# OURSELVES TO KNOW

A NOVEL *by*

John O'Hara

RANDOM HOUSE · NEW YORK

First Printing

© Copyright, 1960, by John O'Hara

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in New York by Random House, Inc., and simultaneously in Toronto, Canada, by Random House of Canada, Limited.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 60–5528

Manufactured in the United States of America
by H. Wolff Book Mfg. Co., Inc.

# OURSELVES TO KNOW

*Books by* JOHN O'HARA

*Appointment in Samarra*
*The Doctor's Son and Other Stories*
*Butterfield 8*
*Hope of Heaven*
*Files on Parade*
*Pal Joey*
*Pipe Night*
*Hellbox*
*A Rage to Live*
*The Farmers Hotel*
*Sweet and Sour*
*Ten North Frederick*
*A Family Party*
*Selected Short Stories*
*From the Terrace*
*Ourselves to Know*

And all our Knowledge is, ourselves to know.

ALEXANDER POPE : *An Essay on Man*

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com

OURSELVES TO KNOW

As a boy and until I was sixteen I spent a large part of every summer at my grandfather's house in Lyons, Pennsylvania. We always sat on the porch on Sunday and my grandmother would hold court with the people on their way home from the Baptist, the Catholic and the Evangelical churches; and like all children I realized at an early age that older people did not treat each other as equals. A man and his wife were a little above you or a little below you. All the people who stopped to chat with my grandparents were a little below them, and they could not help showing it. In fact, I used to think it gave them pleasure to be respectful to my grandparents, even when my grandmother would sharply contradict them on matters of no importance. As a boy who was being brought up very strictly, I was often embarrassed by my grandmother's manner with older people. When they had said as much as she wanted to hear, she would turn away and chat with one of my aunts until the poor man and woman found the simple phrases to excuse themselves. "Guess we better be getting along," they would say, and my grandmother would say, "All right. Goodbye." I did not know then, of course, that quite a few of those people were in financial debt to my grandfather. I did not even know that some of them lived in houses that were owned by my grandfather. There were a lot of things I did not know.

On Sundays it would have been an act of lese majesty for an acquaintance of my grandparents' to use the opposite sidewalk to avoid the MacMahons' porch. The Baptist and the Catholic churches were two blocks away on the opposite side of the street, but all the Catholics and a good many of the Baptists always crossed over to our side before reaching Grandma's porch. On weekdays, however, my grandfather was at the store, or the brickyard or the lumber yard or the bank, and my grandmother was busy about the house and the yard. I was free to go off and play with my friends, but punctuality at mealtime was sternly enforced and I was almost always on the porch before the last bell of the noon Angelus had been tolled, waiting for my

grandfather to come home for dinner. Most of the men in the town carried lunch-pails to work, and the men who came home for dinner were the prosperous ones. I did not take special note of who they were; I had always known. They were the men who owned the stores, worked in the bank, had the higher jobs with the coal company, managed the small factories, or were engaged in the professions of law, medicine and dentistry. They all owned a pair of horses or an automobile. The only other men who went home for dinner were poolroom loafers.

There was one man who had his dinner at home, who had his dinner later than the others. He always went to the post office a few minutes after the Angelus was rung, and this habit of his meant that all the way to the post office he was going against the sidewalk traffic of men on their way home to dinner. The man's name was Robert Millhouser and he lived in a large house on the edge of town, a house in a four-acre lot that was enclosed by a white paling fence. I don't know when I first began to notice Mr. Millhouser, but it must have been when I was very small because I took him for granted. But I think I must have been seven or eight years old when I asked my first questions about Mr. Millhouser, and the answers were evasive and unsatisfactory.

Mr. Millhouser never walked on our side of the street and never appeared on Sunday, but if my mother or my grandmother or one of my aunts happened to be sitting on the porch with me, he would always take off his hat and make a little bow, without actually looking across the street at the person he was bowing to. But he knew who was there; if I happened to be alone on the porch he did not raise his hat or bow. And if I happened to be sitting with my grandfather or my Uncle George, he would touch the brim of his hat in a semi-military salute and smile in a way that you might have thought was only a man smiling to himself, but if you saw it often enough it was the very sweet smile of a man who took pleasure in being polite to the MacMahon family. If there was someone on the porch when he was returning home from the post office, he would make the same polite gesture, and again in the evening when he made his evening trip to the post office.

