Native Voice

Sanford Phippen stands for regional fiction that’s true.

BY GEORGE LOWERY

Whatever your image of Maine, chances are it was entirely formed or at least strongly affected by writers or advertisers from outside the state. Which rather grates on Maine writers.

Today in Maine a thriving literary scene, composed primarily of native-born writers, has risen up in rebellion against distorted images of Mainers and the cultural usurpation of these writers “from away.”

Replacing the old-style writing—folksy stereotypes of Mainers and rhapsodic paens to scenery, dating from Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods* (1862)—is fiction squarely facing Maine’s reality: its poverty, isolation, social maladies, and limited opportunities.

Writers high in today’s Maine literary firmament include Carolyn Chute (*The Beans of Egypt, Maine*), Cathie Pelletier (*The Funeral Makers*), and the ubiquitous, best-selling Stephen King.

There is also the writer proclaimed by *Downeast* magazine as “the guru of the new Maine literature,” Sanford Phippen.

Phippen has published two acclaimed short story collections, *The Police Know Everything* (1982) and *People Trying To Be Good* (1988); edited an anthology titled *The Best Maine Stories* (1986); and is now revising his first novel, *Kitchen Boy*.

His work strives to preserve the vanishing way of life and patterns of speech of a Maine faced with development, gentrification, cable television, and a rending of the social fabric. “I want to save the way it was for the record,” Phippen says.

In 1980, at the dawn of the Maine renaissance, Phippen launched an aesthetic manifesto in an influential essay titled “Missing from the Books: My Maine.” His thesis: only natives or longtime residents can accurately capture Maine on paper. Out-of-state writers who summer on the coast or merely visit the state produce hideous caricatures of Mainers and, worse, idealize a way of life they are not privy to. It is an insight applicable to most, if not all, regional literature.

These “Maine Mythologists,” Phippen writes, “hype the Maine that never was,” but their parvenu status bars them from ever knowing “the Maine I grew up in; the Maine I both love and hate, that is in my blood and ancestry and will haunt me always.”

Mainers were reduced to local color, appearing as backdrops in their own lives. No mention was made of the “subterranean, unreported life of intense social melodrama: alcoholism, incest, illicit love, homosexuality, and madness” that animate Phippen’s complex characters.

Phippen offsets Maine’s less appealing aspects with humor, obvious affection for his characters, and the native’s insight into a way of life that is in many ways unique in this country.

In Syracuse, where he came to teach high school English in the 1960s, Phippen formed a literary friendship that first opened him to the possibilities of writing about his people.

Phippen had completed a master’s degree at SU when he met a fellow alumnus and Syracuse native, the novelist John A. Williams, who was the father of one of his students.

“Here I was, a white hick from eastern Maine, teaching black kids,” Phippen says. “I felt so out of it. Black people are scarce in Maine, and I hadn’t read any black literature.

“But the way [Williams] wrote about Syracuse, and about being black,” Phippen says, “made me realize I could write about Maine natives and my Maine the same way. Have the same gutsy way of looking at things. Dare to put it down truthfully.”

“Syracuse is my second home,” Phippen says. “It’s where I learned to look at the world. Even though it was only 500 miles from Maine, it provided me with the perspective I needed to look back at where I grew up.”

Phippen recalls the rather distorted way some of his Syracuse colleagues perceived Maine.

“Otherwise intelligent people at the University
would say, 'Oh, Sandy, I just love Maine. I ate a lobster once.' All this nonsense about how wonderful Maine was. And I kept thinking: Maine isn’t that wonderful. It’s been called the Mississippi of the north.

Phippen recalls that as a child he read the novels and stories of Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, whose work seemed uncannily familiar to him.

“Southern writers, more than Maine writers, influenced me,” he says. In their treatment of poverty, ignorance, and bizarre characters in rural settings, Phippen found “the real Maine, as far as I was concerned.”

By the mid-1970s, in addition to writing fiction, Phippen began to write columns for newspapers in his home state and to review books for Maine Life magazine. Over the years he has acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of Maine letters past and present.

After teaching for a dozen years in Syracuse schools, Phippen returned to Maine to take up his role as “guru.” When he arrived home, reticent locals displayed no curiosity about where he had been, “as if I’d been on an extended shopping trip.

“It’s not that (Maine) people are cold,” Phippen says. “They’re not. But they don’t kiss. They don’t hug. They don’t say, ‘I love you.’ They don’t show their emotions at all.”

