The Education of Arthur Woehmer

by Doug Margeson

Arthur Woehmer's education, the education that would define the rest of his life, began with him bouncing a ball against a brick wall.

It was a big, soft playground ball and the wall was high, blank and made of the rough-edged Roman brick that characterized many schools of the time; sturdy stuff, in any case, unlikely to be altered by the concussion of three ounces of inflated rubber. How bouncing a ball against such a wall constituted misbehavior, Arthur never found out. It was one of the many enigmas he would contemplate that day.

Perhaps it was part of the labyrinth of regulations, none codified, that dictated life at View Ridge Elementary School. The freeze bell was one such. When recess ended, the freeze bell rang and everyone had to stop wherever they were and freeze in place. If you made a move or uttered a sound, you were sent to the principal's office. After one minute, another bell rang and you could move again, but only to return to class.

Lunch inspection was another. A thirty seven year-old college graduate, one Mr. Klezmer, was assigned to guard the lunchroom garbage can during the noon hour. If a your tray betrayed a scrap of food, no matter how small, Mr. Klezmer sent back to your table. If you brought a sack lunch, you held open the empty sack and Mr. Klezmer peered in, his practiced eye alert to telltale evidence. Crumpled milk cartons and wads of orange peels were especially suspect. Mr. Klezmer was a professional.

Finally, and most famous of all, was the wet cuffs rule. If it snowed or was particularly rainy in the morning, a teacher would check the cuffs of the boys' trousers. If they were wet, the boy had to take his trousers off and hang them in the back of the room. While his trousers dried, he sat at his desk with his legs jammed in the arms of his jacket. Jackets, however, are not designed to fit a lower torso, so on any given winter morning, the kids in the back of the room were treated to a panorama of jockey-shorted buttocks protruding like so many marshmallows from the backs of the desk chairs. There was, of course, no comparable rule for girls. Boys warranted such treatment because, well, because they were boys.

No student complained. No student resisted. No student told his parents, not one. No student thought to. It would just get you in more trouble. That much was certain.

Even with all that, it never occurred to Arthur Woehmer that there was a prohibition against bouncing a playground ball against a brick wall. On this particular morning, Arthur's friends Rob Darrow and Pete McGill were bouncing the ball with him. Rob had just told a raunchy story about a pile of feces and a firecracker and Arthur was laughing. Pete was chuckling and then suddenly went silent. Then Rob went silent, too. Arthur bounced the ball so Rob could catch it. But Rob let it go.

Standing ten feet to the left of them was Mrs. Greevy, a sixth grade teacher Arthur had seen, but did not know. She was a squat woman with swollen ankles and the splayfooted waddle characteristic of bunions and fallen arches. She was glaring at Arthur, her face an over-powdered, toad-like mask framed by wisps of gray hair badly dyed to the shade of a sour apricot.

Her thick lips, like strips of raw liver, were turned downward in a parody of cold malignity.

Arthur looked back at her. He tried to keep his gaze level, neither smiling nor frowning, but he could feel fear clutching at his throat. Its grip got tighter and tighter as Mrs. Greevy continued to glower. Arthur decided he would not look away. Perhaps something in her expression rankled him. Perhaps he didn't know what else to do. In any case, that's where he made his mistake.

By now, the other kids had stopped playing. It was very, very quiet.

Finally, Mrs. Greevy hissed, "You. You come with me."

Arthur did as he was told, passing through a cordon of silent, staring students. Mrs. Greevy opened the door to the building and stalked through it purposefully, forcing Arthur to catch it before it hit him. He followed her to her classroom where, again, she opened the door and let it slam back on him. She sat down at her desk, scowling up at him. She was silent for a long time, almost inert. Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, she said in a voice thick with disgust, "I just wonder how it must feel."

Arthur waited for her to finish the statement, but she didn't. She just kept on staring. How must what feel? What had he done that would cause him to feel anything? Perhaps it wasn't a question at all. The way Mrs. Greevy said it didn't sound like a question. Perhaps this was one of those situations were adults alluded to something they knew and understood, but kids did not -- but they were supposed to. Somehow. Without ever being told. His parents used it on him; sometimes as a way to show their displeasure without having to explain what displeased them, or sometimes in social situations when other adults were around and his confusion could be a source of amusement. Adults were like that.