My first question about Mr. Millhouser, which I asked one of my aunts, was: "What's the matter with Mr. Millhouser?"

"Why? I didn't know there was anything the matter with him."

I could not explain my question. I knew, as children do know, that there was something the matter, and so I said: "He acts funny."

"Not a bit," said my aunt. "He's very polite."

Then I suppose it was a year or two later that I said to my grandfather: "Grandpa, what does Mr. Millhouser do?"

"What does Mr. Millhouser do? He takes care of his *fin*ances," said my grandfather, and then, quite unlike him, he said: "Time to get the crank and roll up the awning, boy." I say it was unlike him because he and I loved to talk to each other and I knew I was being diverted from the subject of Mr. Millhouser. Also, it was not quite time to roll up the awning. It would not be accurate to say that I immediately became curious about Mr. Millhouser, since at that age I was not very curious about any grownup unless he was a policeman or a soldier or ran the miniature steam locomotive at the amusement park or was tattooed or played football at Lebanon Valley College. Mr. Millhouser was totally unlike my personal celebrities of that period. He was, in fact, a most uninteresting man except that my aunt and my grandfather had not wanted to talk about him *to me.* He *was* something or *had done* something that I was not supposed to know, and yet he always bowed to them and they bowed to him. After that, but not at all consciously, I began to notice things about Mr. Millhouser.

I noticed, for instance, that when my grandfather returned Mr. Millhouser's bow, he always said, "Morning, Robert." But when I went to the post office and Mr. Millhouser was there, only a very few men and women called him by his first name, and those who did were the people whom my grandmother treated almost as equals. The others would wait for Robert Millhouser to nod to them or speak to them, and they would nod or speak to him. But he ignored most of the men and women in the post office, just as he ignored some of the men who were homeward bound for the noon meal.

Summer after summer I went to my grandfather's and it was remarkable how few changes took place, but the summer I was fifteen and was wearing my first long pants, I was sitting alone on the porch one day and Mr. Millhouser came along and saluted me, but as soon as he did he realized that I was not my Uncle George, and he smiled and I could hear him distinctly say: "Oh, oh, it's Gerald. Good *morning.*" He had never spoken to me before, and I of course was surprised that he knew my name. After that he always saluted me as he did my grandfather and my uncle, and it was such a satisfactory sign that people were aware that I was getting older that I could hardly wait to ask my grandfather about Mr. Millhouser. I waited until we were alone and would not be interrupted.

"Grandpa," I said. "What is there about Mr. Millhouser? What's all the mystery?"

My grandfather looked at his cigar and worried in silence for a few long seconds. At last he said: "It isn't a mystery, Gerald. It's people not wanting to talk about something. Your mother and father never told you anything about Mr. Millhouser?"

"I don't ever remember asking them. I only asked you and Aunt May."

"Well, you've got a man's pants on now and I guess you could be taken for a lot older than fifteen. There's some ugly things in this world, Gerald." He leaned forward and tapped the end of his cigar over the ash receiver. "Some years ago, I guess you were about two or three, Mr. Millhouser shot and killed his wife."

"You mean he murdered her?"

"No. You can't say that. Better not say it, either. Because he was put on trial for murder, and he was acquitted."

"But did he do it?"

"There's no doubt about it that he did it, but the law said it wasn't murder."

"Mr. Millhouser really shot his own wife and killed her?" I said. "But Grandpa, you and Grandma always speak to him."

"Yes we do, always did and always will."

"Then you thought he was innocent, or you wouldn't speak to him."

"He was an unfortunate man and we felt sorry for him."

"Did Grandma feel sorry for him?"

He smiled. "Oh, you Gerald, you. You're still afraid of your Grandma, long pants or no long pants."

"But did she?"

"Not at first."

"But you made her, didn't you?"

"I convinced her, but once she was convinced, she was convinced."

"Why were you sorry for him?"

"Don't ask me that, or any more questions about Mr. Millhouser. Your father can tell you the rest of it, or your mother, if they want you to know it. If they don't, they won't tell you. But it's not my business to tell you."

When I went home to my own family's I said to my mother: "Why did Mr. Millhouser kill his wife?"

