

Ferris Beach

What to Wear on the First Day
at Lumberton High . . .

Reading Group Guide



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A Note from the Author

*A person who publishes a book willfully,
appears before the populace with his pants down.*

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

The Suede Vest?

As a teenager I had a recurring dream. It was one of those slow-motion dreams. I was running on the beach, a beach towel wrapped around me. I stopped to look at the ocean and off fell the towel. The voices began as I bent to pick it up — chitchat, laughter — and lo and behold, I turned to face the entire population of Lumberton High School rising up from behind the dunes, their fingers pointing as I raced about looking for my towel, only to discover that it was gone and there were no trees or means of camouflage in sight. A beach, a meadow, my own backyard — the setting might change, but the outcome of the dream was always the same: blatant exposure, humiliation.

If there is some kind of Freudian analysis of this dream, I prefer to remain ignorant. I diagnose it as simple self-consciousness, insecurity, the kind of thing that made me, one cold day in eighth grade, opt to go bare-legged rather than wear a pair of pantyhose with a *run*. I thought a run was surely more noticeable than snow-white gooseflesh. It was this same thinking that brought on the dilemma of the suede vest — the one with fringe that, on the store dummy, looked wonderfully *groovy* (though that was a word I could never pull off). I thought I'd die if I didn't have it. And then it haunted me from my closet for over a year because I was afraid to wear it — I thought it might call too much attention to *me*. In the same way, I feared using the hip lingo of Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* or acting as if I were part of the Brady Bunch or the Partridge Family. It was unnatural (though I knew many people who *did* pull it off), and I felt that I would be striking a false and obvious pose. I feared the worst, someone asking, *So who do you think you are, anyway?*

I had no idea what the answer would be.

For me, adolescence was the age when the spectrum of emotions was at a point of sharpest clarity. It was terrible and wonderful and good and bad; it was heaven and hell and I loved it and I hated it. I hadn't quite learned the blending process, how to shade my emotions so that they were muted and concealed. I hadn't learned to temper anger with sympathy and repulsion with tact and adoration with self-preservation and so on.

In a way, the honesty I had then is the kind that I feel is often "grown" out of us, sacrificed for sophistication and dignity. The emotions of adolescence are concentrated, full strength. They have to get out to *go* somewhere: blast that music, drive that car, dance like hell, run or swim laps till you pass out, get in the shower and sing through the steam, or pull out your diary and write about it. I think living through adolescence is a lot like what Edna St. Vincent Millay said about publishing a book: you're appearing before the populace with your pants down, though perhaps not willfully so. And maybe that's why I keep coming back to this span of years in my own writing.

A Scarf Tied Around the Head?

I can remember a girl in my neighborhood describing in great detail all the possible personalities housed in her closet: she could look hip-pie or she could look preppy, or academic, or tomboy, or glamorous, you name it. And the even more amazing part was that she actually did what she claimed. I remember feeling true envy, not of her extensive wardrobe so much as her *nerve* in putting the fringed vests and granny glasses and halter tops into action.

The feeling I had when I witnessed such boldness was no different from the feeling I have now when I create characters who say, wear, and do what they please when they please. I admire the brash and uninhibited, those who act on the times as they are happening; no one asks them who they think they are — and if asked, they couldn't care less. Would anyone have asked Rhoda on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, for ex-

ample, *why* she was wearing the scarf tied round her head? When I was a young girl, I loved the idea of such—scarves, hats, sunglasses—but always chickened out in everyday life. As a result, I fell in love with costume dressing, role-play, Halloween. It was easy to act behind a mask and behind the humor such a costume created; it was safe. It was fiction.

As a ten-year-old I spent a lot of time in wig departments trying on long blond hair. And in high school, when I worked in a clothing store, I had opportunities to stand before a three-way mirror and try on the different looks. It was 1975 and the fashions were extreme. Jumpsuits were hot, and everywhere you turned there were polyester and Quiana shirts with pictures on the fabric. Pantsuits were in (even in the high school!), as were wedgie and platform shoes. It was the year of the mood ring, of scarves around the neck. Tooled leather showed up as belts, pocketbooks, barrettes. Bob Newhart's lapels were wider than his tie, which was very wide. Men actually wore leisure suits. The only decent clothes were the gauzy peasant-look skirts and blouses and, of course, Levi's, both denim and corduroy. There were many possible looks and I was still looking, still seeking some kind of reassurance.

When I write, I have the freedom to appear in the wildest outfit or the most conservative; I have the freedom to pick and choose, to disappear and then reappear as any and many different characters. I have characters who, with the greatest of ease, wear the clothes and say the things that I would never choose to wear or say. I find that there's always an alter ego character, someone confident, too confident sometimes. I get to try on that hat for a brief period of time, but I also get to sit back and watch the reactions. It's the perfect union.

The Indian Moccasins?

