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A Call from Saroyan

PAUL KASER

When I was a high school student in a small Ohio town, my sister brought home a college anthology of plays in which I discovered William Saroyan's *My Heart's in the Highlands*. Having some pretensions of becoming a writer, I was struck by the odd joy Saroyan's work conveyed and how it stood out in pleasant contrast to the other writers' mostly dreary depictions of modern life. At sixteen, I responded to his work largely on an emotional level and mistook his style as simple and easy to imitate.

Back then, I could not have imagined ever connecting in real life with this author.

Saroyan's biography revealed that a woman named Martha Foley in New York had discovered his early work and helped launch him, as she had so many other writers, into the wider world of publishing.

Over three decades later, a short story of mine was chosen by that same Martha Foley for inclusion in Houghton Mifflin's annual *The Best American Short Stories* anthology. The Saroyan connections kept occurring.

Shortly after moving to Fresno, I completed my first novel manuscript, which my wife, Norma, helped me proofread and send out to publishers. When Scribner's agreed to publish the work, my New York editor asked me to get endorsements, preferably from noted authors, to include in the book . . . as if I knew lots of famous authors to lean on for endorsements!

A local acquaintance told me: "The only famous author around here is that recluse William Saroyan, and he won't even look at your manuscript. Forget it."

Thinking it was hopeless but knowing I had to tell my editor I had at least tried, I wrote an appeal for recognition and sent it with my manuscript to his Fresno address. I heard nothing for a week or two and then came home one day from my teaching job to be greeted at the door by my beaming wife, who said: "Guess who I was just on the phone with—my father's favorite author."

For a moment I was worried that she meant Mark Twain. Of course, it was Saroyan, whose works her Swedish father had enjoyed reading as part of his “Americanization” efforts.

“He liked your book and he’s going to send a nice endorsement to Scribner’s.” She added that they hadn’t talked much about literature and publishing because when he heard we were soon to have our first child, all he wanted to talk about was family. “He said he’ll ride his bike over here to see us some day.”

Many years after his death, I was asked to do some commentary for a Saroyan documentary the local PBS station was filming. The experience brought back pleasant memories of the day some fifty years earlier when I first discovered William Saroyan’s wild and joyful work.