"Who on earth told you about that?"

"Grandpa."

"Grandpa? Grandpa told you that? What else did he tell you?"

"Not much."

"How in the world did he happen to get on that subject? I've never heard him mention that for years, practically since it happened."



试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com

"I asked him why Mr. Millhouser was so mysterious."

"He isn't mysterious at all."

"Maybe he isn't, but you are and Grandpa was and Aunt May."

"I wonder how much Grandpa told you. Did he mention Mr. Vance at all?"

"Oh, it was on account of Mr. Vance?"

"I didn't say that."

"Oh, come on, Mother. I've heard of justifiable homicide."

"You know too much."

"The unwritten law."

"I'm going to have your father give you a talking-to."

"You can't stop what I know already. If I know it, I know it. So *can* that."

"Don't tell me to *can* that. I don't like that expression."

"You're not going to tell me about Mr. Millhouser?"

"I most certainly am not, and furthermore, you're not supposed to wear your long pants except on Sunday."

I went away to school the following September and the next summer, when I was sixteen, my grandfather had become an invalid, forbidden his cigars and whiskey, and too weak to come downstairs. He died that summer, and one of the things I remember about the funeral is the tearful face of Robert Millhouser, tearful but strangely handsome, as the casket was lifted into the hearse in front of St. Boniface Church. I had never really seen Mr. Millhouser's face until that day; he had always been raising his hat and looking away. But at my grandfather's funeral he stood still and erect, with his chin up and the slight August breeze blowing his white hair, his skin tanned, his mouth curving downward as in pain, and his tears ignored. By that time I had begun to notice some of the differences in the ages of adults, and I realized that Mr. Millhouser was definitely younger than my grandfather, rather than, as I had always thought, a contemporary. Standing there, a little apart from the others, he seemed to me a stronger man than the Mr. Millhouser whom I had seen so many times, taking his rapid short steps and making his shy, polite gestures on the way to the post office. He had the ascetic look that I later saw in the faces of a few priests, a few deaf people, a few West Point army officers, and a few men who had served long prison sentences.

They closed the doors of the hearse and we went down the stone steps to the undertaker's limousines, and I watched Mr. Millhouser, putting on his hat and starting to walk away in the direction of his house. Then he did what I knew he was going to do: he stopped and turned his head for one last look at the hearse. I don't know why I

was so sure he was going to do that, but I believe it was because I felt that he loved my grandfather as much as I did, and would miss him even more.

I was riding with the other grandchildren in the second car, and we passed Mr. Millhouser on the way to the cemetery. "There's that crazy Mr. Millhouser," said one of my cousins.

"Shut your God damn stupid face," I said.

It was one of my Rochester cousins, a girl, whom I seldom saw and invariably quarreled with, but she had provoked me into a sort of defense of Mr. Millhouser and from that moment on I was actively on his side and as curious about him as my many other interests would permit.

My other interests were those of a boy my age: school, and my friends and enemies there; my friends and enemies at home; sports, particularly tennis; the movies; girls; clothes; travel; cars; reading; cartooning; dance orchestras; the constant effort to make people think I was older than I was; the daily conflict between wanting to be popular and wanting to be independent. My curiosity about Robert Millhouser was not in a class with those interests: when I thought of him I was curious about him, but I had so many other things to think about that he was not often in my mind. I might have forgotten about him if I had not gone to my grandmother's for a short visit during the summer I was seventeen.

I was sitting on the porch, waiting for lunch to be announced (dinner was an evening meal after my grandfather died), and Mr. Millhouser saluted me and I waved to him. But he suddenly stopped and crossed the street to the porch. I still had never spoken to him and had never been physically closer to him than I had been that day of my grandfather's funeral. As he came nearer I was flustered; I did not know whether to stand up or to pretend I did not expect him to speak to me. But he came right to the point, without shaking hands, without any preliminaries. "Gerald, are you at all interested in the Civil War?"

I stood up. "Yes sir, to some extent."

"I thought you would be. Your grandfather, and so forth. Well, I came across a book you might like to have, a book of pictures. They're not photographs, they're drawings, and they're not for children. Pretty gruesome, some of them. But I'm told they show what the war was really like. If you'd like to have it I'll send it down to you this afternoon."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Millhouser. I'd appreciate it."