I remember coming home—I was in the sixth grade—from a high school basketball game where I had sat with my boyfriend. I was wearing a poncho and a vest (this vest too was suede, but standard cut, in moss green, no fringe—not exactly a statement maker) and Indian

moccasins. The Indian moccasins were worn by everybody in all kinds of weather in spite of the soft soles and the fact that they were hard to come by. The Hodge Podge shoe store across town, offering both new and used shoes, was about the only place to buy them. Even in moccasins, I was several inches taller than my boyfriend, and so it was a relief that we didn't walk around the lobby but stayed seated on the bleachers. He gave me a friendship ring and bought me a Coke and, other than hello and good-bye, I don't think we spoke at all. It was exciting. But what was more exciting was coming home and digging the diary out from under the mattress, scavenging around for a symbolic pen—I had my heart set on purple—and then writing about it. The secrecy of it all! There was power in having secret, silent words on the paper. I felt that if the words were spoken, the magic would disappear as quickly as it came.

I remember, too, sitting under the Carthage Road overpass of 1-95 and thinking that I would remember that moment—fantasizing about my future as I watched the cars pass by—for the rest of my life. As it turned out, the thoughts proved less memorable than the sensation: the bright summer light and the cool shady pavement where I sat with some friends and stared out at the glittering black asphalt, felt the vibrations and the whoosh of cars passing both overhead and below.

All around us, motels were springing up. We'd sneak into their swimming pools and swim until the management came and asked us to leave. I have vivid memories of swimming fully clothed (patched cut-offs and Hang-Ten T-shirts) in the Howard Johnson pool and then running dripping wet through the air-conditioned, carpeted hallways, sticking hands into the ice machines, rapping on an occasional door—obnoxious behavior that was absolutely exhilarating. But even better was the finale—collapsing in laughter on the shag-carpeted floor of a girlfriend's bedroom and squealing, "Can you believe we *did* that?"

People would say, *Oh, they're just kids*, and I could return to the solitude of my room, to the rhythms of my parents' household, to the schedule I had known my whole life. There was security in the fact that

I had this glorious recess called summer, that the future was all mapped out for me, and that, come August, the biggest decision at hand would be what to wear on that first day at Lumberton High. But for that big block of time, those summer days stretching ahead, I really didn't need to know anything else. Life was something I could simply put on hold and look forward to.

I have always believed that at the ripe age of adolescence (*literally* ripe, as teenage girls are admonished in health classes all across America) our emotional baggage is already fully packed—every tiny article wedged into place—and strapped to our shoulders, backs, ankles (depending on the load). And that we spend the rest of our lives *unpacking*, sorting and choosing, what to treasure, what to alter, what to throw off the nearest cliff never to look at again. Writing allows me to try on many hats, to think and react to various situations without having *really* committed myself to anything at all. When someone asks, “How could you *say* what you did in your book?” the response is easy: “I didn't say it. My character did.”

The scenarios that played through my mind in adolescence were full-strength—none of this *let's be realistic* attitude. I was the star of those feature films, whether tear-jerker or comedy, whether I was acting out anger or devotion or revenge. My earliest fantasies were filled with Twiggy's clothes—short, tight leather skirts with chains and long, sleek boots, little tams cocked to the side. I idolized the likes of Petula Clark and Nancy Sinatra.

Nowadays, as a teacher of writing, I encourage my students to approach their fiction with the same energy that they give to their daydreams. I want them to see that imagination can generate as much experience as physical action can. I want them to appreciate the freedom of writing, this license to lie, this passport to invisibility or to another life altogether. Sometimes the most difficult part of writing is finding the security and comfort that allows such freedom—maybe it's a particular desk, set at a particular angle, at a certain time of day; maybe it's a familiar place, a piece of music, a flannel robe, a particular

memory. Sitting down to write fiction is really not much different from making sure the bedroom door is locked after everyone else is asleep and then pulling out the diary, finding the pen with purple ink, and turning to a brand-new page.

The Same Old Hat?

I remember following my grandmother up and down the rows of her garden. I remember the smells of the earth and of the tomatoes, the sound of distant trucks hauling tobacco to market. The sun was warm and soothing, and my grandmother's house waited at the end of the row like a cool haven. I was completely at ease in her world; I felt so secure there that it was easy to indulge in larger-than-life fantasies, to enter those bold and cocky places in my head where the aspirations were limitless. And, always, there was my grandmother right in front of me, her day structured by sunrise and sunset, and there across town were my parents and my sister, our routine life as safe as safe. Perfect for breeding fantasy.

I didn't *tell* my fantasies, mainly for fear of dying of embarrassment, but also because the strength was in the *not* telling. I think it's for similar reasons that I don't like to show my writing too soon, that I like to have it to myself until I have reached some sense of it all. If, for the adolescent me, summer was a recess, life put on hold, the only comparable adult circumstance I have is when a novel is rolling along; that's a vacation, an escape, somewhere I go while everything else seems to stop and wait for me to return.

Like adolescence, writing is very self-indulgent, all tied up emotionally such that there is no objectivity. Once the novel is shared, part of the magic and energy is gone. It's like giving someone a half-knitted sweater (or in 1971, a half-knitted *Ali MacGraw* hat). Once the gift box has been opened, it's hard for the knitter to go back and muster the enthusiasm necessary to complete the work. There was a time when I liked to sew clothes until I realized that I never wore any of my creations (they looked too much like *my* creations); what I enjoyed was

the *idea* of making something. The completed work never lived up to the original vision.

