, their character beneath reputations.

Wendell Berry writes with deep compassion and feeling for life lived on and through land. Better than almost any other writer he conveys what tourists never see when they pass through rural areas picturesque because of their quaint poverty. His characters are richly imagined and their landscapes minutely described.

Chrisiant says

More calm, thoughtful stories of the Port William membership. I think my favorite of the six was the older fellow going for a walk in the woods to mend a fence and communing with all the men who had gone before him on trips to mend this fence before, when he was a child with the elders, then when he had children with them and the generation above him, and now, having left the care of the fence to the generations below him but wanting to go check just in case. The description of a long walk in the woods in the body of an 80 year-old - looking carefully for each step, remembering what it was to have a body that responded easily to your brain and bounded along undaunted and realizing how different it is now - was just beautiful.

The pro-farming/agrarian agenda was a little more blatant here than in Jayber Crow. On to more Wendell!

Barbara Richardson says

I so admire Berry's deftness, with language and subtleties of thought. It's as if Henry James had a quieter younger nephew from rural Kentucky. I admire Berry's consistency of vision—we are united by our life's devotion to place—and yet, fiction requires conflict to make its strongest claim on us. Berry's Port Williams residents lack differences. Only Burley Coulter, in the final story, dares live his life differently, by loving a woman he does not marry. He provides counterpoint to the studied philosophical stance of Wheeler Catlett, the town's lawyer, who delivers the unified vision Berry wants us to receive. Actually, the finest of the stories is the first, "Thicker Than Liquor," because it's threaded around a genuine dilemma: how to love and be loyal to a family drunkard.

Dale says

Berry, Wendell: THE WILD BIRDS-Six Stories of the Port William Membership: ah, the joy of returning to this author. Late in the evening (for me: 10 p.m.) starting 06.04.2014, I read the first of the six stories immediately after finishing another very difficult book and almost immediately felt ensconced in a warm blanket of family dysfunction that any country boy (like myself) could easily imagine. All six (6) stories revolving around Port William membership were delightful for me to read. Here is the book jacket blurb about each story: "Thicker Than Liquor", introduced to Wheeler's Uncle Peach, an alcoholic black sheep who falls into Wheeler's care and teaches Wheeler a lesson of acceptance. "Where Did They Go?" tells of Andy Catlett's fall from sexual innocence during tobacco planting. "It Wasn't Me" decides the future of Old Jack's farm as Wheeler comes to the aid of Elton and Mary Penn. In "Boundary" and "That Distant Land" Wheeler's father-in-law, Mat Feltner cultivates a serene strength in the decline of Mat's final summer. "The Wild Birds" shows Wheeler faced with Burley Coulter's resolve to leave his farm to an until then unacknowledged son. 1985 hardback via Madison Co. Public Library, Berea 146 pgs.; read Jun. 2014/#36

Kristen says

Berry comes through for me again, in this collection of short stories. I overdosed on his fiction a few years ago but have recently come back to finish all that I left unread.

One of the most meaningful aspects of Berry's prose is his ability to explore kinship ties, family relationships, without being judgmental.

In "Thicker than Liquor," he explores the relationship between Wheeler Catlett, and his mother and alcoholic brother (Wheeler's uncle). It's 1943, and his mother's younger brother has spent his entire adult life as drunk as they come. Wheeler is raised wondering along with the rest of the town why his mother keeps nursing him back to health and providing food and shelter for him, when he's wasted himself yet again. As a 30 year old man, he is at last able to see his uncle as his mother sees him, and her motivations. It's very moving to me and very relevant to my current life.

"Uncle Peach was, she thought, 'one of the least of these my brethren'---a qualification for her care that the blood connection only compounded. If one of the least of Christ's brethren happened to be her brother, then the obligation was as clear as the penalty. She had long ago given up hope for Uncle Peach. She cared for him without hope, because she has passed the place of turning back or looking back. Quietly, almost submissively, she propped herself against him, because in her fate and faith she was opposed to his ruin."

