The Secret Treasure of Coming Home: Ruth Suckow Park, Earlville, Iowa

James C. Schaap

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss3/7
The Secret Treasure of Coming Home: Ruth Suckow Park, Earlville, Iowa

One of the cement plates standing in the park holds an image of the house where Iowa novelist Ruth Suckow lived in Earlville, a little white house long gone, even though most things likely haven’t changed much in this small town where Suckow once lived. Today, what’s there is a little commemorative park someone keeps up. Doesn’t require much, I suppose.

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

There’s almost nothing of a path around it, where a perfect circle of deep ruts ran around the one in the park I remember. Not so here. It looks unused.

James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English Emeritus of Dordt University, living and writing in Alton, Iowa.

Editor’s Note: This article was aired on Dec. 2, 2019, by Siouxland Public Media, KWIT FM 90.3 and KOJI FM 90.7, and published at https://www.kwit.org/post/secret-treasure-coming-home. This article is one in a series of broadcasts on KWIT and is available at KWIT.org as well as Schaap’s website – floydriverpress.com Editor.
Behind it, barely visible, is an old pump just waiting to find 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.

Here it is. There’s no handle. To say the poor thing is useless seems somehow unfeeling. Once upon a time it had identity. Today it’s a stubborn, iron thing city workers might just as well jerk from the well beneath it.

The Ruth Suckow park reminds me of a Suckow story that nobody who’s reading this ever read or heard of—"Home-coming." It’s about a woman named Bess Gould, who’d grown up in a town named Fairhope and returned for a reunion of first settlers, after having been gone for most of her life. In a way, the whole story is here in the Ruth Suckow Park, Earlville, Iowa.

"Home-coming" exquisitely captures the bittersweetness that arrives when childhood reminiscences return in lingering pastels. At first, Bess is delighted, lost in the unending parade of old-timers, each of whom prompts a memory she can’t help but think might otherwise have been lost.

Then, unexpectedly, she runs into her “old flame,” Charlie, a man who is no longer the young man without whom she once could not have imagined her life—or any life at all. For a time, Bess moves almost hopelessly back in time to a homecoming meeting that is something she hadn’t planned or anticipated.

Charlie’s wife happens to be gone, which gives Ruth Suckow some space to develop what it is she wants to examine: the sheer delight of nostalgia; even more, the near impossibility of ever really forgetting first love. Bess is drawn back into a blessed childhood relationship completely and forever gone. And she knows it. But she loves it, relives it with equal doses of childhood joy and adult sadness. She knows it’s all fantasy.

But she also knows that those childhood memories are hers alone and therefore somehow sacred. Fairhope has not forgotten the initial chapters of Bess Gould’s life—including her childhood Charlie; and all of that is something her loving husband will never know or understand. “She felt lost and all alone,” Suckow says at the end of the story, “and her heart was wildly begging [her husband] to come…. ‘Take me away with you,’ she demands of him in the dream she creates in her mind. ‘Be everything. Make it up to me. Don’t let me die away from home.’”

"Home-coming" ends with Bess’s painful assertion that she is not home in Fairhope, even though something very close to the heart of who she is and will always be quite magically remains along the creek where she and Charlie fished for minnows. Childhood Fairhope is a blessing and a treasure no one else knows, not even her husband.

But, how does one care for a precious thing no one else will ever know?

In Earlville, Iowa, Ruth Suckow’s little park reminds me of that story somehow, and of Ruth Suckow herself. To sit at one of those picnic tables felt like a “home-coming,” even though I’d never been there before. It was a return to Suckow’s small-town Midwest realities, most of which have lost their savor among today’s reading public. H. L. Mencken, her first editor, claimed to have discovered her and was first to publish her stories. For a decade or more, she was a Book-of-the-Month Club star, even anthologized.
But that glory is gone now. What’s left is a little park in Earlville, Iowa, and, here and there perhaps, a copy of a novel or two. Aficionados like me can still sit right here on a bench on a warm summer day and read a story or two or three or four—maybe more—right here where she drew water a century ago.

Even though I’d guess I’d be alone if I did, that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be a joy.

Here’s the Suckow story as her park tells it:

“Ruth Suckow loved the Iowa countryside near this site: The rolling farmlands, woods, streams, and wildflowers. She called the little house that stood here, ‘My house.’ Ruth was unknown when she came to Earlville in 1920. By 1926, she had published two novels and many short stories and was recognized in this country and abroad as the author of a fresh kind of realism. Her work tells in rich detail the life of middle-western communities in the earlier part of the 20th century: The family gatherings, church suppers, holiday celebrations, school commencements. Born in Hawarden, Iowa, on August 6, 1892, Ruth died in Claremont, California, January 25, 1960.”

It’s not a very big park. But then, neither was the lot, I suppose. Still, it was good to sit there for a time, sit and think through the kinds of thoughts that can’t be shuffled quickly through, thoughts of numbering our days.

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, okay? Put some ruts in that thick grass. Make the place look lived in.