

STINK CITY


Jennings

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Richard W. Jennings



Houghton Mifflin Company Boston 2006

Walter Lorraine  Books

For Ashle, Maddie, Faith, Halle, and Aidan

Walter Lorraine Books

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— R.W.J.

A Long Time Ago in a Lake Far Away

Sploosh!

The stinkbait plug hit the top of the choppy water and sank slowly to the bottom, sending up a tiny cloud of mud dust as it alighted silently near a rusted-out Kelvinator refrigerator, with its door removed, an artifact that some Ozark hillbilly, believing all bodies of water to be God's trash dumpsters, had cast into the lake many years before.

Inside the icebox, dozing as he did for twenty-two hours out of every day, was Old Foster, the biggest, meanest, ugliest catfish in the forty-eight contiguous

states, a gruesome-looking member of a rare subspecies known to a handful of foreign-speaking, American-trained ichthyologists as a horned pout.

Among ordinary sports fishermen, Old Foster had grown to mythic status. Fathers told their sons about him. The sons told *their* sons. (The mothers, meanwhile, attempted to avoid getting involved in the conversation by reading home decorating catalogs and baking simple, heartwarming treats using the dough for Pillsbury crescent rolls.)

Of the many men determined to catch Old Foster and bask in the bright, unnatural, and presumably lucrative light of fame, none was more determined than a man recently retired from government service named Earl Emerson Carlsen.

For four years, forsaking traditional family obligations, Earl Emerson Carlsen had been experimenting with various concoctions to create the perfect catfish bait, something he hoped that even the elusive Old Foster could not resist.

For each day of those four frustrating years, Earl Emerson Carlsen had woken up before sunrise, rubbed a plug in a newly created recipe of foulness, putridity, and breath-sucking stink, and sat quietly in his little aluminum bass boat in the semidarkness

to wait for Old Foster to come to breakfast.

And for four seemingly wasted years, Earl Emerson Carlsen had returned home empty-handed.

But Earl Emerson Carlsen was no ordinary fisherman, and, for that matter, no ordinary man.

If he was feeling discouraged, he never let it show. Success in any field, he knew, is based on personal obsession. No matter how many times you fail, you must never, ever give up.

If you want to be the world's greatest baseball player, for example, you must play baseball all the time until you *are* the greatest.

If you hanker to become the world's most admired ballerina, then you must dance, dance, dance, and dance.

If you want to dominate the business of retailing throughout the world, you can never stop lowering prices, or wages, or employee benefits. (Arguably, at some point, you must give your goods away.)

And if you want to catch Old Foster, you must spend every day of your life sitting patiently in your boat.

Such aspiration is not an avocation. It is not a job. It is not even a duty. It is nothing less than a religious calling.

Earl Emerson Carlsen knew this, even if his wife and family and neighbors did not.

A flock of geese flew over the lake well before sunrise, unseen, but their raucous calls were heard by Earl Emerson Carlsen, who, as usual, was rocking in the breeze in his lightweight boat.

Something about the day portended change, not unlike the dramatic arrival of Mary Poppins one morning in London so many years ago, flying in so unexpectedly on a simple but sturdy black umbrella.

But on this particular day, just as the sun peeked over the shimmering cottonwoods, an overwhelmed Old Foster took the compact lump of unusually aromatic bait, and Earl Emerson Carlsen's life changed forever. And although Earl Emerson Carlsen didn't realize it at the time, so did the life of his grandchild, Cade Carlsen, yet unborn.

"Eureka!" cried Earl Emerson Carlsen, as Old Foster pulled him overboard into the chilly waters.

"I have found it!"

The Shadow of Your Smell

You know how every house you enter has its own

distinctive aroma—a family smell—that its occupants seem not to detect?

When you first step inside, some houses greet you with a blend of moldy basements, piled-up laundry, neglected bathrooms, and cats, while others are thick with the synthetic emissions of spring-scented bath soaps and orange cleanser.

Some people's houses smell like barrooms, with cigarette smoke trapped in the draperies and the people themselves cologned with alcoholic beverages. Other houses I've been in smell of well-worn shoes, cooked cauliflower, fresh paint, Christmas, bug spray, and, in one particular case that I will never, ever forget, impending death.

No two households smell the same, and while I'm sure that I will never know the truth about mine, when my father was here, the garage—the only room that was truly his—smelled strongly of cigars. Since then, as a household of two hygienic, fastidious women—me and my mom—we put a lot of faith in vanilla PlugIns.

But this is not about me. This is about my neighbor—the poor kid.

There's nothing wrong with Cade Carlsen's looks. He has blond hair, brown eyes, reasonably clear skin,

and in profile his face resembles an ancient Mediterranean statue before its nose got knocked off by barbarians.

Cade is shorter than the other kids at school, but at fifteen, it's possible that he's still growing. Time will tell. And it's not like he's broke or selfish or mean-spirited or anything. Thanks to a thriving family business—the root of his troubles—he has a tidy cache of spending money with which he is quite generous, for all the good it does him socially.

No, the problem with Cade Carlsen isn't his appearance or his financial circumstances or his personality.

It's that he smells bad.

In fact, Cade's house and his whole stinking family smell bad—gawd-awful, in fact—and there's no getting around it.

Anyway, the stink is not the worst part.

The worst part is that thanks to coincidences of birth and geographical proximity, I am Cade Carlsen's best friend. This is not a situation that I would have selected for myself.

Thankfully, a sinus condition due to airborne country allergens permits me to bear this otherwise unbearable burden much of the time.

As with all things, there is a logical explanation for Cade Carlsen's deplorable situation, which I can sum up in two words:

Stink City.