He did not hear my thanks; he was looking, with a faint smile, at the high-backed rocking chair that my grandfather had always sat in.

He nodded. "Good day," he said, and left. The book was delivered later in the afternoon by Moses Hatfield, the Negro who was the only servant that lived in Mr. Millhouser's house. I thanked him and he said: "Take good care of this book, Gerald. You' Grandpa used to say this book showed war like war was, not like the Fourth of *Joo*-ly parade."

I cannot say that I took very good care of the book. At my mother's suggestion I wrote Mr. Millhouser a note of thanks, and then I put the book under my atlas, which it matched in size, and it remained there with the rest of the books that I had not taken away to school. For the next few years I stopped going to my grandmother's in the summer; we would motor to her house for one enormous meal between Christmas and New Year's, but after sophomore year in college I had my own car and I always left Grandma's as soon as I could break away. I did not, therefore, see Mr. Millhouser at all during my last year in prep school or in my first two years in college. I might never have seen him again if it had not been, once again, for that book.

My roommate was a history major and his history professor would occasionally drop in for a chat with Kevorkian, who was a straight-A student and eventually a junior-year Phi Beta Kappa. "I wish you could get hold of a book called Mittendorf's *Pictorial History of the Civil War,*" said the professor. "It was published in Columbus, Ohio, around 1885, but I haven't seen a copy of it since I left Northwestern."

"I have a copy of it," I said.

*"You,* Higgins? *You* have a copy of Mittendorf's *Pictorial History of the Civil War?* Describe it," said the professor.

"It's about the size of an atlas, about an inch-and-a-half thick. The binding is green, and there's a picture of a drum and a cannon and flags on the front of the book." I did not like this history professor but I enjoyed this situation. "I could describe the contents for you, too."

"Where did you get hold of this treasure? Was your grandfather in the Civil War?"

"I had two grandfathers in the Civil War, but the book was given to me by a man who thought I'd appreciate it."

"And where is it now?" said the professor.

"In my room, at home, with the rest of my books."

"Higgins, I may have wronged you. Would you let Kevorkian and me have a look at it?"

"Well, it's never been out of my house—"

"Oh, you knew how valuable it was?"

"Oh, I always knew that."

"I'd be willing to make a trip to your home town, just to have a good long look at it. And take Kevorkian with me."

"You don't have to do that. I'll bring it back after Christmas."

"Higgins, you amaze me," said the professor.

I was well aware that the professor would repeat his astonishment to his chums at the Faculty Club and that a little story like that would do me no harm. Within the week I had a small reputation as a secret bibliophile, which I was not, and the college librarian wrote me a note suggesting that I might like to donate my Mittendorf to the library, which I had no intention of doing. At least not until I was in much worse scholastic standing than I was at that moment, and needed some favorable publicity at the Faculty Club. I am probably being unnecessarily harsh with myself; I finished college without using Mr. Millhouser's book for any sinister purpose, and when I knew I had passed all my courses I wrote to Mr. Millhouser and asked if he would approve my donating the book to the library. As a result of his reply I was able after many delays to obtain the material for the book which the reader now holds in his hand.

Mr. Millhouser was more than pleased that his gift to me would find a permanent place in the library at my college, and that the book was considered a useful one. He invited me to call on him, and I did so, and that first visit in 1926 led to many more. The story he told me follows, although naturally I have to tell it in my own way and not exactly as it was given me by Mr. Millhouser.

THE FIRST Millhouser to settle in North America was a friend and follower of Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg. Franz Millhouser had gone to classical schools in Einbeck, Hanover, with Heinrich (or Henry) Muhlenberg, and Muhlenberg wrote to his young friend and urged him to join him in the work he was doing in the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania. Accordingly Franz Millhouser arrived in Philadelphia late in 1745 and for the next ten years he helped to form new congregations in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland. In emulation of the scholarly Muhlenberg he studied some law and some medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and he died in Philadelphia in 1790. Except for his carefully kept church records and a few letters to his wife, he left no writings that told much of a personal nature. He married Anna Christina Weiler, daughter of a Lancaster clergyman, and they had three sons and two daughters. The sons attended the University of Pennsylvania, but only one of

them studied for the ministry and that son died in Georgia where he had gone to assume charge of a new congregation. Another son remained in Philadelphia to engage in the practice of medicine; and the third, from whom the Robert Millhouser of this story was descended, was a lawyer and later a judge in Fort Penn. Judge Peter Millhouser was the first man of wealth in the family. He resigned from the bench a few years after he had been appointed, and almost immediately he amassed a considerable fortune in farming and timber lands to which title was obscure. He was murdered in his sleep by a person or persons who were never identified.

