

RUTH BARTON

Ruth Barton was my first teacher at Colorado College; I took a two block course from her called Creative Writing. In typical Ruth fashion, we met not in one of the sterile classrooms at Armstrong Hall but in a lounge at Montgomery Hall with windows that framed Pike's Peak. On that morning in September 1972, the ten or so of us young writers arranged ourselves on chairs and couches and waited for Professor Barton – who was late.

Time passed and still no Professor Barton. We glanced at our watches, sneaked looks at each other, but no one spoke. Finally, the door opened and shambling into the room was a small woman in cat eye glasses who, in my memory, was clutching a sheaf of books and papers and a cup of coffee. She arranged herself in an armchair, brushed dog hair off her blouse, pushed her own thick hair back from her sharply pointed face, smiled warmly at us, and lit a cigarette.

“Good morning!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “I'm Ruth Barton.”

That voice! Slightly gravelly, rather low, a little breathless. Ruth's voice was her signature: you could hear the Sweetwater, Texas childhood; you could hear the flat Midwestern and western intonations from her years at the University of Wisconsin and in Colorado; but, most of all, you could hear in her voice the lively, inquisitive, humorous, and skeptical intelligence that made her such a compelling presence notwithstanding her unassuming appearance.

Ruth did not look like a college professor to my 17-year-old eyes. She looked like one of the nice lady librarians who worked at the reference desk at my hometown library. But Ruth was to a small town librarian what an astrophysicist is to a high school science teacher; same genus, very different species.

As the creative writing class unfolded, it became apparent that Ruth was a person of profound erudition and a passionate commitment to literature, especially poetry. It was her commitment to the written word that made her such an extraordinary teacher. For Ruth, literature was not optional; it was not an ornament to decorate a liberal arts education like a shiny topper on a Christmas tree. Literature was what gave depth and meaning to our human experience; it was a way of framing our moment-to-moment perception, a way of seeing the world.

Twenty –odd years after I’d graduated, on one of my visits back here, she and I had a conversation about the uses of poetry. I told her that sometimes I would see something or have an experience and spontaneously a line of poetry that I had learned from her would come into my mind to describe that vision or that experience. Yes, she said, of course, and then we sat in her back yard and traded lines from our favorite poems. “Glory be to God for dappled things,” and “Teach us to care and not to care/ Teach us to sit still,” and “The best lack all conviction while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity,” and “A single ship assembles all the sea,” and “At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make/Ambiguous undulations as they sink/Downward to darkness on extended wing.”

Naturally then, her love of literature led her to becoming a mentor to generations of student writers. As a teacher of writing, Ruth imparted a vital lesson: writing is thinking; if your writing is unclear, it is because your thinking is unclear or as she might have put it “dubious.” I’m sure this was a revelation to students who thought that the two were separate activities. But no, Ruth might say, you cannot write clearly if you have not thought clearly about what it is you want to say. In that precept is the key to all good writing. The number of

student writers who studied with Ruth or worked with her on the Cutler Board, and then went on to become successful professional writers is amazing: David Mason, David Owen, Alan Prendergast, Gregg Easterbrook, Jeannette Barnes, Russell Martin and me, just to name a few. I told her once the college could host a writer's symposium that consisted entirely of writers she had mentored.

But as every grateful student knows, great teachers impart life lessons as well as academic ones. Ruth was no exception. Yes, she gave me poetry but more than that she gave me permission to think of myself as a writer by taking seriously what I wrote and treating me as if I were already published. And then she gave me even more; she loved me. I don't say that sentimentally. Ruth was not a sentimental person. She was a clear-eyed, clear-headed rationalist with a frontier woman's stoicism in the face of life's losses: the loss of her husband, of her beloved daughter. Life, she and I agreed, was basically a struggle. Literature helps make it bearable; the great works of literary arts illuminate our suffering and console us. Another helpmate is kindness.

Ruth was kind. She was kind in the ancient sense of that word which derives from the Old English word for family. Not kind in the way that means "nice" – nice is a behavior that even a sociopath can learn, but kindness is bred in the bone. Ruth was kind in the way that means connected; kin, kindred, kinfolk. Ruth's kindness was brisk and practical and generous. I was desperately poor when I was a student at this school and Ruth knew that. Unobtrusively, she fed me at her table, sheltered me under her roof, and hired me for odd jobs to put some money in my pocket. The door of the Barton residence on Custer Street was always open to me. I know I was not the only beneficiary of her kindness, far from it.

I know that generations of students sat at her dining table and poured out their hearts to her; their fears, their hopes, their conflicts, their aspirations. Unlike other adults who were quick to offer advice or admonitions, Ruth knew when to simply listen. She listened to every waif who appeared at her doorsteps with the same kind attention, as if she had not heard these outpourings a hundred times before, as if she did not know that we were simply being young and that time and perspective would lay to rest most of our troubles. She let us purge ourselves of our anxieties and we came away grateful and relieved. In this and in so many other ways, Ruth was kindness in action; she was love in all of its practical manifestations. And that lesson – how to be a good, kind, decent, loving person – that lesson was also not lost on us; indeed it may have been the most important lesson of all that we learned from Ruth. Another lesson I learned from her was to be true to my deepest experience of myself. When Ruth told me I could be a writer, she gave me the permission to trust myself that no one else ever had.

W.H. Auden – a poet about whose virtues Ruth and I mildly disagreed – wrote a poem called “Archeology” in which he says:

Our school text books lie.

What they call History

is nothing to vaunt of,

being made, as it is,

by the criminal in us:

Goodness is timeless.

What he is describing in those lines is what I call the secret history of humanity; it is the history of generations of women and men, who are mostly unknown to us, who have worked

quietly but tirelessly to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, console the sick and dying, advocate for the imprisoned, and, like Ruth, educate the young. Sometimes they appear at decisive moments and leave such a large footprint that we know their names. Most of the time, however, they do their work in relative obscurity but, while their names may be forgotten, their acts of lovingkindness continue to send ripples into the stream of time. Those of us who are fortunate enough to know such women and men metabolize their goodness and carry it with us for as long as we live.

Ruth was a figure in this secret history. The lives she touched, she changed for better. Mine was just one of them. Thank you, Ruth.