But this, he decided, was something different -- or at least some variation with which he was not familiar. Mrs. Greevy interrupted his thoughts.

"What do you plan to do about this?" she said.

"What?" Arthur said.

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't," Arthur, said.

"Then you can stand there and think about it."

Arthur found himself remembering a movie in which John Wayne, or maybe it was Jimmy Cagney, was being interrogated by a sadistic Japanese officer, the kind who said, "We have ways of making you talk." The gallant Yank stood at attention and looked straight ahead without moving a muscle. It all seemed quite noble and heroic; exactly what a Real American was expected to do.

Arthur did not feel noble or heroic. Mostly, he felt a growing, stomach-twisting mixture of confusion and uncertainty. He tried to put it out of his mind but it kept coming back, gnawing on him, patiently pecking away at the cracks in his self-control, teasing him to break down and cry and make a

spectacle of himself. What, exactly, was going on and what, exactly, was he supposed to do about it? Nothing came to mind. He felt very alone, as if abandoned in a rainstorm far, far from home.

A sense of isolation and discomfort was not entirely new to him. He had always been the tallest kid in his class, ever since kindergarten. Teachers took note of it and were prone to say things like “Why does such a big boy act like such a baby?”

His looks didn’t help. He had heavy, rather coarse features which, when he appeared in a kindergarten play, caused one of the mothers in the audience to chirp, “Why that little boy looks just like W.C. Fields!” Later, when Arthur told his mother it embarrassed him, she said, “Oh, don’t be such a spoil sport. They’re not laughing at you, they’re laughing with you.”

“But I wasn’t laughing,” Arthur said. His mother's face went blank with confusion. Then she walked away.

At age seven, he caught a line drive in the face, and when his adult teeth came in, they came in crooked. His parents refused to get him braces, explaining that if he just pushed the bad teeth with his thumb, they would straighten out by themselves. His older brother called him “Can Opener.”

Even his hair was against him. Thick and wire-like, it took the shape of however he laid his head on the pillow the night before. It couldn’t be combed.

He brought some problems on himself. Once he told a group of girls one of his father's corny jokes, a guaranteed knee-slapper among the intellects at the Tuesday Rotary. When the girls heard it, they scowled and walked away.

Arthur even committed the cardinal sin of challenging authority, although he didn’t mean to. When his teacher Mr. Durslag stated that Russia fought on the side of Germany in the First World War, Arthur raised his hand and said no, it did not. He knew because he read a book about it.

Mr. Durslag turned red, huffed audibly and in a choked voice said that since Arthur was such an expert on the subject, he could write a ten-page report on the entire war, which he would read in front of the class next Friday.

When Arthur’s mother found out, she broke down, convinced her son’s chances of getting into college were destroyed.

“They’ll find ways to get back at him!” she sobbed. "They always do! They always do!"

“Well, I’ll just have to go have a talk with this fellow,” Arthur’s father pronounced manfully.

“No! For god’s sake no!” his mother wailed. “Oh god, oh god, oh god!” She went on sobbing past midnight.

Arthur wasn’t an outcast, exactly. He had friends. But he was most assuredly the school’s resident big, homely, clumsy kid with the funny last name. There was no getting around it and he had learned to accept it – but only to a point.

For, inside Arthur Woehmer, deep inside him, was a mind that wanted to be used, a voice that wanted to be heard. But a place with freeze bells, lunch inspections and wet cuff rules was something less than conducive to such exploration. Most kids knew it and obediently surrendered whatever imagination and spontaneity they once had possessed. But somehow, Arthur could not.

And now he was standing next to Mrs. Greevy's desk wondering why he was there. Mrs. Greevy was busy doing paper work and seemed to ignore him – save the times when she would stop, look up and glare at him coldly, as if she were examining a cockroach. Arthur continued to look straight ahead. Finally, after a particularly long stare, Mrs. Greevy sighed, "It's things like this . . . " Then she shook her head.