Peter Millhouser had four daughters and a son, Henry, the youngest child and the father of Robert Millhouser. Henry left the University of Pennsylvania in the middle of his sophomore year because of illness. He was thirty years old before he fully regained his health and was able to devote his time to the tangled affairs of his father's estate, which through neglect, mismanagement, and lawsuits had been reduced to a fraction of its value at the time of Peter Millhouser's murder. Through hard work on Henry's part and the natural increase in land values, the losses were wiped out so that at Henry's death the dollar value of the estate was greater than it had been at Peter's death. But the Millhouser fortune in 1870 was hardly comparable to the Millhouser fortune of 1810, and not to be counted among the first twenty fortunes of East-Central Pennsylvania.

Henry married late in life and built the house in the town of Lyons in which his only child, Robert, was born. He chose Lyons because it was on two railway lines and in the geographical center of the Millhouser holdings; the timber to the north and northeast, the farms to the south and west. Zilph Murray, whom he married, was an Ulster Irishwoman, a childless widow who had come to Philadelphia to visit her sister, but with no intention of returning to Ireland. When Henry met her at the home of one of his Philadelphia cousins he knew that he wanted to marry her, but her brogue seemed to warn him that she was a Roman Catholic, and her forthright manner and self-confidence further warned him that she was not one who would be likely to change her religion. Then upon learning that she was a Presbyterian, a Protestant, he proposed to her and was accepted with a speed that delighted him while it alarmed him. "I was wondering if I'd have to turn coquettish to make you speak," she told him. "Mind you, I was fully prepared to, and don't think I wasn't." The marriage from the start was a happy one, saddened only by two miscarriages before the birth of Robert.

Lyons was not a town for much social life in the middle of the cen-

tury, and even if it had been, Zilph Millhouser would not have joined in. "Wouldn't you like to see some of the people in the town?" said Henry.

"I have, and if they'll keep their distance I'll be only too glad to keep mine. What would we do with them?"

"Feed them, I suppose," said Henry.

"And after that, what? A hand of cards? Not the Methodists, surely. Polite conversation? On what subject? No, Henry my dear, I'm content, so long as you are."

He was content. As a newcomer to the town he was liable to some hostility, but as a man of means he was carefully spared any display of it. His initial account at the bank made him immediately the largest depositor, and after it became apparent that he had no plan to dominate the town or to change the existing order, the hostility and suspicion disappeared and he was treated with the special deference due a man who has power but refrains from using it. The women disliked Zilph: the Protestant women could not believe anyone so Irish was not a Catholic; and the Catholic women, most of them Irish, hated her Protestantism. But their husbands quickly silenced all criticism of her, when it was made in their presence, and very few women in Lyons were safe from the beatings that were the usual punishment for opposing their husbands. They were often beaten for a great deal less than deliberate disobedience.

Robert Millhouser was fifteen and at Mercersburg when Henry died, and Zilph Millhouser, who was not yet forty-four, had a difficult decision to make. During her marriage she had formed no friendships with the people of Lyons and had been, as she said, content. It was a strange contentment; in the County Down she had never been far from friends or from the sea; in Lyons she was not half a mile from the great forest that came down to the clearing in the middle of which Henry had built their house. Westward the forest stood unbroken by a highway, up and over the mountain, into the next valley, up and over the Second Mountain and down into the Second Valley before a highway would be met. A mile from her house was already wilderness, and over the mountain, in the next valley, no Lyons man would go without a guide. Foolish men had been lost and died within the sound of the Lyons-Fort Penn train whistle. Only the men who wanted to kill moose and bear would take their guns into the next valley; those who wanted wildcat and deer had not so far to go. Sometimes during the late fall Henry would have guests for the night, men from Fort Penn and Philadelphia who would be up and gone before daylight and would not be back again for three or four days or a week, never with less than a buck, often with the head and hide of



试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com