

Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)



## A READER'S JOURNAL

### How I Grew

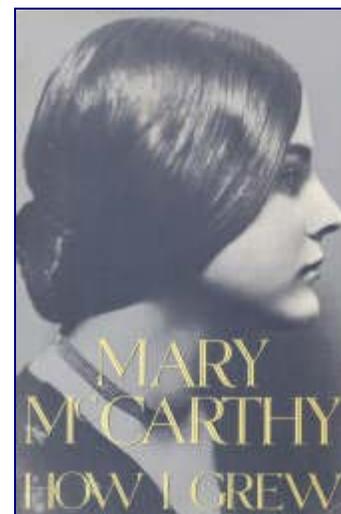
by

Mary McCarthy

(Her Early Years 13 to 21)

Published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/NY in  
1987

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



Mary McCarthy is a well known novelist, probably best known for "The Group". I read this book about

her early years from 13 to 21 as part of my study of the lives of writers to discover what makes them write. The first words of this book gives us a hint:

**[page 1] I was born as a mind during 1925, my bodily birth having taken place in 1912. Throughout the thirteen years in between, obviously, I must have had thoughts and mental impressions, perhaps even some sort of specifically cerebral life that I no longer remember.**

Early in her life she discovered, as I did, the *look* of the librarian when you try to check out a book that she deems is perhaps not suitable for you. My book was about a funny little cartoon character named Spiro and his adventures in the blood stream. I was about ten or eleven and the drawings of the inside of the human body attracted me. Mrs. Larson, the librarian at the Westwego library, gave me the *look*, and asked if I was sure I wanted to read that book. Silly question to ask when you try to check out a book, isn't it? "Yes," I relied earnestly and she stamped it for me. Only much later, sometime in college, did it occur to me that the Spiro character represented the syphilis germ in its adventures through the blood stream. Here is Mary's similar adventure on the first day she got a library card to the main branch of the Seattle library.

**[page 30] The power of choice I held affected me as an urgency, forcing me to take out a book before I was fully prepared, hurrying me to make up my mind as though behind me there were a crowd of other borrowers. Summoning resolution, I picked a book from the shelves and advanced to the counter. It was *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. The librarian looked at me; I looked back at her. She took my card and tucked another one, stamped, in a flap at the back of the volume. I had the impression that she might say something, but she let me walk away. In my mind was only the vaguest notion of who Joseph Conrad was or had been.**

On page 32, she writes about her high school, "Garfield had no academic stars, awing the rest of us with their straight A's." The word "awing" with its possible meanings of "creating awe", "saying aw at," and "flying by wing" intrigued me and I dashed off a small poem to illuminate the propinquity of meanings in one word.

**Aw, Aw, Aw**

Aw, aw, aw

Awing

A wing

Awing in the evening sky.

Awe, awe, awe  
A wing  
A wing  
A wing in the glowing sky.

Caw, caw, caw  
Cawing  
A wing  
A wing in the blowing sky.

Awe, awe, awe  
A wing  
A wing  
A wing in the evening sky.

Mary had a girl friend, Ted, who introduced her to books that her school and grandmother had kept from her, real "modern literature." And yet Mary was crestfallen by some of the books that Ted secreted into her school bag for her to read at home. Mary was hoping to "see the fig-leaf stripped off sex" but rarely encountered that frankness of description in those books.

**[page 55] That was one of the pitfalls of modern literature, I soon learned; it did not always live up to its promises. I had already been let down already by Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, when I took it out of the public library the year before, thinking that the dirty word "nigger" in the title was going to couple perversely with the white narcissus bloom, but then "Narcissus" turned out to be the name of a boat. . . .**

**To be truthful, what I was hoping for from books described as modern or daring (and from classical sculpture) was to see the fig-leaf stripped off sex. Someone had finally told me the rudiments of the act, but I did not feel wholly convinced that *that* was what men and women did. There was the usual difficulty in picturing respectable people, i. e., my grandparents, doing it and in fact something in the sexual conjunction does arouse a natural skepticism, whoever the parties involved: "For Love has pitched his mansion/ In the place of excrement." But unless someone has experienced sex or a close approach to it, stories and poems do not tell much about it; if one has, they may act erotically as reminders. . . . It is something like the Uncertainty Principle: if you are distant enough from the experience to need instruction, you are too remote to be benefitted. Possible blue movies shown in the classroom by a teacher with a pointer are what is really needed.**

Two points: 1) Rather than the Uncertainty Principle, I would point to the Bootstrap Paradox as it applies to computers: one cannot load a program into a computer unless a program that loads programs is already in the computer. Understanding writings about sex requires one to have already experienced it. 2) Perhaps we have arrived in the past decade or so where explicit movies in the classroom and a teacher with a pointer is *de rigeur* for sex education.

This next passage may well be my favorite quotation from this book:

**[page 72] Nonetheless, as often happens with lonely young creatures, I found companionship. In poetry. Indeed, I wonder whether poetry would have any readers besides poets if love combined with loneliness did not perform the introductions.**

In the next passage she shares how her guardians, her grandparents watched her so closely that they created the opposite of what they wished to happen. Seems like too tight constraints and too loose constraints on teenage girls tend to have similar results. With Mary, her boy friend Forrest Crosby couldn't take her anywhere that they might be seen and reported to her grandmother which left open only riding and parking, "which was bound to leave us in the end with no recourse but sex."