Things like what? Did he have some inherent flaw he didn't know about? That's what she seemed to be saying, but he wasn't sure. The tone of her voice was tired and resigned as if she had experienced something so distasteful and immutable that she had given up.

What in the world was she trying to get at?

Arthur's thoughts were interrupted when the morning bell rang and the children started filing into Mrs. Greevy's classroom. Most took a quick glance at Arthur and then, either embarrassed of disinterested, went to their seats. One, Leroy Verker, decided to have some fun. Arthur knew Leroy as a bespectacled little weasel whose specialty was picking fights and then getting the other guy blamed for it. Leroy stopped in front of Arthur, framed his face with his hands, popped his eyes wide and then rocked his head from shoulder to shoulder. When Mrs. Greevy started to look Leroy's way, he instantly switched his expression to one of hurt and injury, as if Arthur, the big bully, had just threatened him.

"It's all right," Mrs. Greevy said in a kindly tone. " Just take your seat." Leroy sniffed loudly as he walked down the aisle.

The day's lessons began with art class. The students took out colored paper, glue and scissors and started cutting and pasting triangular shapes into abstract patterns. After making sure everyone was properly busy, Mrs. Greevy went back to her desk to continue with her paper work.

Leroy Verker tried to draw Arthur's attention by making faces at him. Once, when he actually succeeded, he stuck out his lower lip, pointed his finger at Arthur and then, with the index finger of his other hand, made a whittling motion, the classic shame-on-you gesture.

Arthur looked the other way, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Leroy whisper something to the girl next to him. She giggled. Mrs. Greevy looked up to see the girl and Leroy dutifully cutting and pasting away. A few minutes later, Arthur glanced over at the girl and saw her watching him. She lowered her chin, made her eyes large and sad, pouted her lips and slowly shook her head silently in a "tsk-tsk-tsk" motion. She and Leroy found that very funny.

Arthur momentarily forgot his sense of destitution. He fixed his eyes on Leroy and fantasized about putting his hands around the little worm's neck and slowly squeezing as the bones crackled like a napkin full of eggshells. Leroy responded by making a google-eyed face at him. Then, clown-like, he

changed his expression to one of hurt. He sniffed loudly. Mrs. Greevy caught Arthur staring at Leroy. Her face transformed into its mask of repugnance.

“I just wonder how people can stand it,” she said. The class went silent as she stared at Arthur for a full thirty seconds. Then she returned to her paperwork and the class, with a snicker here and there, returned to its cutting and pasting.

Arthur tried to force his mind to work logically. He was frantic to do something, anything to make this stop.

Maybe he should dash for the door and then run for home. He had a key to the house, and he knew all the back alleys and short cuts, so they wouldn't catch him.

Or maybe he should blow his stack and demand, with righteous indignation, to know why Mrs. Greevy was doing this to him. Astonished, she would back down.

Or maybe he should march down to the principal’s office, insist on an audience and state his case with such eloquence that the principal, awestruck by his Perry Mason-like delivery, would make Mrs. Greevy apologize.

He turned those, and other possibilities over in his mind. But when his fear and anger subsided a little, clarity came. He realized his imaginings were fantasies, and foolish fantasies at that. So, realistically, what could he do? Nothing came to mind. But he did know Mrs. Greevy would not break him. He would stand there and make like a totem pole until school let out, longer if he had to. Then he remembered. His mother was coming at 2:30 for a parent’s conference with Mr. Durslag. Mr. Durslag wore pink shirts, bow ties, black and white shoes and a nubby tweed sport coat a size too small. Mr. Durslag harrumphed. The kids laughed at Mr. Durslag behind his back. But they also were grateful they had him as a teacher. After seven months of classes, Mr. Durslag still didn't know all their names.

Since Arthur’s grades were passable, the conference with Mrs. Woehmer would consist of five minutes of vague generalities. Arthur would weather it safely.

