

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

John Vorhaus: Poole's Paradise

John Vorhaus · Wednesday, January 7th, 2015

This is an excerpt from [Poole's Paradise](#), the new novel from John Vorhaus. Poole's Paradise follows earnest young Alexander Poole and his "imperfect search for purpose" in a small New England college town in 1974. It resonates richly of the 1970s, and will ring strong cultural bells for anyone who lived through that time. As this excerpt demonstrates, you can almost smell the ditch weed from here...

Felix Cort Woods spread from the northeast corner of campus up over a hilltop and down to the back side of Greenville. Following my footsteps, I walked to a picnic pavilion at the top, where the trees had been thinned out and an abortive attempt at a playground put in. Vague traces of last summer's frolics still littered the place: a barbecue pit with half-spent coals; a punctured kickball; a bag of empty Schlitz cans. I sat on a cement picnic table and looked off east, trying to pick out the distant line of the Green River – a futile effort in the dark, but anyway it took my mind off my mind.

"Got a light?" the dark suddenly asked.

I flinched, and that made the dark laugh. "Never mind. Turns out I have one." At the snick of a Zippo, a cone of blue and white flame illuminated the next bench over, where a girl lit a cigarette behind the windscreen of her cupped hands. She tipped the pack in my direction. "Cancer stick?"

"No thanks," I said. "Don't smoke."

"Smoke pot?"

"Do smoke pot."

"Let's smoke pot." She stubbed out the cigarette, and as she fished around in her big leather bag for her stash, I took a moment to check her out. She was around my age, interestingly dressed, with a kind of a biker jacket and Gloria Vanderbilt jeans bloused into something like combat boots, long hanging crystal earrings and a Marlboro belt buckle. And I couldn't be sure in the dim light, but I thought her hair was colored, maybe blue. I'd never seen blue hair before.

"What's up with you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

“The way you’re dressed.”

“What’s wrong with how I’m dressed? Man, I just offered to get you stoned. Besides, you’re not so jazzy yourself there, Army Coat.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I laughed. “My friends say I keep it real. Sometimes I keep it too real.”

“Yeah? So then tell me,” she said as she lit a joint, “What’s wrong with how I’m dressed?”

“No, nothing,” I said. “What kind of boots are those?”

“Doc Martens.”

“Yet designer jeans. Yet a biker jacket. Yet those dangly earrings. Can I borrow your lighter?” She handed it over. I struck a flame and held it aloft, examining her in its light. “Yet blue hair.”

“You’re saying I don’t add up?”

“Not entirely, no. But who says you have to add up?”

“Okay. Okay, that’s not completely insulting.” She passed me the joint. “I’m Danielle, by the way. You’re Poole, right?”

I almost jumped. “How’d you know that?”

She pointed to my chest. “It’s on your jacket, dude.” Oh, so it was. I’d forgotten all about that.

“You know,” I said, “in a way it’s kind of freaky that you’re here.”

“Why is that?”

“No, I was just walking along thinking, hey, I’m lonely, and then, boom, there you were. It was like magic.”

“Heh-heh-heh, let’s not get ahead of ourselves there, Romeo. I have a boyfriend. A big one.”

“No, I didn’t mean – ”

“I know, I know, you’re keepin’ it real.” She plucked the joint from my fingers. “Anyway, that’s not magic, just coincidence. I’m up here like you’re up here, staying away from someplace by being somewhere else.”

“Where are you not being right now?”

She looked taken aback. “You want the real deal? Facts and everything?”

“Why not? What harm could it do?”

She coughed a little laugh. “Poole,” she said. “Where’d you get that jacket?”

“Army surplus store.”

“Lucky it had your name.”

“Not magic, just coincidence. So where are you not being right now?”

She shrugged. “Home with my mom. Her boyfriend’s a cuntlip.” I wasn’t used to that kind of imagery from girls, and I guess it showed. “Too rude?” Danielle asked archly. “I give him a different name every day. Yesterday it was fuckwad. Tomorrow it’s assdrip.”

“Sounds like a nice guy.”

“He’s a punk. When he drinks he gets handsy and then it’s best to be out of the house.”

“How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better. What’s it to you?”

“No, I don’t know. Maybe there’s someplace better you could be. Do you go to Cort?”

“No, I don’t go to Cort. I go to work.” It might’ve been the pot talking, but I could hear all kinds of overtones in her voice. Anger. Resentment. Wistfulness or sorrow. But also defiance and pride. Man, that was a lot going on in ten words.

