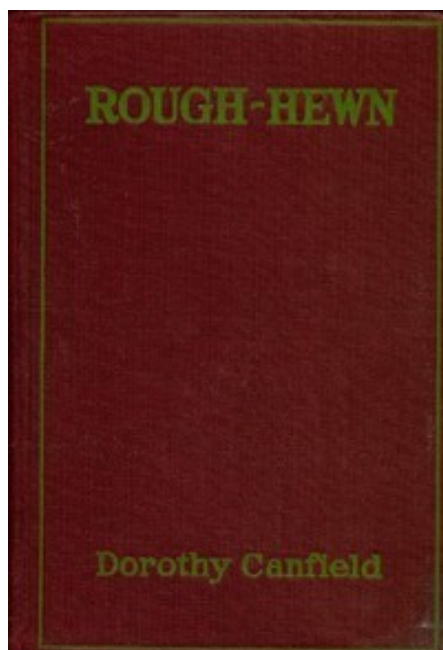




Rough-Hewn

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

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In the spring of 1893 Strindberg had just published "A Fool's Confession," D'Annunzio was employing all the multicolored glory of his style to prove "The Triumph of Death"; Hardy was somberly mixing on his palette the twilight grays and blacks and mourning purples of "Jude the Obscure"; Nordau, gnashing his teeth, was bellowing "Decadent" at his contemporaries who smirked a complacent acceptance of the epithet ... and, all unconscious of the futility and sordidness of the world, Neale Crittenden swaggered along Central Avenue, brandishing his shinny stick.

Rough-Hewn Details

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From Reader Review Rough-Hewn for online ebook

Perry Whitford says

Lengthy romance of unusual depth and insight into its two characters, despite the fact they are kept apart for the vast majority of the story.

We first see Neale Crittenden aged ten, playing shinny stick and throwing stones at rival kids from Hoboken. He thinks of nothing but being successful at games, a single mindedness of purpose which will drive him on through college and on into his career in business as a lumber salesman.

Mary 'Marise' Allen is raised abroad in Bayonne near the border between France and Catalonia. Her father is inattentive and her mother both indolent and restless, a combination leading to a tragedy that shapes the young girl.

The early sections of the book, which focus on Neale and Marise's early experiences, are particularly excellent. Here's a passage where the young Marise learns about the contradictory ways of adult behaviour:

'it wasn't nice to do things behind Maman's back, but everybody seemed to be doing things behind everybody else's back. Maman did behind Father's, lots of times, and it was perfectly understood between them that Marise was never to tell Father on her.'

Canfield Fisher was a prominent educationalist in her time, basing her approach on the Montessori method. As such corresponding sections of the novel dedicated to schooling are very interesting. Neale's conventional education is shown to be all about cramming facts for exams, not at all about personal development:

'The life of his personality, his inner self, during those two years, realised the ideal of the eighteenth century educator who felt that the only safe up-bringing for boys would be to shut them up in a barrel, between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and feed them through the bung-hole.'

When the story started out by presenting the developments of Neale and Marise in separate, alternating sections I immediately hoped that this would remain the case until the final part. The structure made good on my wish.

When they do finally meet, they are ready for each other. He is *'an unlighted torch'* after one good but ultimately unsuccessful love affair, she has come to mistakenly *'think that the evil was in life itself and not in the coarse and evil minds.'*

The novel is also full of superbly realised support characters who offer their own perspectives on people and events. Worth especial mention is Jeanne Amigorena, a prejudiced yet fiercely loyal Basque peasant woman who effectively raises Marise.

A brilliant novel of contrasting childhood and youth which leads to a very adult romance.

Jane says

I have neglected Dorothy Canfield Fisher's work for a long time, because I was torn over which of two books about the same two characters I should read first.

The book that was written first but set later, or the book that was written second but set earlier? Writing order or chronological order? The book I owned or the book that I didn't? My head said the first and my heart said the second!

As Dorothy Canfield's day on *The Birthday Book of Underappreciated Authors* drew near I knew that I had to make a decision, and I did. The heart won! It told me that I wanted to meet these two characters – Neale and Marise – as children, and that I didn't want my impressions of them as children to be affected by my knowledge of what they would do, what would happen to them in later life. The head appreciated the sense of that!

'Rough-Hewn' follows Neil and Marise from childhood to the beginnings of their adult lives when they finally meet.

Neale grows up in New Jersey, the only child of parents who are devoted to each other. They send him to a private school, and he does well enough but sports and games are his consuming passion. He progresses to college at Columbia, where football becomes the focus and striving for success teaches him a great deal; and he spends his summer in Massachusetts, where his grandfather runs the family lumber mill. Eventually he will work there too, and his new ideas breathe new life into the business. He is a success, but when the friend who had become a girlfriend leaves him he begins to question his purpose in life. He gives up his job to travel, hoping to find an answer ...

Marise Allen grows up in Bayonne, near France's border with Spain. Her father is the sales representative of an American company there, but his family has moved to France not for that but because Marise's mother believes that she will be happier there than she was in provincial American life. She loves her daughter, but she is too caught up with her own pursuit of art, culture and love to play the role of mother. Marise's upbringing is left to the Basque servants, who love her dearly but have no regard for her mother. When her mother's actions spark a tragedy and a scandal the servants and her teacher do everything they can to protect Marise, but she is profoundly affected and she has only her distant father, who will do his duty but not much more, to help her find her place in the world ...