If, however, his mother showed up and he still was standing in front of Mrs. Greevy’s class, then something truly terrible would happen. Alice Woehmer's world must be one of unthreatened stability. This would disrupt that world. She would spend the night wailing, all the way to dawn. Arthur’s father would stand by, posturing manfully and then, typically, doing nothing. In the end, Arthur would be blamed for causing a family crisis.

As Arthur contemplated that, Jeff Trent appeared at Mrs. Greevy’s desk. Arthur knew Trent as a playground loudmouth, the sort who would refuse to let kids join games because he didn’t think they were up to his standard. If any tried, he would shout insults at them and occasionally push them to the sidelines. Arthur had played football against him a couple of times and once, on an end sweep, knocked Trent flying. Trent came up roaring with fury, demanding to know just who you think you are? You aren’t supposed to block me.

Now, Trent was smiling sheepishly at Mrs. Greevy. She smiled back fondly.

“Um, I’m working on this merit badge for Boy Scouts, the Scholarship merit badge, and I need your signature to show my grades are good enough. Uh, if you think they are, that is.” He hunched his shoulders and looked down at the floor, the very picture of the bashful schoolboy. Mrs. Greevy was touched.

“A signature from me?"

"Uh, if you think my grades are good enough, that is." Trent had his act honed to perfection.

"Well, we both know the answer to that, now don't we." Mrs. Greevy said. She smiled, patted Trent on the on the shoulder affectionately and signed the note.

“Thank you, m’am,” Trent said, stammering slightly for effect.

As Trent walked back to his desk, he stepped down hard on Arthur’s foot. Arthur gasped in pain.

Mrs. Greevy snapped her head around and shot Arthur another cold stare.

“Some of us are actually trying to learn something," she said.

Learn what? Certainly not how to discern the truth. You actually fell for Trent's act. You wanted to. Trent was slender and handsome. Trent flattered your vanity. Trent fit the role you wanted him to fit, the clean-cut All-American boy; Tom Sawyer, Andy Hardy and Jack Armstrong all rolled into one. Yes, that particularly; just like Leroy fit the role of the refugee waif who had to be protected from big, mean bullies. Or how the girl next to him fit the role of the adorable little Mary Sunshine whose sweet smile brightened every morning.

The realities behind those facades? What did it matter? Mrs. Greevy saw what she wanted to see. After all, Pete and Rob had been bouncing the ball against the wall too and Rob had even told a dirty story. But Rob was average size, had large, dark eyes and a perpetually cheerful expression. You couldn’t help but like him. Arthur liked him, but he also knew Rob had the biggest repertoire of dirty jokes in school, occasionally stole cigarettes from his father and had an inordinately detailed knowledge of female anatomy.

Pete was short, with a wiry build and quick movements; probably the best shortstop in school. He rarely spoke, smiled rather than laughed and seldom expressed an opinion. He exuded an aura of politeness and sober reflection. Arthur liked him too, but the more he came to know Pete, the more he found that his quiet demeanor had nothing to do with sobriety or dignity. Pete didn’t talk because Pete had nothing to say. Pete didn't express opinions because he didn’t have any. There simply wasn’t much to Pete. He played baseball, watched television, kept his mouth shut and that was about it.

But, with their looks and demeanors, Pete and Rob fit easily defined roles. Arthur’s role, he realized, was supposed to be that of the lummox and the oaf. I know that I am not like that, he thought. But people feel compelled to

treat me that way. Why? Why don't they leave me alone? Why don't they just Leave Me Alone?

And now he had to stand here and be humiliated -- while Leroy Verker and Jeff Trent and that girl, he didn't even know her name, played out their charades day after day, week after week, year after year. They always got away with it and they always would.

Well, let 'em, he thought. To hell with it. Let his mother blubber like the whiney weakling she was. To hell with it. Let his father bluster like the pompous windbag he was. To hell with it. Let Mrs. Greevy vent her ugly, old woman's bitterness on him. To hell with it. He could stand here a long time, as long as it took. If he had to take a leak, he would do it in his pants and let it run on the floor. Let's see how Mrs. Greevy reacted to that. To hell with it. To hell with it all.