In adolescence, all the secret thoughts and wishes that I carried around were like lucky charms, protective devices, my own personal holes to climb into when the going got tough. Sitting under the bridge, or falling asleep with my sister in her bed right next to mine, or standing in my grandmother's garden, I felt supreme confidence. I felt I could take on the world, beat the hell out of King Kong, do anything I desired. But when I crossed the line, and the gong of a bell announced the beginning of adulthood, I suddenly felt small and insignificant and totally helpless. All I could find to keep me in balance was the image of my grandmother in her garden, or the whiz of the cars on I-95, or the games like "I Spy" that my sister and I called out to each other in a dark room—the way it all smelled and sounded and looked; the way it made me *feel*.

Writing fiction, I get to rummage through my bags, to pick and choose, to alter and mend. I don't, of course, write only about adolescence, and perhaps as I get older, I will feel a lessening need to dwell on the age (though now I'm doubtful). I will be disappointed in myself as a *writer* if I ever stray beyond a point of recognition and identification.

As a teacher I try in the same way not to forget what it felt like to be a student. At the beginning of each semester, I pull out and read the first story I ever wrote in a writing class, and painful as it always is (the ultimate cringe), I read it from start to finish.

I think that to forget what it feels like to be adolescent is to forget how it *feels*—period. Along with the hormones the emotions are working in their purest, simplest forms. When I'm asked how I am able to get inside a character so different from me—a middle-aged man or an elderly woman—and know how this person thinks, my answer is simple. I isolate the emotion at hand. A hat, placed on another head, does not change in shape, size, or color.

When I begin constructing a scene, though I have now lived in several different places, the setting that always comes first to my mind

is my hometown—more specifically, my hometown as it was when I was an adolescent. I rely heavily on that flat, pine-wooded landscape, the rise and fall of the traffic sounds on 1-95, the way the light fell on my bedroom walls on a winter afternoon. I rely on the smells: the cool moldiness of the cemetery where a friend and I rode our bikes and mourned the deaths of people who died before we were born; the smell of my grandmother's kerosene heater, sitting there in the corner of her breakfast room; the musty halls of Joe P. Moore School, with its cracked plaster, ancient graffiti, and large, rattling windows. And yes, I rely on what I was wearing when, and what songs were playing on the radio; these are the things that maintain the momentum.

The sensations of adolescence are so strong and clear that I feel drawn to write about them, and then, *because* I write about them, the clarity sharpens. Growing up, writing fiction—it's magic secrecy, freedom of fantasy, self-consciousness that is all tied up with *appearing before the populace with pants down*.

The fact remains that to get from point A to point C (to get from childhood to adulthood), as scary as that may be, you must go through point B—adolescence—to pick up all of your luggage (the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look). Good, bad, or indifferent, it's how we all got where we are. For my fiction—and for me—the passage is fertile territory. I suspect I'll be unpacking for some time to come.

Reading Group Guide

1. Katie has a birthmark that some people use as a way to identify her. The birthmark is a symbol of how people are stereotyped in this community. Discuss the social strata the novel describes—from those within Katie's class at school to those within the broader structure of the town.
2. Popular culture references to the 1970s—music, fashion, lifestyle—abound in *Ferris Beach*. How has the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s affected life in Fulton?
3. *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank, is an important part of Katie's life, as it is for many girls her age. What is the significance of Katie's identification with Anne Frank?
4. Throughout the novel, Katie discovers that people and situations are often not what they appear. What are some examples of this, and what do these second looks Katie takes lead her to discover about herself?
5. Angela and Mo Rhodes are women Katie idolizes. She finds them both beautiful and wonderfully alive. Discuss how she ultimately comes to see each of them in a very different light and how she makes sense of that.
6. Katie's mother is a misplaced northerner, an outsider in Fulton. How does her different geographical origin play out in a larger theme within the novel? Who are the other outsiders here, and what makes them so?
7. This is a novel of mothers and daughters and how they relate to one another. Discuss whether you think the author has portrayed these relationships realistically.

8. Merle Hucks is a character who takes on an unexpected role. What—or who—is responsible for the path he takes?

9. Sally Jean Rhodes often misuses words and says inappropriate things. How does such a comic figure contribute to the overall progression of the novel?

10. Mrs. Teresa Poole represents the Old South in many ways. Discuss her effects—both positive and negative—on the community.

11. Katie watches the Rhodes' house across the street as if she is watching a play. And she witnesses, from a magnolia tree, Perri Loomis's rape. Discuss these acts of witnessing and Katie's role as witness. Does the witness have a responsibility? What about the role of the witness in the larger context of race and class?

12. Television is used as a backdrop during the dramatic scene when the reader learns that Mo is not coming home. What is the effect of the background noise?

13. The death of Katie's father is significant and sets off a series of changes, most notably in Katie's relationship with her mother. How and why do these changes take place, and how is what happens between Katie and her mother similar to or different from what happens between Misty and Sally Jean?

14. Whispering Pines Cemetery serves as an important backdrop in *Ferris Beach*. Discuss the many ways the characters in the novel are haunted.

TOM RANKIN



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