The story of each life was told quite beautifully, with sensitivity, with intelligence, with empathy, and without one single drop of sentimentality. There is no plot as such, but I was captivated by the unfolding of each life. I noticed that they were told rather differently. Neale's story was told in a straightforward way, always from his point of view; while Marise's story was often told through the accounts of people around her. That reflected the different nature of the stories, and while I found Neale's story easier to read I was more anxious to follow Marise's story.

I found so much to love in this book.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher drew out the characteristics of the two families beautifully.

I loved the portrayal of the happy marriage of Neale's parents, and at first I wondered if he was coming second to the relationship between the two of them, but in time I realised that they were working hard at the business of parenthood and making sure that he had the right opportunities to learn and grow and was well equipped for whatever life he might want to live.

Marise's parents were more difficult to love, but even so I could understand.

The evolution of those characters and their relationships were quite brilliantly done. There were so many significant moments perfectly caught, and a great many lessons were learned.

There were a great many more characters who were so well drawn that they lived and breathed. I was

particularly taken with Jeanne, the servant who loved Marise like a daughter; and with Eugenia, Marise's spirited school-friend.

I was equally taken with what the telling of Neale's story and Marise's story had to say about education and how we learn and grow.

Music would be Marise's salvation, and I loved reading about it.

"The silence was intense.

And then it seemed to her that the silence had been broken by a voice, a beautiful, quivering voice, deep and true, which went straight to her heart, as though some one had spoken a strong, loving word. At the sound she stopped trembling and sat motionless.

Before she could draw her breath in wonder, she knew what it had been ... only a note of music. Her own hand falling on a key of the piano had struck a note, which was even then echoing in her ears.

But the first impression was ineffaceable. That, too, rang in her ears. It seemed as though it was the first time she had ever heard a note of music. Really, really that was so. She had never been still enough before to hear how a note sounded. How it rang and rang in the stillness, its deep vibration stirring echoes deep within Marise's heart! She had thought it was a voice. Why, it was like a voice, a voice speaking to her, just when she had been so sure that there wasn't any voice she could possibly expect to hear.

She sat up marveling, and struck another note. Into the dead, stagnant air of the room, and into her loneliness, it sang out bravely, the same living voice, thrilling and speaking to her. She struck a chord, astonished at what she heard in it—all those separate voices, each one rich and true and strong and different from the others, and all shouting together in glorious friendliness. "That's the way things ought to be," thought Marise, "that's the way people ought to be." But, oh, how little they were like that! But here was a world where she could always make it come true, where she could have that singing-together any time she wished to make it for herself.

She struck more chords, her fingers finding the keys with the second-nature sureness, learned in her months of dreary practice.

She listened to the sounds, shaken and transported to hear how they flooded the barren emptiness of the room with glory, how they filled her heart full, full of happiness ... only if she were happy, why was she crying, the tears running as fast as they could down her cheeks?

This was one of the remembered moments which brought nothing but a pang of joy to Marise. When it came, the world about her brightened."

I couldn't feel the same way about Neale's love of sport, but I could understand why it was so fundamental for him.

I did feel the same way about his discovery and his love of books:

"He didn't suppose these grown-up books in the library could be worth anything, but he took down a volume to see.

"Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place over-grown with nettles was the

churchyard ...”

Half an hour later Neale was still standing by the book-case, the book in his hand, his mouth hanging open, shivering in the clammy mist together with Pip and the man with the iron chain. An hour later he was tucked into the Morris chair, among the cushions of which he hid the book when the dinner bell made him reluctantly lay it aside.

What made him hide it? An invincible sense of moral decency made him hide it. He would have shuddered and cowered like a modest girl whose bed-room door is opened inadvertently by a stranger, at the very idea of carrying the book to the table and pouring out to his father what it made him feel. With a shy, virginal delicacy he stood guard, half-frightened, half-enchanted, over the first warm gush from the unexpected well-springs of emotion in his heart. If his father had come into the room, had seen what he was reading and asked him how he liked it, he would have answered briefly, “Oh, all right.”

But for the next three days he did nothing but live with Pip, and feel intolerable sympathy, far deeper than anything he had ever felt in his own healthy life, for the convict victim of society. On the afternoon of the third day, his heart pounding hard with hope, he was in the row-boat, in the track of the steamer. The Morris-chair in which he sat, swayed up and down to the ocean rhythm of the great deeps which bore him along. He peered forward. There was the steamer at last, coming head on. He called to Provis to sit still, “she was nearing us very fast,” ... “her shadow on us,” ... and then, oh, gosh! ... the police-boat, the betrayal, the summons to surrender!

Neale’s soul recoiled upon itself in a shudder of horrified revolt. He recognized the traitor, a white terror on his face. Grinding his teeth, Neale leaped at his throat. With a roar the water closed over their heads ... he would never let him go, never, never.... Down they went to the depths, to the black depths, fiercely locked in each other’s arms. Neale smothered and strangled there ... and came up into another world, the world of books.”

There are many more wonderful passages that I could pull out.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher created a world, she made it spin, and she spoke quietly and profoundly about the human condition.

I knew how this book would end, but I was so caught up that I didn’t think about it until I got there.

That final act was so right, so perfectly done, that I could happily read it over and over again.

I’m not quite ready to let go of this book yet, but when I am I will read the other book that Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote about Neal and Marise, and I am quite sure that after that I will be reading more of her work.

Wealththeow says

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