

AATF BOOK CLUB: MARCEL PAGNOL'S *LE TEMPS DES SECRETS*

The AATF Book Club proposes a very appealing work to launch the 2009 theme of Education. Marcel Pagnol's *Le Temps des secrets* is the third volume in his *Souvenirs d'enfance* series. The character of young Marcel is known to many teachers from the popular films of the early 1990s, *La Gloire de mon père* and *Le Château de ma mère*, which were based on the first two volumes in the *Souvenirs d'enfance* trilogy. Familiarity with these novels or their film adaptations is not necessary, but they do provide a useful context by which to approach this work. This third volume, which has not been adapted to film, follows Marcel as he becomes more independent from his family and reaches a turning point in his life: entrance into the *lycée*.

The *Souvenirs d'enfance* narratives were undertaken by Pagnol after a successful career as a playwright and filmmaker. He published this volume in 1960, at the age of sixty-five. While not strictly autobiographical, the work draws on Pagnol's early life in Provence in the first decade of the twentieth century. This first-person account is filled with cinematic dialogue and colorful scenery. It is a portrayal of an idealized childhood remembered a half-century later.

The story of Marcel's first days at the *lycée* is preceded by his last carefree summer. Marcel continues his friendship with Lili des Bellons, another boy his own age. The two are free to roam the hills and trap wild animals near the family summer home. Soon Lili has a competitor for Marcel's attention: an intriguing girl named Isabelle, who seems to Marcel to be a magical figure from a rich, cultured family. Marcel embraces her world of pretense and creativity. Unfortunately, the fantasy comes crashing down when he discovers that both Isabelle and her family have perpetuated an image which is not necessarily true.

Finally the summer is over and the long-awaited first day at the *lycée* is at hand. The reader can easily identify with eleven-year-old Marcel's nervousness and insecurity as he moves to a larger school. Marcel learns to appreciate his new teachers, who must endure the schoolboy pranks of the more rebellious pupils. In the school courtyard, Marcel finds a way to gain status among his classmates by defending another student against a bully. Events of a century ago still ring true with today's readers, especially with teachers who see the same concerns in their own students as they try to navigate the transition to adolescence. Here are some suggestions for discussion:

- How does the boy/girl interaction between Marcel and Isabelle differ from

that of their counterparts today?

- How does a day in Marcel's life at the *lycée* compare to today's school day, in the U.S. or France?
- What are Marcel's impressions of his teachers? Are they justified?
- How does his attention to his studies compete with his desire to establish his identity among his peers?
- What are the "secrets" to which the title refers?

Compare the preoccupations of Marcel and his classmates with those of Nicolas and his companions in *Le Petit Nicolas* classroom episodes.

Le Temps des secrets (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2004; first published in 1960) is available for purchase at online booksellers such as [www.amazon.com] or [www.amazon.fr]. It may be available through a local university library or library consortium.

The theme of Education chosen for this year's AATF Book Club pays homage to the professional efforts of AATF members. Let's combine our shared interest in students with the pleasure of enjoying a good book.

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