

Gipping the Gypsies

The history of the world's "Gypsies" is extraordinarily complex. While my husband and I watched and enjoyed *The Riches* (on Netflix), we wished for more sharing of that complexity. The friend who recommended the series to us pointed out that the English are apt to be more knowledgeable about the Romani/Roma than we are and did not need more background information. She had not recognized that the series, whose main characters are played by British actors, is actually American.

When I was growing up, Gypsies were fortune tellers arriving with the carnival on Armistice Day. I looked forward to having my fortune told, though my parents cautioned vaguely that all was not right with such "shamsters," who were different from the legitimate "Palms Read" lady with a respectable home in our town, Warsaw. (Much later, I learned that a similar Palmist in Sanford was the sister of Lash LaRue!) My grandmother would grumble, shaking her head, that "the Gypsies kidnapped children" and I'd "best be wise and wary." I was not easily persuaded, but the alliteration appealed to me, and I loved the Nancy Drew mystery about the doll real Gypsies had that gave off a strange glow. They remain a Boogie Man used to keep children in line, e.g., "The Gypsies will get you if you don't behave and watch out!"

"The Gypsies" appeared mysteriously every summer, too, wandering through our rural neighborhood in Duplin County and stirring tales of the "spells" they cast on innocent



neighbors to get their life savings and "trinkets." Local lore gathered and paraded their once "carrying off" Uncle George Giles's horse Prince, with his cart, while their owner stood rooted in the magic circle they had drawn around him. I came to dread my parents' shopping trips to Wilmington when I was left alone to tend our grocery store. My father, pre-Political Correctness, said the Gypsy threat was not magic but "conniving" and the "gipping that's where they got their name. They drive up in two cars, one needing gas. While you're outside at the pumps, they're inside stealin' you blind! Damn rascals! But at least they can't slip up on you! Gypsy cars are always piebald — body one color, fenders and boot another!" I was more distracted initially by how we went from gyp-gip-jip . . .

The Gypsies of my childhood likely descended from those nomadic "Irish Travelers" or Pavees (called by some "Jews" and linked with the tinsmith cursed for building the cross on which Jesus died). Cromwell drove one branch from Ireland. "German Gypsies" can be found in Pennsylvania. Scotland has Gypsy "tinkers," and I came to wonder if my grandfather, who traveled by Model A selling

Watkins products, could have been an "Irish Traveler."

This group, long maligned, is still persecuted today. Some sources even deny that its members are "true Gypsies" but consider them Asian Indians and relate them to pre-Celts, including the Fairy Queen Mab, and Celts far older than King Arthur! Many still wander and speak among themselves the ancient "Cant" or "Gammon." In America, they maintain clannish ways and are identified especially with arranged marriages and the mating ritual known as "looping," along with marrying young and valuing males. They have such settlements as Murphy Village in South Carolina and continue to be known as scam artists. Even Madonna's championing recently brought jeers.

Gypsies seem to have been perpetually hounded and, like the Jews, were victims during the Holocaust. They are caught in a time warp of our and their own stereotyping. My husband and I have traveled around the world five times and were always warned by our ships' guides and local ones to "beware of the Gypsies." Stories of their "attacks" were legion. When we were in Palma de Mallorca, they gave women tourists roses and grabbed their purses. At Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, "gypsy cabbies" (free-lance, unofficial), as Russia brands them, rushed us. We had no problems with these but learned later that many of them work with partners who suddenly jump in to rob their passengers. One of our best guides,

Alexander, was a Glasnost victim at 48. He had x-rayed nuclear submarine welds (and feared the CIA). Unable to find employment, he "gypsied" as a guide and cabby. Leaving St. Petersburg's Nevsky Prospekt Baskin-Robbins, we were again targets of that so-called PLAGUE OF RUSSIA. A cute child approached to beg, and we were distracted until we suddenly found our arms pinioned from behind. We lost nothing because my husband Emory wore a money belt, and I was, on purpose, sans handbag or jewelry (except my wedding band). When he shouted, broke away, and shook a fist, they ran off. Mostly youths, they haunt main streets, live in train stations, and surround tourist types, who are deemed easy marks. (We had a far worse experience on the train that is a major quarry of the Russian Mafia.)

Why can't we distinguish figures "allowed" in childhood legends from the flesh-and-blood HUMANS who walk through our adult worlds, more or less daily, suffering from such labels as "Irish Traveler" and "Gypsy"? Quite recently, science, through DNA research, has, probably unintentionally, struck down the stereotyping of the "Gypsy look" by validating tow-headed Romas. As for my stance today, I championed the good ones in a novel (2012), though its Queen of the Gypsies is a pretend-Rom.

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PADDLING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

than the houses in which we lived. Of course all of my friends and I were forbidden to go to the river. Our parents were concerned that if we made it across the railroad tracks we would surely drown in the muddy Mississippi River.

In 1956 when I was 10 years old, one of my friends, Willamena Williams, and her family moved to the other side of the Mississippi River. The very next day I decided I would go visit her when I saw a telephone pole floating in the river. Near the pole was a floating board I decided I would use as a paddle. I didn't think

about how I would explain to my parents why I was wet or where I had gone. At New Orleans, the river is about one mile wide. I guess I got maybe 20 feet out into the current before it swept me away. Several miles down river I was finally able to get the telephone pole back to the levee where I could stand up. I called home from a pay phone, and my father picked me up. The next week, dad had enrolled me in a paddling class, and I have been paddling ever since. Wow, what a gift he gave to me. It was worth the scolding I got.

Some people paddle canoes, others paddle kayaks and some paddle both. They paddle for many reasons. Paddling can be great exercise, but not what you think. Good technique

involves the core muscles and doesn't rely on arm strength. In fact, whether you are paddling a canoe or a kayak, the key is what paddlers refer to as the paddler's box. The box is made up of your arms, shoulders and the shaft of the paddle. Ideally, you don't break the box which means you don't bend at the elbows or at least not a lot. The movement requires you to rotate your body using the muscles on both your front and back rather than relying on the small muscle mass of your arms. If you feel aches and pain at the end of a paddle it is because you are not using proper paddling technique.

We are social creatures, and paddling with a group of friends or family members is

a wonderful way to have some special time together; something different and unique, something out of the ordinary. When we can share something we love with those we love, it makes it all that more wonderful.

Other people paddle to relax, to get away from it all. I like to say that civilization is a wonderful thing, but it comes with a very high price; the price of insanity. Getting out on the water is one way to leave the sounds and pressures of society behind you as you retune your natural biological rhythms to the rhythms of the earth. Being out in Nature is a way to reconnect your senses to what matters in life by clearing the mind of unnecessary and negative inputs.

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