The Secret Treasure of Coming Home

One of the cement plates standing in the park holds an image of the house she lived in here in Earlville, a little white house now long gone. What's here is a little commemorative park someone keeps up. Doesn't require much, I suppose.

An old-fashioned merry-go-round stands just beyond the picnic tables, the kind of machine that scared me long ago, when some big kid would push and push until we'd sail around so fast I started to believe if I didn't fly off, my stomach would.

Almost nothing of a path around it, where a circle of deep ruts ran around the one in the park I remember. This thing looks unused.

Behind it, barely visible, is an old pump just waiting to bang its way into a lawsuit. It might well have been the very pump Ruth Suckow used to get water a century ago on this street, in this place.

The Ruth Suckow Park reminds me of a story nobody who's hearing this likely ever read--"Home-coming," about a woman named Bess Gould, who'd grown up in a town like Suckow's hometown of Hawarden, and returned for a reunion. She'd been gone for most of her life. I think that whole story is right here in the Ruth Suckow Park, Earlville, Iowa.

"Home-coming" captures the bitter sweetness that seeps in with pastels of childhood reminiscence. At first, Bess is delighted to be back, lost in the parade of old-timers, each of whom triggers a memory that might otherwise have been lost.

Then, unexpectedly, she discovers her "old flame," Charlie, who is no longer the kid without whom she once could not have imagined her life--or any life at
all. For a time, Bess moves hopelessly back in time to a reunion she hadn't planned or anticipated.

Charlie's wife happens to be gone, which gives Suckow some space to develop what she wants to examine: the dark delight of nostalgia maybe; but even more, the impossibility of forgetting one's first love. Bess is drawn back into a blessed childhood relationship completely and forever gone. She knows it, but she loves it, she relives it with equal doses of childhood joy and grownup sadness.

But she also knows those memories are hers alone and therefore sacred.

"Home-coming" ends with Bess's painful realization that she is not home in the old place, even though something very close to the heart of who she will always be still plays magically along the crick where she and Charlie long ago fished minnows. Coming home is a secret treasure no one else can know, not even her husband.

How does one care for some precious thing no one else will ever know?

In Earlville, Iowa, Ruth Suckow's little park reminds me of that story, and of Ruth Suckow herself, a writer born and reared here, in Hawarden. For me, to sit at one of the picnic tables felt like a "home-coming," even though I'd never stopped in Earlville before. It was a return to Suckow's small-town Midwest realities, most of which have lost savor among today's reading public. For a decade or more, she was a Book-of-the-Month Club star.

That's all history now. What's left is a corner park in Earlville, Iowa, and, here and there, a library copy of a novel or two. Aficionados like me can still sit right there on a picnic bench and read a story or two--maybe more, right there where she drew water a century ago.
It's not a big park. But neither was the lot, I suppose. But it was good to sit there for a time and think through thoughts that can't be shuffled quickly.

If you're coming across Iowa, it's two minutes off Highway 20. Won't cost you much time. Who knows? You might like it. Might even like her.

Do me a favor. If you stop, give that merry-go-round a spin. Put some ruts in that thick grass. Make the place look lived in. That'd be nice.