Then he saw a movement out the window. It was a dog, a chubby little black and white mutt just out of puppyhood, all big feet and floppy ears and constantly wagging tail. It wandered through the schoolyard from time to time, a pet from some home nearby.

The dog was sniffing around in the grass. It found a small stick, tossed it in the air and chased it. Then it chased its own tail. It seemed very happy with life on this sunny April morning.

It barked one short yap. That got Mrs. Greevy's attention. She studied the dog for a moment. Then her hand went to her desk telephone.

"A dog," she said. "Just outside room ten. It is tearing up the lawn and frightening my students."

Actually, the dog had done nothing to the lawn, and the students, who were sitting down, couldn't see him. A few heard him, but they paid no attention.

Presently, Mr. Owens, the school custodian, materialized. Mr. Owens had lived through the Great Depression and you kids don't know what tough is. Mr. Owens didn't get all this fancy book learnin' you kids get, he came up through the school of hard knocks. Mr. Owens resented anything that distracted him from his primary commission: Smoking cigarettes behind the furnace and listening to the ball game. He was especially put out about having to deal with some goddamned dog.

He clapped his hands and shouted, "Go on! Get outta here!" The dog wagged its tail and jumped from side to side. To him, this was a game.

It was the same motion Arthur's dog, Mike, made when Arthur came home every night. Mike would run circles around Arthur, roll over on his back and kick his legs, or simply stand there, his mouth wide and grinning, his eyes filled with happiness.

Mike followed Arthur around the yard when he did his chores. When Arthur was sad, Mike silently slid up next to him, not making a sound or a movement, but pressing his body into the boy's, offering his warmth, his very energy, for reassurance. Mike never asked for anything. Mike never judged. Mike never failed in his love and devotion.

The dog outside the window was so much like Mike. When Mr. Owens stomped his foot, the dog yapped happily. When Mr. Owens tried chasing him, the dog played hard to get. All the while, its eyes sparkled and its tail wagged.

Mr. Owens was getting red-faced with frustration. Finally, he picked up a rock and threw it. He missed and the dog chased after the rock, thinking this was go fetch.

The next time, Mr. Owens didn't miss. The rock grazed the dog just behind the ear. It yelped, staggered a few steps and then turned to face the janitor, its expression confused and pleading. It wagged its tail in uncertainty.

Arthur felt himself choking; a poor little dog, a puppy, someone's devoted best friend; so innocent, so trusting, so full of joy. Cruelty was beyond its understanding. The tightness in Arthur's throat became an ache, a yearning. Why? Why must it suffer so?

He must do something. Cruelty was wrong and it was the responsibility of a decent person to stop it. He should call out. He should run from the room, grab Mr. Owens' arm and stare him down. Cowards always back off when you stare them down. Yes, he must do something.

Then he found Mrs. Greevy looking at him, her reptilian eyes smug and amused. Arthur realized she knew what he was thinking, and she was enjoying it.

And that is when, finally, Arthur Woehmer understood. He understood it all.

She had him before he even saw her. Was it because he was the last one holding the ball? Was it because he was the last one to spot her? Was it because he was big and clumsy-looking and she knew that made him vulnerable? No matter, she found what she wanted.

He couldn't defend himself. She could say that they were being loud and disruptive and were endangering other students and. . . It didn't matter. She would be the one who was believed. His boyish attempts at defense would be fumbling and inarticulate and only get him into even more trouble ("Well, since you refuse to face up to your behavior. . ")

She had found the perfect form of cruelty: Confuse him, give him no hint of why it was happening, then stand him alone and helpless in front of his peers; the purest of humiliations. Oh, how he would squirm.

And the dog, ah, the dog. That might even make him cry. Perfect. Mrs. Greevy was savoring one of the best mornings of her life.