“I’m sorry, I – ”

“What, didn’t realize I was a townie?” She took a step back and faced me, hands on her hips. “Do I look like a Cort girl?”

“What’s a Cort girl look like?”

“You know: J. Crew blazer, Izod shirt, ankle socks. Designer jeans.”

“You’re wearing Vanderbilts.”

She smiled sideways. “Yeah, but mine are stolen.”

“I will say this, most Cort girls don’t have blue hair.”

“Do you like it?”

“Hard to tell from this far away.” I reached in to touch her hair, running my fingers through it and finding it fine. “It doesn’t feel blue,” I said. I leaned closer and sniffed it. “It doesn’t smell blue.” I nuzzled in under it and lay my nose on her neck. “It smells nice.”

For a moment she stretched her neck and went, “Uhn,” but then she put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me back roughly. “Easy there, Cort kid. Didn’t I tell you I had a boyfriend?”

I spread my hands. “If you don’t want to kiss me, don’t kiss me.”

“Keepin’ it real, Poole?”

“It’s what I do.”

I wasn’t surprised to find myself making out with a girl I’d just met; that had happened before. I was a little surprised to be making out with a townie, but in the context of drinking at the

Gunnison, it suddenly didn't feel so strange. We kissed fiercely and at length, then all of a sudden she broke off and started licking my cheek and chin.

"What's that?" I sputtered.

"Face paste," she said. "I face pasted you." She pulled her hair away from her neck. "Try it."

Man, I did, and it was fantastic. I face pasted from the base of her neck to the far reaches of her ear, with an extended detour along the contours of her nose and, just lightly, across her eyelids. "I like face pasting," I said. "I declare I do."

Danielle laughed. "You sound like Dr. Seuss." She kissed me one last time and said, "I gotta go."

"That's a bad idea," I said. "I honestly can't think of a worse idea right now."

"And now you learn that honesty only gets you so far. I don't want you to think raggies are easy."

"Well, I don't want you to think Cort kids are, but I'm willing to take that chance."

She threw her bag over her shoulder. "I'll see you again, Poole. You stand out." She took off, skipping down a backside trail toward town.

I stand out? I never thought I stood out. But I did seem to be having this knack for telling the truth. Just now it scored a point with an interesting chick. I wondered what other tricks it could do.

The author comments on his process

Having written *Poole's Paradise*, I now find that writing a novel can be like carving a sculpture. You start with too much and keep chipping away – "squeezing out the stupid" – until what's left can be called an artistic, as opposed to literary, work. See, the big difference between writers and artists is that writers expect to get edited. We let agents and editors stand in judgment of our work, and make changes according to their notes. Artists don't get notes. They sculpt until the sculpting is done, then they put down their tools. I understand that writing and art are not the same – not the same process, not always the same intent – but I think that writers would be better off if they trusted their vision more. Poole's Paradise, ferociously sculpted and rigorously self-edited, has taught me to trust mine.

Because here's the thing: When you decide that no one will make your choices but you, you take on a responsibility to be clear-eyed and very demanding of your own work. I hated Poole for 14 of the 15 months it took to write, but I kept getting rid of what didn't work and ultimately came to love what was left. I found the sculpture inside the stone, then I put down my tools.

And picked up other ones. Now I'm marketing the work, and I hate that part of the process like a cat hates baths. But what are you going to do? Since I write "artisanal novels," it's hard to get heard above the din of social media, and it's up to no one but me to put energy into making that happen. Frankly, I'd rather be writing, but the reality for most novelists in our time is that we have to do it ourselves.

So then, one might wonder, why do it all? The answer is "legacy," an issue of no small concern to every writer I know. We only have these few frail years of our lifespans in which to make our mark, and we have no way of knowing which part of our mark will last. My plan is to download as

much as I can from the ephemeral vessel of my brain into the slightly less ephemeral vessels of the page or the e-page, for the simple reason that if my thoughts die inside my brain, they do no one any damn good. If it sounds like I'm thinking about "higher purpose," I guess I am. I see myself as a steward of my DNA, and see my job in this life is to honor that stewardship as best I can. Sharing my wisdom in ways that help people's lives rise is how I fulfill my stewardship. This makes me in no way special – everyone has wisdom and everyone can share it if they choose.

So here's the wisdom of *Poole's Paradise* as I understand it: Purpose comes when it comes. If you feel like you haven't found yours, that's totally okay, because while you're searching for purpose, the search for purpose is your purpose. If you find that idea resonant, I think you'll really enjoy *Poole's Paradise*. And if you do, then I can put down my tools proudly and say, "My work here is done."

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