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Russo re-rumbles our eighth-grade rumbles

By Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—I like to get moving in the early fives. It's still dark, but I'm optimistic that light is moving in my direction. It's still still, but busy is stirring in the wings.

It's dark and still, but not quiet. The boys in the pond are croaking as loud as they can to scare off other boys and seduce girls. This never worked for me, but then again I haven't tried it in a long time. It reminds me of high school.

I make coffee and settle in to read for an hour or two. No television. No email. No annoying rings, bells, chimes, buzzers or gongs. No vibrating phones in my pants.

My mind is fresh and my eyes are clear before dawn. Things muddle up later in the day. Memory works better at 5 a.m. than 5 p.m., which is a sound argument for sleeping late.

These minutes feel like something free, something filched out of the official agenda.

I read books in the morning more than newspapers and magazines.

This week I'm working through Ronald Louis Bonewitz's, Smithsonian Nature Guide, Gems; David More and John White's, The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Trees, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Al Cambronne's, Deerland: America's Hunt for Ecological Balance and the Essence of Wilderness; Edith Wharton's, Ethan Frome; and Alan Venable's Ratting on Russo.

These choices connect in my thoughts, but I don't claim there's much rhyme or reason to it. Often, I'm just read 'em where they ain't.

I trudged through Ethan Frome (1911) in high school, because it was required. At 16, I had no life experience that would help me understand the repressed love of an older, hope-short, married man for a young woman who is the live-in caregiver for his older wife, a full-time hypochondriac and a part-time semi-invalid.

Nor did my Pittsburgh neighborhood give me any context to relate to his hardscrabble days spent eking dollars out of a water-driven relic of a sawmill and a Massachusetts farm that grew many granite stones and few other crops.

The Frome marriage had soured years before, but Ethan, who embraces the repressed New England ways of the early 1900s, finds himself torn

between marital duty and the love he can't manage. Wharton ends this irresolvable triangle in a way that penalizes everyone.

The wages of sin in her view were, if not death, life-long misery. What better lesson could high school teach its croaking teenage boys?

Ethan Frome taught us to live within whatever lines we drew for ourselves starting out. It's a prescription for staying where you are with what you have. It's an interesting question as to whether early lines drawn narrowly or broadly provide an easier time of it.

Ratting on Russo is a coming-of-age novel set in Pittsburgh's Shadyside neighborhood in 1957. Martin Badger, the 13-year-old narrator, like Ethan Frome, faces hard choices involving loyalty, honor and the confusing pursuit of happiness.

Russo, a rough-and-tumble newcomer to Liberty School's eighth grade (which he has navigated several times at similar facilities), befriends Badger, an upper-middle-class kid clinging to a barely tolerated perch next to the in-group. Russo is braver and more worldly, but intuitive and impetuous; Badger is smarter and better able to calculate consequences, but uncertain and confused.

Russo and Badger form an odd alliance against the boys who run the class and have first dibs on its girls.

The two become friends. And then they are drawn into an escalating tit for tat with a gang whose 16-year-old leader Jimmy sports a ducktail haircut -- the required signature of a teenage tough guy -- and rides the cobblestones in a bullet-nosed, 1950 Studebaker Champion.

(The way you wanted to do this was to drive with your left arm hanging straight down on the outside of the door while you smoked an unfiltered Lucky Strike held in your right hand, which you employed reluctantly and infrequently for steering and gear-shifting, both of which were usually handled by tromping down on the gas pedal.)

After Russo evens the score for an unprovoked attack on Badger, the gang jumps him and puts him in the hospital. Russo retaliates. He leads the two of them in stealing Jimmy's Stoodie as a prank relocation. The boys end up unintentionally with the Stoodie in the Allegheny River. They're arrested.

In contrast to Ethan Frome, punishment for Russo and Badger does not follow transgression. Badger's Dad, a "dahntahn" corporate lawyer, pays for the car repairs and keeps the boys free from the criminal-justice system.

Both graduate from Liberty. Russo goes to trade school to learn boiler-making.

Badger goes to Peabody High where he distinguishes himself. He doesn't see Russo again. Maybe they reconnect years later on the Internet.

Author Alan Venable was a year ahead of me at Peabody. I recall him as a guy who played by the rules. The Russos from that time stand out more than the Badgers—at least between five and six in the morning.

I found it comforting to learn that at least one other eighth-grader of that time and place was plagued by fear, self-doubt, older bullies, bewilderment, weirdness, girls and bad judgment.

Ratting on Russo is a precursor to George Lucas's film, "American Graffiti," set in Modesto, Calif., in 1962. Each is understood better next to the other.

Alan has the local details down—from the tire-smelling bicycle shop on Shady Avenue to the open storage cages in apartment basements. He even finds room for Dusty, one of the Westernaires -- a no-horse cowgirl quartet from Monongahela -- who twanged for Wilkens EZ Credit Jewelry on WDTV.

(I remember their mournful version of "Cool Water" from the Sons of the Pioneers—"All day I face the barren waste without the taste of water, Cool water." Apparently, a lot of Pittsburghers identified with a grizzled prospector and his equally grizzled mule, Dan, both of whom were dying of thirst in some desert while singing their lungs out.)

Ratting on Russo is the story about Badger *not* ratting on Russo. About not having to. About getting away with a mistake that he didn't cause. About how socio-economic differences play out.

I haven't been in the eighth grade for almost 55 years, but Ratting on Russo feels right. That year was the non-negotiable transition between childhood and the hood of the teenager. It's a short chapter that we can reread, but not rewrite.

Ratting on Russo is a good read for adults as well as eighth-graders...at any time of day. ([www.OneMonkeyBooks.com](http://www.OneMonkeyBooks.com); print at \$14.95).