

Pondering *The Secrets of Pond Street*, by Robert Benson

The Secrets of Pond Street,

by Robert Benson. illustrations by Matthew McCosco

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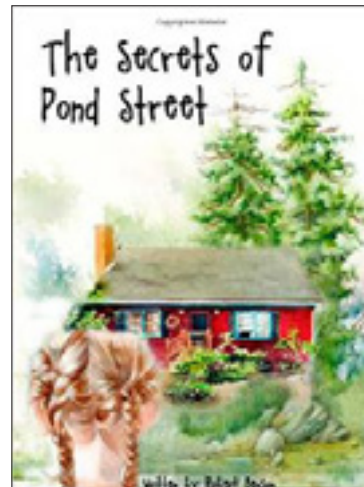
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Review by Thomas Gagnon

A long time ago, in a kingdom far, far away, I learned about reader-response criticism. Unlike formalist criticism (concerned only with the form of the text), reader-response criticism focuses on the reader's interaction with the text, which is based on that reader's past experience. There is plenty of fascinating backstory about all this—should you be, say, an English or Education major—but suffice it to say here that, by the '90s, reader-response criticism was central to the study of literature in middle school.

I am not in middle school, but I had so many responses to this young adult novel that I decided to base my review of it on the reader-response mode. Primarily, I responded to the politics of the book, and this is an intensely political Young Adult novel (with nary a vampire in sight). Overall, the plot of this YA novel reminded me of my mother's book, *The Dream of Deliverance in American Politics*, which I set myself to read about five years ago. In *The Dream of Deliverance*, the "dream" arises from a tendency in all Americans to believe that, whatever the different interests at stake, a simple alteration of policies or personalities can bring about deliverance from an evil for all parties concerned. She demonstrates that this dream cannot be realized, precisely because it is a dream, not reality. In *The Secrets of Pond Street*, the 12-year-old heroine, Karen Taylor, resolves to make the dream—a reality. She discovers a scheme to build an industrial plant near the town, a scheme that requires the demolition of Pond Street where she and many townspeople live. The business scheme also threatens an endangered species of salamander. This situation presents Karen with three very different interests: the townspeople's interests, the business interests, and the environmentalists' interests. By the end of the novel, Karen, after a lot of maneuvering, brings about a reconciliation of all of these interests. This is an amazing resolution, but, if *The Dream of Deliverance* is to be believed, not reality-based. This reader's response, however, was suspension of belief in *The Dream of Deliverance*.

From the vantage point of a 47-year-old, it stuns me that Karen is thinking about major economic and environmental issues at age 12. I'd assumed that most 12-year-old girls were more concerned with the state



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of their bust (I'm thinking of Judy Blume here) than with the state of their world. And Karen does more than cogitate. She plays a front-and-center role, beginning when she asks her neighbor Mr. Gunderson why he likes to read about business and never ending until she finds a solution that satisfies all interested parties.

Along the way, there are several places where Karen's front-and-center role might have ended. One of them stands out. Although she does not become concerned specifically with her bust, Karen does become worried generally about her looks, after she gets to know the 7th grader Davey — and it's not a brief anxiety:

...by the weak light of her desk lamp, she looked into the mirror for a long time, trying to find the answer to a question that was bothering her. The girl she saw looking back at her was not pretty, like some of the girls at school. Her hair was no particular color... The brown eyes that frowned critically into their own reflection looked muddy and dull. The nose had a funny rounded tip... Her mouth was too wide for her face.

Karen concludes:

...[Davey] could still be a useful ally. It made no sense to worry about what he thought of her, but she lay awake for a long time thinking about it anyway.
(106)

At a later time, after she goes bowling with "useful ally" Davey, she wonders to herself, *Was that a date?* (161) Karen's teenage desire to be a pretty girl with a cute boyfriend conflicts with her desire to save her town—a conflict that nearly becomes a head-on collision.

One more thing that struck me was the repetition—like a leitmotif in an opera—of the phrase, "It's not fair." I recalled that, when I was about 12, I assumed life was not fair. In particular, I'd have heard Jimmy Carter's declaration that there are many things in life that are not fair, and undoubtedly I'd have agreed. After all, I had begun life with a seizure disorder and, once that was reasonably well stabilized, I had developed a severe speech impediment. By 5th grade, I had become sufficiently near-sighted to require glasses—a catastrophe for a boy. None of this facilitated my social development. Thus, to me it was a given that life was not fair, and at no point would it have occurred to me to right any wrongs. It does occur to 12-year-old Karen Taylor, more than once. Her fight for a just solution for all, including the salamanders, caused me to sit up and take notice. Although I did not always know why she expected herself to be heroic, it was refreshing to read about a character who had not lapsed into cynicism and apathy.

Then doubts crept in. I wanted to believe that a brave 12-year-old girl could reconcile three very different interests. But I couldn't, and not because I had become pessimistic and cynical. It simply was not at all

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probable. Townspeople rarely, if ever, have the power to prevent a business action. Businesses are not known to suspend their plans until all affected parties are satisfied. Businesses do not generally let environmentalists impede them. Perhaps most of all, one person, without a large group of allies, cannot bring about a major change. We would like to think that can happen, but it can't. This does not mean that *The Secrets of Pond Street* is a lie. It does mean that it presents a myth. But a myth, like True North, can be useful. It gives us a star to steer ourselves by