

How it Went: Thirteen Late Stories of The Port William Membership

by Wendell Berry

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I was first introduced to Andy Catlett, the precocious young boy who grew up and narrated the life and times of Port William, shortly after having children. At the time I remember thinking that I would like to have a son like Andy one day, which of course was more of a statement about the type of father I hoped to become. Over the years, Wendell Berry's semi-fictional community of Port William, Kentucky has become an established fixture of my imagination. Great stories have a way of doing that. Like any great art, well written stories breed a curious combination of awe and familiarity at the same time. Wendell Berry first started describing the lives and times of the members of Port William in his 1960 novel *Nathan Coulter*, and has produced 8 novels and published over 55 short stories that examine the beauty and complexity of human community. For Berry, this small town in Henry County, Kentucky is more than just fiction, it is the place where he brings to life his deepest contributions to the questions of membership, belonging, stewardship and right relationship with the land.

Berry's stories effortlessly portray characters that feel as real as they do distant. Members of a bygone era, of a harder yet simpler time when things revolved around real life, not the abstractions of our modern age. Despite being in the past, they are not simply products of their "times". Berry is careful to construct his characters as close to real flesh and blood as possible, illustrating that the virtues of stability, community, and a life well lived are as desirable and possible today in any town or city, as they were and are in Port William. And that these virtues are not developed in a vacuum but largely depend on the community. To call Berry's stories nostalgic would be an insult. His stories don't paint some fictional "golden era" or "atopia". Port William is far from perfect, but it is a place occupied by people that have a deep sense of place.

How It Went: Thirteen Late Stories of the Port William Membership is a collection of short stories covering the long life of Andy Catlett, one of the most enduring members of Port Williams. Through thirteen stories, Berry covers the life of Andy from his youth to his preparation to join the whole Membership of Port William. Covering the years 1945-2001, Andy comes to age and experiences the post-World War II reality and the subsequent changes that followed, first as a naïve youth and then with the earned introspection of age. In this way, Andy serves as a kind of bridge, experiencing in himself the challenges that face the very fabric of life in Port William and by extension our own world.

The first story finds eleven-year-old Andy sitting on a fence joining the chorus of bells celebrating the end of what his grandmother called "by its full name" the "terrible war." The title of the Chapter "Divide (V-J Day)" indicates what the last lines of the story make clear. The "terrible war" has ended and the world is temporarily at peace, but a new less "creaturely" world is on the horizon, one that Andy will have to navigate in the years to come. "And so ring the old bell, young Andy Catlett. Ring your ignorant greeting to the new world of machines, chemicals, and fire...Ring farewell to the creaturely world, to the clean springs and streams of your childhood, farewell to the war that will keep on coming back." In a masterful stroke, Berry has already made a point that he does not feel inclined to belabor.

The following four stories cover Andy's learning to leave boyhood behind without losing himself along the way. They are filled with the delight that comes from the freedom, real or imagined, in the mind and heart of a child coming of age. From learning to cut wood well and appreciate people for who they are in "A Conversation," to chasing squirrels and carrying the burden of letting Grandma down in "Time out of Time," to appreciating the "little jobs" dreamed up by his father, in "One Nearly Perfect Day" Andy lets us in to his world and allows us to make it our own. In each story the narrator provides a bit of Andy's current voice reflecting on the events of his childhood.

The middle part of the books covers two stories, one told and one untold, that are part of Port William's collective memory. Inserted in between these stories, is the touching account of Andy's "Dismemberment". A physical dismemberment in the loss of his hand to a harvesting machine in 1974, and a communal dismemberment from the family and community that he would have to remember to depend on. The physical dismemberment that "he would be obliged to think that he had given his hand, or abandoned it, for he had attempted to unclog the corn picker without stopping it, as he had known better to do." Later he viewed "that the machine had taken his hand, or accepted it, as the price of admission into the rapidly mechanizing world that as a child he had not foreseen and as a man did not like." The physical dismemberment precipitated the equally painful communal dismemberment.

"He did not, he could not, ask his friends to help him." But to his great embarrassment they came nonetheless. "'I don't know how to thank you. I don't know how I can ever repay you.' He sounded to himself as if he were rehearsing the speech to give later. And then Nathan, who never wasted words, reached out and took hold of Andy's right forearm, the remnant of his own flesh that Andy himself could hardly bear to touch. Nathan gripped the hurt, the estranged, arm of a friend and kinsmen as if it were the commonest, most familiar object around. He looked straight at Andy and gave a little laugh.

He said, "Help *us*."

"After that Andy was again one of them. He was better."

The final four stories come from Andy's memory and cover deeper themes of marriage, agriculture, progress, and the value of good work. The witness of Danny Branch's friendship and the imagined list of nine principles of "The Branch Way of Doing" and the following reflection on how these and other principles lived by the Membership of Port William provide a template for good stewardship in "The Art of Loading Brush" give the mature reckoning of Andy's thoughts.

The final story, "Rainbow," is written by Andy himself without the need of a narrator. In it he speaks with found memory of Elton Penn who "saw the good and beautiful work that would be required to remake what hard use and neglect had unmade, and he wanted to be the one to do it." Elton bought "the run-down ninety acres directly across the north fork of Bird's Brand" and through "good treatment" made it a testament to being a "farmer born and bred, a land husband, who longed to put his hand to the ground and cause it to flourish."

Interwoven in his admiration of Elton Penn, he tells a story of being called "an old head."

"The phrase may well have meant that I at first thought it did. But the world changes, perspective lengthens, and that was seventy years ago. And now I hold the minds of the

elders and authorities of old Port William in far more respect than I did then. I am one of them now, one of the last of them....I am able now to imagine that they regarded me as a throwback, a boy from somewhere back in time, who had somehow turned up in time. And so, I imagined, they may have thought of me as something like a late-come contemporary of theirs: a young boy with an old head.”

Andy's life clearly parallels the life of Wendell himself, and in this final chapter the past 60 years of his insights are beautifully displayed. However, Wendell does not subsume Andy's voice as his own. In fact, he does not need to. Andy's is his own, even if he is a fictional character, and one feels the gravity and reality of his presence simultaneously to feeling the vision and thoughtfulness of the one who brought him into literary existence. One does not need to be a devotee or frequent reader of Wendell to sense what is happening in this final chapter. It provides a fitting closure to the book.

With a mix of good humor and piercing insight into the human condition, Berry examines the inner life of Andy Catlett. Never forceful, Berry makes his points none the less. Andy is learning to navigate the challenges of a changing world sometimes with more grace than others. Along the way we can learn something to.