

A RELIABLE WIFE

Novelist Robert Goolrick comments on the inspiration for his book.

At one point, during the course of *A RELIABLE WIFE*, the heroine thinks, “*Men only give you what they give you when they know they can’t give you what you want.*” This thought, so compelling and pointed, was not invented by me. It was said to me twenty years ago by a friend, during the course of a hapless affair she was having with a movie star who had given her a diamond bracelet instead of the divorce he had promised.

I am always grateful the small moments that linger in the memory; for the chance remark, for a random sighting of a child taking her father’s hand on the bus, and putting her head against his chest, for things seen and heard and lived through. For the inexplicable, magical ordinariness of everyday life.

Novels are made up out of scraps such as these, some big, some little. They are made out of everything the writer has gleaned from experience. Passion recollected in tranquility.

People are more clever and more touching than they imagine, and, as a writer, I am their diarist, their scavenger.

In the case of this book, apart from the thousand bits and pieces seen or heard, there are two profound influences, completely different from each other, each a fire in my brain. One began as a doctoral dissertation and turned into a book I first read thirty-five years ago; the other is a children’s book, something casually read fifty years ago, but never forgotten.

When I was about ten, my sister was given a wonderful book for her birthday, one that I loved, I think, more than my sister did. It was called *THE PARK THAT SPRING FORGOT*, and it was by Winifred Welles, published in 1940. In it, there’s a park that mysteriously fails to turn green and lush one ordinary spring. On a recent re-reading, I realize that the unnamed park is, in fact Sheridan Square in New York City’s Greenwich Village, and one of the houses drawn in the

beautiful illustrations is the one in which my friends, the Nadins, now live with my sweet goddaughter, Anna Page.

Thus the writing of *THE RELIABLE WIFE* began with the idea of a miracle in a garden, and the rest of the novel is built to create that miracle. I realize now that the idea for it came 50 years ago, from Welles' book, and, like the park, it lay dormant until a miracle of my own occurred.

The dissertation that became a book is by Michael Lesy, and it was first published thirty-five years ago as *WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP*.

The pictures you're about to see are of people who were once actually alive. That's the way Lesy's book begins. And it never lets up.

I was set on fire when I read it. Lesy's collage of words and pictures paint a haunting, cinematic portrait of a small town in Wisconsin at the diseased end of the 19th century. I had been taught to imagine nineteenth century cities to be teeming with moral turpitude and industrial madness, and rural America to be sleeping in a prosperous innocence, filled with honest and industrious people. Not so. Lesy unlocks the Pandora's box of country life, to show us its dark and ravaged soul.

The portrait he paints has never left me, and certainly it had a profound influence on the structure and genesis of *A RELIABLE WIFE*. I set the story in Lesy country, frozen Wisconsin in the dead of winter, and played out a complex entangling of three lives against his starkly compelling canvas.

I owe a great deal to Michael Lesy, to his explication of the awful life endured by the mass of people caught between machinery and madness. Read Lesy's book. It will never leave you. It left me changed forever.

And so it began, a secret garden, and three figures in a frozen, barren landscape, like a pure blank canvas, waiting for the first drop of crimson to fall.