**[page 74] Hence I might say that what happened was my grandparents' own fault; *they* had forced**

**me into clandestinity. If I had been free to meet him innocently, I would not have met him guiltily. This was true up to a point and in a general way. The tight rein they tried to keep on me while my contemporaries were allowed to run loose was a mistake and kept me from having any easy or natural relation with boys; I never even learned to dance with one of them properly. Moreover, the prohibitions I labored under led me into all kinds of deceptions. I lied to my grandparents about where I had been, with whom, how long, and so on.**

Eventually this led to a lugubrious sexual experience in the front seat of a car and shortly afterward, she recalled an episode around Christmas.

**[page 80] I remember singing a new (to me) Christmas hymn, "A Virgin Unspotted," as we marched in procession into chapel, and the strange emotion that came over me as I caroled the words out, my heart singing for joy in Mary Virgin, though Mary I was and virgin I was not.**

Later she broke with Forrest after his letters got shorter and more distant. In her final letter to him, she showed what I would call "the writer's propensity," to correct the spelling of others.

**[page While loosing the vials of my wrath, I may have alluded to his faults of spelling -- I hope so.**

This next passage about one of her early boy friends reminds me of a comic strip in which the character said, "That Superman story is really fantastic! Whoever heard of a 'mild-mannered reporter'?"

**[page 92, 93] In any case, Mark did not live long enough to sour into a reactionary. When he died (of TB, I think) during the war, he was arrested at a stage of pure misanthropy -- normal in a newspaperman.**

In our current age, memories of previous incarnations are not readily available to most people, and so the bleed through of those memories takes the form of *déjà vu* or a vague recognition such as Mary expresses below:

**[page 133] Though I had never seen highly skilled actors perform before, I had a sense of recognition — the same as with Latin — as though I had met the theatre in a previous incarnation.**

In this next passage she illustrates the process I call "remembering the future" when she sees Harold Johnrud on stage for the first time, the man who will become her husband. If we allow the possibility that the future can be remembered as well as the past, we might expect that seeing a person we will spend the rest of our lives with will have a distinct impression upon us, something that is called erroneously, rightly understood, "love at first sight."

**[page 175] Above all, he had "presence"; he was arresting. And this quality in him was often remarked on; it was not just a young girl's notion that he "stood out" under the lights on the greensward representing Runnymede. I cannot explain why that should have been.**

One always appreciates an actor who is able to portray accurately a drunken man reeling across a stage, and if one is not in the acting profession, one might imagine that one learns to stagger across a stage; not so.

**[page 183] Mrs. Browne did have a lesson for us, namely, that illusion in the theatre is tied to imagining of a "counter-force" (here represented by the specific gravity of fluids): the actor playing a drunken man depicts not staggers but the effort to walk straight.**

When in New York for the first time, without a friend in the world, abandoning her grandmother and Isabel at the museum after a spat, she bumps into Harold Johnrud. As amazing as this is, it is not an uncommon circumstance that when one is hopelessly abandoned by the rest of the world to have a friend pop up seemingly out of mid-air to save you from your despair. I recall my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday at home, another birthday without a party for me — I never had a birthday party till I was 50 — and I could find no joy in the barbeque crowd around the house as none of them knew or cared that my most important birthday was happening. Finally I crawled under my bed to keep from being interrupted as I cried my eyes out in hopeless desperation and despair. Suddenly I was called to the phone by my mother — I

rarely got phone calls in those days of 1956 -- and especially from a girl. As I walked down the hall, drying my eyes, but there was no hope to hide my reddened eyes. I took the phone from my mother's hands, it was from a girl from a distant town that had visited a family down the street during the previous summer and was back again. My spirits soared as I talked to her and I invited her to a movie that night! What a birthday present the world had sent me! Mary got to experience a similar thing when alone in New York City, she wanders down a street and runs into her Runnymede Red Cross Knight, Harold Johnsrud.

**[page 191] I dared not ask him up to our little suite of rooms (anyway he had an appointment), but I was wild with joy. To think that this had happened on *my first day in New York*. When I went upstairs, my grandmother and Isabel were there, and, to do them justice, as astounded as I was by the remarkable event that had befallen me. Not finding me on their return, they had worried; now they were relieved of guilt pangs by the statistically wondrous chance that had brought this man to 46<sup>th</sup> Street at the very moment that I, thanks to our fight in the museum, was coming along it without a friend in the world. At first they could not take in that this was the Red Cross Knight in the Magna Carta pageant — what a tale to tell Grandpa!**

When someone has a stroke and is unable to communicate, the people around the distressed one will project all sorts of imaginings without any knowledge of what is really going on inside. When Dr. Fitch, who was to marry Mary and Johnsrud, was taken by a stroke, his aide told them, "The saddest thing is that he can't remember the Lord's Prayer." And yet this aide had no access to what was actually going on in Dr. Fitch's mind; he may well have been doing nothing else but reciting the Lord's Prayer mentally over and over again.

The literary magazine that Mary with Frani and Bishop founded at Vassar was called *Con Spirito* from the musical notation meaning "lively, with spirit" — it was their way of rebelling against the more staid Vassar Review. That phrase describes the life that Mary lived from 13 until 21, a spirited life in which she was ever ready to rebel from the staid constraints that life in her time placed on her as a woman in society.

---

**Other Books by Mary McCarthy:**

[Ideas and the Novel](#)

[The Company She Keeps](#)

