

## Waltzing With the Captain

Remembering Richard Brautigan

GREG KEELER

Limberlost Press, \$15.00 paper, ISBN 0-931659-93-0

It's hard to know what to make of Greg Keeler. Expressing more precisely this sentiment, naturalist David Quammen once wrote, "Greg Keeler's my absolute favorite practitioner of whatever the hell it is he practices, in all of America."

Actually, Keeler practices a contemporary version of whatever the hell it is that his friend and mentor, Richard Brautigan, practiced. For those who might have forgotten (or never knew in the first place), Brautigan was one of the writers du jour of the 1960s, and his indelible image still lingers along with some of his prose: "The sun was like a huge 50-cent piece that someone had poured kerosene on and then had lit with a match, and said, 'Here hold this while I go get a newspaper' and put the coin in my hand and never came back." That sentence might also describe Keeler's relationship with Brautigan who, in that Orwellian year, 1984, committed suicide, like one of his favorite writers, Ernest Hemingway, by putting a single bullet into his brain. After reading Keeler's affectionate and seriocomic memoir of Brautigan, one imagines Keeler still holding that 50-cent piece.

Although Keeler does not tell us so, he obviously worshipped Brautigan like an older brother. In this case, however, the older brother, born in Tacoma, Washington, in 1935, had thrown a rock through the window of a police station at the age of 20. He wanted something to eat. Presumably, he got his meal before being sent to the Oregon State Hospital where doctors diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic and treated him with electroshock therapy. Not long after his release Brautigan turned up in San Francisco where he eventually grew out his straw-colored hair and a walrus mustache, and purchased a pair of granny glasses, a broad-brimmed hat with a tall crown, a paisley shirt, a striped vest, love beads, Levi's, and cowboy boots. In a word, he became (what else?) a poet. He also married a Japanese woman who bore him a daughter, and, in 1961, the three of them spent the summer camping out in Idaho while the poet worked on his first novel, *Trout Fishing in America* (1967). Eventually, this collage of chain stories found both a publisher and a public, selling more than 2 million copies. Critic Robert Novak calls it "Brautigan's Hemingway book, a kind of 'BigTwo-Hearted River' as seen through the disillusioned eyes of a flower child."

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Greg Keeler's *Waltzing With the Captain* pays homage to Brautigan's most famous book by mimicking its pre-postmodern style. Each chapter is a self-contained fragment, a lyrical narrative loosely linked to the previous chapter. Even Keeler's chapter titles—"Attack of the Thistles," "Night of the Living Borscht," "The So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away Airplane"—recall the zeitgeist, as well as real Brautigan titles like *Revenge of the Lawn*. In the first chapter of *Trout Fishing in America* (aptly titled "The Cover for Trout Fishing in America"), Brautigan describes the actual cover of the book, featuring a photograph

of the author's now-famous pose in front of a blurred "Benjamin Franklin statue in San Francisco's Washington Square." The cover of Keeler's *Waltzing With the Captain* obliquely plays on Brautigan's cover and first chapter by featuring a Greg Keeler painting of Greg Keeler and Richard Brautigan. The book's frontispiece is a 1982 photograph of Keeler and Brautigan on which the painting is based. All this may seem like much ado about very little until we read the book, which makes art by sometimes doubling the doubles.

Brautigan obviously saw in the tall, gangly, bespectacled, blond-haired young Greg Keeler he met in 1978 in Bozeman, Montana, a house-of-mirrors image of himself. At that point, Brautigan, then 43, was probably at the height of his fame. He used his secluded house on 40 acres in Paradise Valley as a getaway—only, of course, there was really no escaping his manic depression or his alcoholism, ever. For a half-dozen years the younger Keeler served at Brautigan's pleasure as his chauffeur (Brautigan never learned to drive), tour guide, host, patron, dinner and drinking companion, and straight man, much to the horror of Keeler's wife, Judy, who figures stoically and comically in the major story as Brautigan's door-slammng nemesis. One day while Brautigan is staying with the Keelers during a writer's residency at the local university where Keeler is a tenureless assistant professor, the Captain strays into the living room "with a towel around him, fresh from the bath and asked, 'Where should I put these dirty clothes?'" Without missing a beat, Judy replies, "'Up in the washing machines at faculty housing' (where the university had reserved a place for Richard)."

Plenty of celebrities make cameo appearances in this memoir (Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, Jimmy Buffett, Rip Torn ... ), but the primary focus always remains on Richard Brautigan, "the big goof," "Captain Colossal, Captain Belly-Buster, Captain Darkness, Captain Clumsy, Captain Random, Captain Death." On the surface, Brautigan would seem to fit almost every stereotype of the 20th-century American white male writer—crazy, alcoholic, suicidal. Somehow Keeler's book nevertheless gets at the mystery of a man who could be charming and funny, brilliant, sad, rude and obnoxious, even mean, but a man who was also generous and kind, although ultimately doomed. Gothic overtones creep around the edges of several chapters, beginning with "The So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away Airplane." One warm summer day the Captain and part of the crew are drinking Chablis on the deck of the ranch house, and the Captain orders "Greggie" to make a paper airplane from the cover of the Captain's new book. Then he tells Greg,

"Get back from the sidewalk about twenty feet and throw it as well as you can. If it goes across the sidewalk, we'll all be rich I tell you, rich. If it doesn't—tragedy."

Elsewhere, pistols (including a .357 magnum) begin appearing inside living rooms in the hands of people we don't always trust (mainly the Captain). Soon enough the Captain begins his long disappearing act, sometimes sending very short and semicryptic letters to Greg from faraway places like Amsterdam and Tokyo, but usually returning to Montana

within a few months.

Part of the pleasure of reading Keeler's book resides in the use he makes of stereotypes and doppelgängers. "Richard himself was merciless when it came to poking fun at romantic characters, but at heart, he was among their ranks," Keeler says at the outset of "Ode to Melancholy," another chapter devoted to the doubling motif. Keeler and the Captain are drinking at one of their Bozeman watering holes when the Captain spots "a solitary young man dressed in black, hunched in a dark corner with coffee, earnestly scribbling away on a note pad." "Look," says Richard, "a melancholic!"

"A what?" says Greg.

"You know, a melancholic. A Bozeman melancholic."

"You mean like in Burton's 'The Anatomy of Melancholy'?"

"No, I mean like yonder earnest young man, gloomily scrawling away in his little pad."

Obviously, both Keeler and Brautigan were once such young men.

Keeler goes on to recount Brautigan as the "fool for love" he knew him to be, and ultimately it is love itself that drives this kooky and gentle recollection of a genuine American character, one actually somewhat at odds with the popular image we have of Richard Brautigan as "the bard of the flower children." In an age in which self-indulgent memoirs have sometimes appeared to dominate western American writing—and make no mistake, both Keeler and Brautigan are western in character—Keeler's self-deprecating humor comes as a welcome respite. If, as critics have alleged, Brautigan wrote *Trout Fishing in America* in response to the horrors of Vietnam and the social and economic evils of the day, there's no doubt Keeler wrote *Waltzing With the Captain* in the same spirit. ■

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