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Interview with Alex Award Author Peter Rock

[Megan Frazer Blakemore](#) | [Awards](#) | Tuesday, March 16th, 2010

Peter Rock's *My Abandonment* was one of the winners of the 2010 [Alex Award](#). The novel tells the story of Caroline and her father who live more than off the grid in Portland Oregon's Forest Park.

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Congratulations on receiving the Alex Award for *My Abandonment*. This award recognizes books published for adults which are appealing to teens. Did you consider a teen audience while you were writing it?

I'm delighted if a teen audience is drawn to the book and can sympathize with its narrator, Caroline. That said, I wrote the book because I was very curious about where it would go; I don't really think about "audience," I just try to get inside and follow. The kind of storytelling that appeals to me, I think—full of adventure and mystery, not so worried about demonstrating how "smart" the author is—is a kind that would hopefully include teen readers. I believe that younger readers are more willing to engage, to go deep inside a book, and that fascinates me; I remember the wonder I felt, reading when I was younger. Sometimes now I can get back to it. That's why I read, and why I write.

Several of your novels feature teen characters; what do you think draws you to characters in this age group?

Because I am really immature? Honestly, I think this fact about my books is less by choice than by chance. Which is to say that this focus has chosen me? One thing that has drawn me is that I see adolescence as this very important time—we're at once free of our parents' control in many ways, trying to figure out how to understand the world on our own, and we're also generally free of some of the adult responsibilities (such as employment). So it's a period of great testing of boundaries, of finding identity, of wondering. Also, I liked being that age and remember how invigorated and confused I was.

In your acknowledgments, you thank three young women from whose lives you drew inspiration. How do you manage the balance of honoring their stories while creating your fiction? (By the way, I'm not going to name the women since I made the mistake of looking at the acknowledgements before I finished reading, and it gave away something of the story.)

Writing fiction based on or inspired by actual people or events is not something I've often done. Not until recently. It's tricky. Whether or not I've "honored" them is probably up to them to determine, not me. It is a concern, however; I guess my hope is that what comes through is that I have a great fascination and curiosity and wonder about these stories, and that I'm pursuing them out of a desire to exhaust that curiosity, to exercise and exorcise it? For instance, in *My Abandonment*, the "true" story of Caroline and her father is very limited, there is very little known, and then they simply disappeared (one reason I wrote the book—to "figure out" where they'd gone, what had happened to them, and also who they were). So the great majority of the novel departs in almost every particular and detail, every twist and turn from what happens. Did this actual girl (her name was Ruth) have a toy horse, a blue ribbon, did she love libraries? Probably not. People have often asked me what I would do if I encountered this girl, what I would say. I think I would see what she had to say. My hope, perhaps delusional, would be that she would appreciate how much work and energy and goodwill I put into trying to imagine her world—that I was driven by wonder and excitement at what I knew of her. Of course, she might feel a little less happy about me having appropriated her story; in which case I'd be the right person to take it up with! In truth, I have mixed feelings about all this: I feel that these are people who didn't want attention (as far as I know, they are still disappeared), and in some way my novel raises all these questions again, makes people interested in them and where they might be. And at the same time, my book is so clearly fictional, so perhaps it's giving them some cover...

Libraries play a large role in this novel. Since this is a blog for librarians, can you tell us what relationship you have (or have had) with libraries?

I grew up in Salt Lake City and I'm not a Mormon, so I've always had a kind of resistance to churches. Instead, libraries are my churches. I love books, I love to read, I love the hush of libraries, the way imaginations seem to thicken the air. I've spent a lot of time writing in libraries and about libraries because I see them as a strange spaces that exist out of time and place, as the houses of storytelling.

I looked you up on Wikipedia (did you know you have a page?), and this is how your work was summarized: "Rock's fiction focuses on characters on the fringe of society—outsiders, wanderers—and allows his readers to see into the minds of these otherwise invisible characters." What do you think of this categorization?

I did not know that I had a page. I can see that someone might describe my work in this way; it's fair enough. I never set out to write a story thinking, "which fringe character will I focus on today?" however. It's more the case that I think writing about and reading about characters/people unlike ourselves is as close as we can get to getting inside another person's head. This empathy is key, and must have application outside of reading and writing. I've never been an autobiographical writer, in an explicit way. This may be a strength or a weakness, but I've always found more energy for writing at a distance from my immediate (external, if not emotional) experience. By exploring it I hope to translate what I've learned, what's fascinated me.

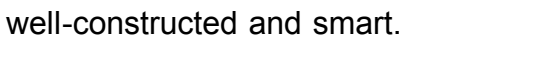
I resorted to Wikipedia because there's not a lot of information about you online. There is the Peter Rock Project, but that's maintained by someone other than you. Are you purposefully avoiding an online presence?

Yes and no. I'm happy to have someone make a website about me or put up an entry on Wikipedia—it means people are interested and that, hopefully, the word will get out. Again, I have mixed feelings. I'd rather the books have their own webpages, maybe (I think *My Abandonment* has a fan page on Facebook that is not run by me [I'm not on Facebook]), and I wouldn't be involved at all. All this is complicated. Maybe I could simplify it this way: 1) I feel it's bad etiquette or manners to push one's work too much, 2) I feel it's distracting for the reader to think about the author, 3) I feel that that talking too much about writing I've done isn't always a good or healthy thing for me as I try to write new things—I don't want to think of myself as an "author" as I'm writing, I want to get further inside than that. Also, looking back on it, I think that *My Abandonment* in some ways encapsulates my anxiety about fatherhood—I finished the book just before my daughter was born, and so I was thinking about fathers and daughters...now I have two daughters, both under 3, so I have little time to work on self-promotion of this kind even if I wanted to!

Finally, what are some books that you loved as a teen, and do you think they influence your work today?

Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy—yes, absolutely influences me every day. Amazing. Such surefootedness in a created world, such wonder, such integrity.

I also like all of those S.E. Hinton books—*The Outsiders*, *Rumblefish*, etc—which are very well-constructed and smart.



[Comments \(2\)](#)

2 Comments

I've really enjoyed Peter Rock's fiction since I picked up "This is the Place" when I was living in SLC. Great book, and he really knows how to evoke a sense of location!

Comment by Todd — March 17, 2010 @ 10:19 am

I just love My Abandonment! Once in a while, I read something so compelling, so fascinating, that I find myself consumed by the characters, wanting to know more than what is revealed by the author. I notice that I'm actively reading, rather than passively letting the words slip in and out of my consciousness. My eyebrows are raised, I'm leaning in as if to hear a little better, and even once in a while whispering out loud, as if the characters could hear my sympathetic murmurs as they struggle against whatever obstacles they are facing. Peter Rock's My Abandonment is such a book. Thank you so much for the interview with the master!

Comment by BytesLand — February 28, 2011 @ 2:39 am

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