This was such a tender passage, as one of my daughters struggles with childhood depression, and while I haven't lost hope at this point, as I imagine the future, it seems a possibility. But this passage gave me peace of mind and also some clarity---that losing hope isn't a bad thing, a sign of weakness. It also reminded me that Christianity and modern psychology don't always agree.

In 1943, there were no recovery centers, no outpatient treatment programs, no AA to go to, no detox programs. No one understood alcoholism, and I have to say, would it have changed his aunt's relationship with her brother for the worse, if she had understood the textbook victim-persecutor-rescuer triangle, the drama triangle that all of us try to avoid, and behaved accordingly? If she decided to not feed him, bathe him, clean up his vomit, and withhold a bed to sleep in, in the name of not enabling---an expression that didn't even exist then, I'm guessing---what would have been the outcome? And would that outcome be more desirable than what she chose to do.

When interacting with my daughter, I've often chosen textbook behavior over true charity, or Christian love. I'm worried about doing the "wrong" thing, because all the professionals in her (our) life really emphasize teaching accountability, which is something I do believe in. But how could caring for someone, providing the basic human necessities, ever be wrong? After laying awake some of the night considering these ideas, I've decided it's possible that perhaps the answer isn't one or the other---as I am prone to think when faced with two choices that I don't fully understand--but both, and I'm thinking there must be something I have more to change and do, after seeing that hope or expectation are not always the primary motivators for rescuing someone from themselves.

Peach's sister had left her expectations for her brother fall by the wayside, but the language of "propping herself against him" came over me like a tidal wave and I can now reimagine what it means to care for someone who may or may not learn to fully take care of themselves. I feel like Berry is at his finest in exploring the simple but most important of all things--family. Good fiction like this that causes you to live differently from that moment on is invaluable. God bless you, Wendell.

Longfellow says

Favorite story from this collection: "Thicker Than Liquor"

What can one say about Wendell Berry? Here's what I say:

Berry is one the best fiction writers our country has been blessed with over the last several decades. His characters are enjoyable and empathetic while managing to be realistically imperfect at the same time. The truths Berry manages to communicate about relationships and life together are both profound and subtle.

In writing of rural farms and small town life, he makes beautiful what our culture so often scoffs at, and I find myself wanting to belong to such an "old-fashioned" community.

I'll mourn the day his writing days are over.

Sara says

I adored this book. Six (it seemed more) interrelated stories of the people in a small farming community in Kentucky ~ their relationships to each other, to their history, to the land, and to their work. Stunning, pitch-perfect writing capturing the essence of those relationships and of man in nature. It made me a total fan of Wendell Berry's, & I've never been disappointed yet. One of the stories, "The Boundary," is the best short story I've ever read, but don't read it without reading the others. Like us, it is best appreciated in context:)

Emily Crow says

I've been meaning to read something by Wendell Berry for a while, and since I happened to have picked up this slim volume of short stories at a book sale or used book store at some point, I decided today's the day. I didn't realize that the stories all concerned a group of characters that occur throughout Berry's work, and my unfamiliarity might have detracted a bit from my appreciation of the stories, kind of like being invited to someone else's family reunion.

What I liked most is the writing itself; you can tell that Berry is a poet, as he has a real flair for memorable description, such as this depiction of a local dandy in "Where Did They Go?":

"A hundred times a day, Col would lift his hat in a three-fingered pinch as exquisite as a jeweler's, toss back his languorous forelock, and replace the hat as though preparing to meet, if not his Maker, perhaps the press. This procedure required him to stop absolutely whatever he might be doing, and was almost routinely concluded by a curse from his father-in-law, who in the meantime might have been holding up one end of a log. The smooth underside of Col's right forearm bore the tattoo of a scantily clad lady who danced when Col flexed his muscles, and in the midst of work he would sometimes spend long minutes studying it, slowly doubling and relaxing his fist, whether entranced by the loveliness of his own arm or by the lady who danced there, I could not tell."

