

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

*Don MacLaren*  
**The Popular Kids**

**M**y parents transferred me to East Grand Rapids Junior High School from Saint Stephen's Catholic School when I was 12 years old, in seventh grade.

After I had transferred I became terribly lonely. I didn't have any close friends at the school, but when I came home and my mother would ask "How was school?" I always answered "Okay." But it rarely ever was "okay." I hated school.

When my mother was asking me "How was school?" my father was calling me into the den while he was watching TV. I always armed myself with a bowl of cereal when I used to watch *Gilligan's Island*, *The Bugs Bunny Show* and the Vietnam War and my father always armed himself with a gin and tonic while watching TV. The toxic chemicals in the cereal made me feel good, but if I ate too many of them, they were bad for me. The toxic chemicals in the gin and tonic had the same effect on my father.

"I want to talk with you," my father said after calling me into the den, bringing the drink to his lips, sipping himself a few more cents into debt and into death each time he did so. "I want you to communicate with me," he said, yearning for understanding through his pain. "Okay," I answered him. Like the "okay" I answered my mother with though, it wasn't "okay." Unfortunately, his desire to communicate with his children rarely bore any fruit. Outside of football and hockey conversations, there was never anything communicated in a positive way. It seemed that whenever I tried to open myself up to my father he would put me down, cut me off, and make me regret ever having tried to speak, much less having tried to develop a friendship with him. He didn't know how to communicate, so his yearnings went unfulfilled.

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Out of the hundreds of students at East Grand Rapids Junior High School when I was there I only remember one black student. Shortly after I began classes my first year there I was assigned to write a paper, and I chose to write about racism at East Grand Rapids Junior High School. I started the paper by writing: "I don't like the way people at this school think about black people. I went to Saint Stephen's with black people and they were nice people, but here people just think of black people as a bunch of dumb niggers." I was doing my best to express my opinion and make a point, but all the teacher did was attack the grammar and structure of the piece without mentioning the content, as the paper was displayed in front of the class on an overhead projector. Most of the kids laughed because I had used the word "niggers." I sat in the front of the class trying to ignore the criticism and laughter. I was too self-conscious to turn my head and look for salvation outside the window in the back of the class, so I just stared down at my shoes instead.

I didn't get good grades in that composition class, nor in many other classes that year. However, I usually got good grades in "Conduct" in school. Apparently, looking out the window and daydreaming about running away to California didn't count as bad conduct. When the teach-

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ers reported their worries about my unusual amount of daydreaming and looking out the window to my parents, and my parents relayed their concern to me (as I daydreamed during my parents' lectures and looked out the window), the Vietnam War was raging and the Watergate scandal was slowly building up momentum. Neither my teachers, nor my parents, seemed to ever stop and consider that there might be a problem with them and the status quo they did everything they could to maintain. I didn't see anything wrong with wanting to escape; fantasizing about another world, any other world than the one I was living in.

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In eighth grade there was a kid in my class who at first seemed to be friendly toward me, and I felt good because he was very popular and well-liked. Though this kid and I seemed to be on good terms for a while he soon became ugly. He hit me with spitballs and rapped me on the head with his knuckles, giving me noogies. In addition there was verbal abuse; when he teased, threatened and mocked me while the whole class looked on, it hurt me just as bad as the noogies. At that time the movie *The Godfather* was playing, and he would sometimes quote part of the famous line in the movie, with one change: "We'll make MacLaren an offer he can't refuse." I considered it as good as a death threat.

I felt paralyzed. I could neither fight nor flee. Perhaps the reason he never let up on me was because I didn't know how to fight back without becoming just like him in the end, and it was for that reason that I never fought back. I wasn't the only object of the bully's aggression in that particular class, and he wasn't the only aggressor, but he was the lead bully, and I was the prime victim.

It seemed that the kids with the most talent at aiming spitballs at other kids and giving noogies were also the most talented at getting picked for first string for football. A couple years after the eighth grade bullying I experienced, the eighth grade bully leader grabbed one of his junior varsity football teammates by the legs while the teammate was naked in the shower. The bully dragged the naked kid into the parking lot, as the victim's genitals scraped against the gravel. Though the victim cried, begging the bully to stop, the bully was not one to relent. "You Jew pussy! I'll stop when your dick falls off." The bully whipped his victim's body with all his might, trying to fling the body into the street. His victim landed near the edge of the parking lot. Then, the coach came out and saw the naked Jewish kid, whimpering, as he lay naked on the parking lot, balled up in the fetal position, clutching his bleeding genitals. "What the hell is wrong with you, Cohen?" he asked the beaten kid, while ignoring the bully. "What are you, homosexual? Get back to the locker room, get dressed and go home," the coach yelled. "You're not on this team anymore." The bully, however, remained on the team as one of its star players.