Arthur thought again about John Wayne, or was it Jimmy Cagney, standing tall, taking the worst the Jap could dish out and never blinking. Inspiring stuff -- except the scene lasted only three minutes and the whole movie lasted but two hours. Then it came to a neat, logical conclusion and everyone left the theater feeling satisfied.

But real life lasted a lot longer, it didn't have logical outcomes and whatever conclusions you drew from it were rarely clear-cut. That which was right and good may win out in the movies but, Arthur now realized, with a real life, they

were fantasies; ideas as silly as magic bean stalks and glass slippers.

The strong abused the weak. They did it because they could get away with it; that was the only reason that mattered, really. All else was merely good camouflage.

That realization settled into Arthur Woehmer's mind, layer by layer, bit by bit. It was a lot for an eleven-year-old boy to absorb and it took a few moments, but settle it did.

Arthur laughed inwardly. Good god, what a fool I've been.

Now it was time to end this thing that was happening to him. Now he knew what to do.

Mr. Owens threw another rock, a bigger one. It hit the dog in the ribs, throwing it off-balance. The dog cried out, turned and started slinking away, looking at Mr. Owens over its shoulder. The janitor picked up another rock. But by now, the dog was running. Arthur could hear it crying; its pain, its confusion, its fear drifting out on the afternoon breeze. Arthur forced the sound from his mind. It was easier than he thought.

He waited until the lunch bell rang and the other children left. Then he dropped his chin to his chest, squinted his eyes and let out a long, sniffling sob. He waited a second to see how Mrs. Greevy took it. Nothing. So he let out another sob, this one louder. Then he inhaled a couple of times as if to catch his breath. He gurgled a little to make it convincing. That worked.

“The expense of effrontery is a waste of obduracy," Mrs. Greevy said. "I hope you’ve learned that.”

Of course I haven’t, you stinking old whore. . . Then he caught himself. What’s the point, what’s the point . . .

“Yes,” Arthur said with a loud, choking sniff, as if he was unable to say any more. He kept his chin down and his eyes tightly shut, as if trying to hold back tears.

Mrs. Greevy stared at him, looking for a sign of a lie. Arthur sniffed again, a good, deep, wet one this time. That sealed it.

“Go,” she said imperiously. Her dead eyes followed him as he shambled out the door.

That afternoon, Arthur met his mother after her conference with Mr. Durslag. His mother looked frightened, with eyes wide and expression blank, as only she could.

“What’s this business about you getting in trouble with a teacher? Mrs. Greenlee, I think her name was.”

"Oh, nothing,” Arthur said. “We were playing ball and Rob made a joke and I told him to shut up and Mrs. Greenlee thought I was talking to her so she made me sit out recess.”

He was careful to say it in a casual way, a way he had been rehearsing for

more than an hour, a way that was a complete lie; a well-crafted lie, the sort of lie, Arthur reasoned, necessary to achieve his purpose.

Arthur Woehmer had learned from his mistakes. He would perfect techniques to make practical use of his new knowledge. The act he put on for Mrs. Greevy was his first experiment. It worked. The act he was putting on for his mother was his second. He waited for the results.

"Hmmm," his mother said, looking at him with the earnest expression of a one about to impart sage wisdom. "Well, you'd better be more careful."

Arthur Woehmer smiled inwardly.

"Don't worry," he said. "I will."

Doug Margeson is a former newspaper reporter from Seattle, Washington. Margeson won 184 regional and 28 national journalism awards; 212 in all. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting in 1985. His fiction short stories have been published in *The Chaffin Journal, The MacGuffin, 580 Split, Straylight, Worcester Review* and *The Homestead Review* magazines. His nonfiction has been published in *The Palo Alto Review* and *The Santa Clara Review.* His story "Gold Star Buckle" was nominated for the 2011 Pushcart Prize. He has taught as a guest lecturer at the University of Washington and for the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference, the Washington Journalism Educators Association and the Washington Press Association. Margeson served on the boards of directors of the Washington Press Association and the Western Washington Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi. In 1983, he was presented the press association's Superior Performance Award for his work in improving the state's student press. He is a graduate of the University of Washington and served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War.