I have a special fondness for nature writing, and there are some wonderful passages of this as well, such as this paragraph from "The Boundary," about an old man walking around his land for the last time:

"A water thrush moves down along the rocks of the streambed ahead of him, teetering and singing. He stops and stands to watch while a large striped woodpecker works its way up the trunk of a big sycamore, putting its eye close to peer under the loose scales of the bark. And then the bird flies to its nesting hole in a hollow snag still nearer by to feed its young, paying Mat no mind. He has become still as a tree, and now a hawk suddenly stands on a limb close over his head. The hawk loosens his feathers and shrugs, looking around him with his fierce eyes. And it comes to Mat that once more, by stillness, he has passed across into the wild inward presence of the place.

'Wonders,' he thinks. 'Little wonders of a great wonder.' He feels the sweetness of time. If a man of eighty years old has not seen enough, then nobody will ever see enough."

Despite these passages of great writing that are sprinkled through these stories, I couldn't really warm up to them, which is probably due entirely to personal preferences--the content felt too sentimental, almost cloying at times. Other reviewers have praised this quality as being an utter lack of cynicism and a depiction of human kindness, but I can't help it, I'm a cynic, and the world depicted herein seems too idealized and unrealistic. In all fairness, this is obviously a deliberate choice of the author's; I felt that a passage describing one of the characters, the lawyer Wheeler, was equally true of the book as a whole:

"A more compliant, less idealistic man than Wheeler might have been happier here than he has been, for this has been a place necessarily where people have revealed their greed, arrogance, meanness, cowardice, and sometimes their inviolable stupidity. And yet, though he has known these things, Wheeler has not believed in them. In loyalty to his clients, or to their Maker, in whose image he supposed them made, he has believed in their generosity, goodness, courage and intelligence. Mere fact has never been enough for him. He has pled and reasoned, cajoled, bullied, and preached, pushing events always towards a better end than he knew he should expect, resisting always the disappointment that he knew he should expect, and when the disappointment has come, as it too often has, never settling for it in his own heart or looking upon it as a conclusion."

Ultimately, these stories simply do not resonate with me as a reader, but I appreciated the writing. I think I will look for Berry's poetry in future, but probably avoid any more of his fiction.

Stephen says

Within the membership of Port William, a close knit farming village, lays another more intimate still. It is the membership of a neighborhood of families who, working adjoining lands, make it their business to help each other through life. They help sow one another's fields, and help reap them. Hannah Coulter, the story of a young widow adopted into this private membership, introduced it; in Wild Birds, Wendell Berry delivers six stories about its other members, advancing through the years, and delivering a sense of real people developing through time and through their relationships with one another. The young mature into older adults; Wheeler Catlett opens the piece as a young newlywed, tasked yet again with hunting down his drunken uncle, and closes it as an older lawyer contemplating retirement. There's a prevailing theme of coming of age and owning one's responsibilities here, though as always Berry creates a sense of

timelessness: his characters have moments in which every season of their life is being lived simultaneously. This is best exhibited in "The Boundary", which for me is the most tender piece I've ever read by Berry, about an aging farmer who decides to go on one last patrol of his fields to inspect a boundary fenceline. Leaving home, he departs from his wife with a hug, noting that she seems to have changed while he held her from schoolgirl to grandmother, a lifetime lived in one another's embrace. As he eases down a hill he scrambled down as a child, he relives the many times he and his fathers before him, and he and his sons after that, had walked those paths before, tended those places together. Berry is a master at creating intimacy, inviting the reader to draw close to his characters, so endearing even in their flaws. To read these stories is to take a deep draft of the milk of human kindness, to be loved almost by an author who delights in stirring one's soul and bringing to remembrance a sense of being at home in the world.

Related:

Hannah Coulter, Wendell Berry

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