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One of the girls in the eighth grade class who came off as quite awkward and under-confident, even more awkward than most of the rest of us at 13 years old, was also the butt of a lot of jokes. There was one guy who feigned sexual interest in her almost every day, pretending to ask her out. At one point she just couldn't contain her humiliation any longer and

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burst into tears in front of the whole class.

Most of the bullying that went on occurred when the teacher was out of the room or had turned her or his back, but not always. The teachers went through the motions of trying to stop the 13-year-old fascists, but alas, the strength of the fascist powers in the eighth grade classroom proved too overwhelming to end the attacks. Funny that I'd so wanted the bully's respect and friendship at first. Perhaps it was because he, as I, was Catholic.

Maybe he felt I didn't deserve any mercy if I didn't even try to fight back. He never gave me any mercy. Though I never fought back, however, I never broke down and cried either, despite all the abuse I took.

The only comfort I could find in all this is that I became convinced that all the bullies in my life would one day pay for the evil they had done, after they had died and gone to hell.

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There is a small creek a few blocks from the house I lived in when I was growing up. The creek is surrounded by brush and woods, where once in a while you can see a raccoon or a beaver meandering about. The creek flows through those woods and then into a shallow sewer, that flows under the street, a few yards away. Eventually, the sewer spills into the Grand River - which flows through the middle of Grand Rapids.

At the point the stream flows under the street there is a barricade in the form of metal bars running down vertically from the concrete sidewalk up above. If you move the right way though, you can get your body between the bars, and walk behind them into the sewer.

It was around eighth grade that some of the popular kids from school had gotten one of their big brothers to buy some beer one Friday night and had gone through the metal bars at the entrance to the sewer to drink. They had talked about visiting the houses of some of the losers in my neighborhood, and inviting the losers to come drink with them. Then, when the losers came along, the popular kids would push the losers through the bars, knock them down and push their faces in the water that ran through the sewer. You couldn't really see the shit and piss in the sewer water, but the popular kids figured they could shit and piss in the water to be sure that the losers would have to bathe in it. They figured it would be kind of like giving the losers a swirly - where the popular kids would force one of the loser's heads in the toilet.

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There were different variations of a swirly. The two most common types were the fizz swirly and the chocolate swirly. A fizz swirly was one in which the popular kids would stick one of the loser's heads in the toilet after taking a piss. (It was called a fizz swirly because the piss bubbles on top of the water of the toilet bowl and the edge of the porcelain looked liked fizz.) And there was a chocolate swirly, which was a swirly they gave to one of the losers after someone - or perhaps several people - had taken a shit in the toilet bowl.

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The popular kids got drunk, dumped the empty beer cans in the water, rode their bicycles to one of the houses near mine and rang the doorbell. One of the losers - a guy named Jim East - answered the door, surprised that the popular kids had come by to see him. It had just started getting dark when Jim East took his bicycle out of the garage and joined his new friends at the sidewalk. But by that time a couple of the popular kids felt like they were going to barf from the alcohol they had been drinking. The popular kids went down the street and made a turn, which took them down a hill where they came to a big house that had its lights turned off, where it would be difficult for others to see them, and where they commenced to barf on the front lawn.

In the midst of their barfing, one of the popular kids - in fact the most popular kid at the school - the one who gave me noogies and had told me "we'll make MacLaren an offer he can't refuse" - began to cry. "My mom's gonna get mad if she smells beer on my breath," he whimpered. By that time I had sauntered up with a stray dog I had befriended earlier that day, that was sniffing about. I suggested to the popular kid that he chew on some grass, in order to cover up the smell of alcohol on his breath.

Often, chewing on a blade of grass you pulled slowly and carefully from the lawn - getting it all - from the very base of its root up, was a good experience. You bit down ever so slightly on the white root and sucked the juices from it, pretending you were a cowboy or maybe, even an Indian.

But the most popular kid, neither cowboy nor Indian, just lay down on the grass and grazed on it, as if he were a cow. Jim East picked up grass with his hands, tearing at it and feeding it to the most popular kid, who couldn't seem to get enough of it. Jim East also fed it to all the other popular kids present, who were following in the footsteps of their leader - grazing and barfing. Jim East picked up a clump of grass and realized just after he put it in the mouth of the most popular kid that there was piece of dog-doo in it. I walked by and looked at my friend, the dog, sniffing around on another part of the lawn. My dog discovered a piece of dog-doo and picked it up in his teeth, consuming it voraciously. He then spied the popular kids, grazing on the grass on all fours. The dog ran up to the popular kids that had just eaten his shit and barked at them. I kicked some more dog-doo laden grass the popular kids' way, and eventually the popular kids ate it all up.

I had always wondered why dogs liked to eat excrement and I began to wonder why it was that the popular kids were devouring it as well. But I decided to leave well enough alone. Concluding that it would be rude to disturb the popular kids' feast, I made my way home.

And, alas from that day on I viewed popular kids differently.