Stink City is the registered trademark of the most effective catfish bait ever devised by the wily mind of man. It is also quite possibly the single most noxious-smelling substance on this planet. Once you get it on you, it's impossible to get it off.

On Saturdays during fishing season, just as soon as he gets off work, Cade takes a shower.

It's hardly worth the bother.

You know how dogs like to roll in stink? You know how their sense of smell is a million times more sensitive than humans'? According to scientists, dogs can detect odors that we humans don't even know exist. No less an expert than the Page-A-Day® calendar reports that dogs can smell the subtle changes in our body chemistry when we go from feeling happy to feeling sad, or from being well to being sick.

That's why I recommend that if your dog should ever run away, before you go posting a reward, wait a few days, then call the Carlsens at 1-555-CATBAIT. (This is a free call.) Within the four-state region, sooner or later, most itinerant canines follow their

noses to the powerful aroma emanating from the Carlsens' place.

That's where the Carlsens make their ghastly goo, in back of their house, in the secrecy of a steel shed on a thousand-acre spread of prairie grasses next door to my mother and me.

Lucky us.

But, as Cade points out, they were there first. In fact, it was Cade's great-grandfather who started the company after he retired from his high-ranking government job. Today the old geezer is one hundred and seven years old, which makes him one of the oldest people in the world.

Every year on his birthday, the *Pottersville Post* runs Earl Emerson Carlsen's picture on the front page. On my doorstep, thankfully, it smells like fresh newsprint.

The old man is quite wrinkled, but his creases are only skin-deep. His great-grandson, on the other hand, is fully divided, a boy at odds with himself.

Cade Carlsen has a worried mind that he can never shut off. Among his more earnest anxieties is a concern for the fate of catfish.

And why?

"Fish feel pain," Cade declares.

A Woman's Burden

"Fish feel pain," Cade Carlsen, the Stink City heir apparent, repeated as we sat together in the back of the school bus. "It's a proven scientific fact. It's simply not right to hook them."

"If you say so," I agreed, wiping my runny nose with the back of my hand.

A fish's ability to register pain was a subject I knew something about, having followed the controversy through the pages of the *Pottersville Post* for some time.

For years, few people bothered to take the fish's point of view seriously. A fish's nervous system is too primitive for it to suffer from a fishhook in its lip, the experts agreed. Even dropping a lobster into boiling water isn't torture, they claimed, despite the racket made by doomed crustaceans thrashing around in the pot. Animals such as these just don't have the brains for pain, authorities pointed out.

Uh-huh.

Research scientists in Great Britain disagreed. They discovered a number of receptors in the heads of fish that resemble pain receptors in humans and, in controlled experiments, observed behavior in fish

consistent with human reactions to torture, include writhing around uncontrollably and attempting to scream.

In other words, big brains or little brains, if you stick 'em, boil 'em, cut 'em, or leave 'em out to dry on the dock, it's going to hurt like the dickens.

So Cade Carlsen was not necessarily mistaken when he decided to side with the fish. His mistake—or series of mistakes, as it turned out—was in how he went about it.

On impulse, he joined the Foundation for Ichthyology Studies and Humane Treatment of Aquatic Life Everywhere (the initials spell out FISH-TALE), headquartered in Springfield, where shortly after his check cleared he was named Junior Regional Chairman, Freshwater Division, meaning, as I interpret such matters, that he was among the organization's biggest saps.

"If your parents ever find out what you did, you're going to be in a lot of trouble," I warned him. "Their livelihood depends on people fishing with a clear conscience, unless, of course, there's beer involved."

"No adult should have a clear conscience," Cade retorted. "Besides, do you think my parents would prefer I sit on my butt and do nothing?"

“Of course they would,” I told him. “That’s what fishing is.”

I might have been more sympathetic to his gesture if it had involved cottontail rabbits, mallard ducks, white-tailed deer, or even butterflies—anything but catfish.

With their forked tails, squashed faces, wide, pale, bloated lips, squirmy whiskers, and patches of fat, catfish are nasty, slimy, lurking bottom feeders. If it sinks and it stinks, a catfish will eat it, and the dead-er it is, the better it tastes to a catfish.

In my opinion, the species is little more than a wet, featherless variation on the visually offensive turkey vulture. The catfish’s only real attribute is that, when breaded and deep-fried, it tastes good.

I like mine with tartar sauce.

But fate insisted that this foolish boy be my friend, so as we walked from the bus stop down the gravel road on a cold February afternoon with a pack of stray dogs sniffing at his aromatic heels, I tried a different tack.

“Did you ever wonder why fish have such disgusting names?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?” Cade answered. “What’s wrong with ‘catfish’?”

“Well, that one’s not so bad, but what about crappie, shad, scup, roach, goggle eye, and sucker?” I said.

Cade displayed a blank look.

“Okay,” I said. “Then try shovelhead, hammerhead, chub, hick, hogchoker, toadfish, lizardfish, hagfish, and snook. Those are hardly names you’d want to give your children.”

“I don’t plan to have any children,” he announced, kicking a rock into the ditch, where it sent a hapless hidden toad scurrying for the safety of the underbrush.

“No children?” I responded. “Not ever?”

“What would be the point, Leigh Ann?” he replied. “It’s such a cruel world. They’d only wind up being unhappy.”

Hmm, I thought. This boy is seriously depressed.

What is it about being born female? Are we destined to become nothing more than guardian angels, school-teachers, diaper changers, and nurses?

Whatever the circumstances, I realized that it was up to me—and me alone—to straighten out this distraught, confused, and very stinky young boy.

All right, I said to fate. If you insist.