Phippen’s stories are wry and frankly autobiographical. His characters include Fod, a lobster truck driver whose death doesn’t sadden his family; Bunny Crowley, a 75-year-old policewoman; and Annie LaPointe, once a vapid high school cheerleader grown up and into a grim middle age.

Some of the people Phippen modeled his characters on were upset when his first collection of stories was published. “My aunt punched me in the nose at a family reunion,” he says. Others refused to speak to him and snubbed him socially for about a year after The Police came out.

“I never wanted to hurt anybody. I just wanted to say what was truthful and close to the bone, explaining what it was like to grow up here,” Phippen says. “I was so sick of reviewing so many stories about people who didn’t know Maine. People here are just as mean and awful and wonderful and good as any other place.”

Phippen insists his writing is sympathetic in a manner possible only from an insider. “I thought my book was full of love and humor, but some people just could not handle it. I was calling attention to situations these people thought they had escaped.”

Among the many redeeming characteristics of rural Maine life, according to Phippen, is that in small towns people tend to be honest and dependable because everyone knows everyone. One gets a reputation fast.

In small coastal towns, in shacks, and in the mansions of the summer people, Phippen’s characters display universal qualities as well as those peculiar to Maine. Like any writer, Phippen hopes to capture and reveal such qualities, both bad and good. In those cases where the truth might hurt, Phippen has learned to follow the dictum of Mark Twain.

“If you’re going to tell the truth, you better make ’em laugh, or they’ll kill you. I hope in that way I’ve captured the feel of the place, the people, and the times.”

“The Maine Food Plan”

By Sanford Phippen

“The ugliest couple in the world,” my father called Pean and Minerva. “The God-dammed ugliest” he’d ever seen; and it was true that standing side by side they did make the man and woman in “American Gothic” look positively cheerful and light-hearted.

“They can’t help it,” my mother would say, “and they are relatives, remember.”

Minerva was a case. Before she married Pean, she had been a schoolteacher in the days when a person could start teaching with only a high school diploma, but she was such a homely-looking creature, especially with her face all contorted and twisted into the clown face that she thought would amuse children. Instead, she scared the hell out of us. She had big lips, bug eyes, bad breath, a mustache, and always wore hair nets.

Minerva was a big one for clubs and plans. She was the first in the neighborhood back in the ‘50s to have a Tupperware party. Then, there was the Maine Food Plan, a grand scheme whereby a customer would agree to pay so much a month for a new freezer which would be stocked by the Maine Food Company. Minerva and Pean signed up right away for it.

It was only a year or so after Minerva and Pean had been living on the Maine Food Plan that Pean died. Pean’s funeral was the first one I ever went to, and I was shocked by the sight of my first dead human body. It didn’t look like Pean at all. It was shaved, there was no hat on its head, and it was laid out straight. It wasn’t hunched over. A total stranger in Pean’s casket.

Minerva put on a good show, weeping and wailing for days before, during, and after the funeral.

Then there was the morning of Minerva’s confession. I awoke that morning to Minerva’s pounding on the front door and screaming for my mother.

“Minerva, what is it? What is it?” my mother was saying, trying to calm the hysterical woman down, but not having much luck.

“I’ve never had sexual intercourse!” she kept screaming over and over, sobbing in between exclamations.

“Well, ya didn’t miss that much, Minerva,” my mother said, but Minerva didn’t seem to be much comforted by this.

We’d hear reports that Minerva was stealing from the stores in Ellsworth, had made a strange remark to someone in church, and that she had several long talks with the Baptist minister and asked if a strict Baptist lady like her, at her age, could become a nun.

It was on Halloween night that fall, when Cousin Lillie and I crept quietly around that fall, when Cousin Lillie and I crept quietly around back, and there we saw her in the light of her bedroom window. She was naked and on the edge of her bed mumbling something about Jesus.

So Minerva had to leave her home. Then came a period of Minerva’s life when she had to be institutionalized from mental hospital to halfway house, and finally in her seventies in a nursing home.

I had begun to be curious as to why some couples around town were couples. Some marriages didn’t make much sense to me, especially if they were non-sexual and childless, so I asked Aunt Myra why Minerva married Pean in the first place.

She answered without hesitation. “Well, it seems to me Minerva needed a home, and Pean needed someone to take care of him. Simple as that.”

My mother agreed, adding, “The problem was that Minerva needed taking care of, too. She was always great about doing things herself.”

Adapted from People Trying To Be Good, copyright 1988, Sanford Phippen; published by the Puckerbrush Press, Orono, Maine.