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Paul Quarrington

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One morning in Don Mills, Phil and his brother Jay agree to let their friend Norman Kitchen tag along on an adventure down into a ravine — and what happens there at the hands of two pitiless teenagers changes all their lives forever. Years later the horrifying details are still unclear, smothered in layers of deliberate forgetting. Phil doesn't even remember the names: Ted and Terry? Tom and Tony? It's only when he descends into a crisis of his own that he comes to realize that perhaps, as he drunkenly tells a crisis line counsellor, "I went down into a ravine, and never really came back out."

The Ravine is Phil's book — we read it as he types it, in the basement apartment he's called home since his wife kicked him out for having an affair with a make-up girl. As he writes, and then corrects what he's written, we hear how he went from promising young playwright to successful, self-hating TV producer. We listen in on his disastrous late-night phone calls, and watch his brother (once a brilliant classical pianist) weep to himself as he plays Ravel and *Waltzing Matilda* in a desolate bar. **The Ravine** tells us all about the influence of *The Twilight Zone* on Phil's work and his life — how it helped him meet his wife Veronica and then lose her, and how it led to the bizarre death of his friend, TV star Edward Milligan. Sometimes, when Phil's drunk, a friend will look at what he's written so far and call him on it — like when Jay tells Phil that he's remembered it all wrong: that he was just as good as Phil at tying knots back when they were in the cubs.

Phil's "ravine" is his attempt to make sense of things, to try to understand how everything went so wrong just as it seemed to be going so right. But **The Ravine** is also a Paul Quarrington novel, meaning that it's hilarious and ingenious, quietly working its magic until the reader is at once heartbroken and hopeful. A darkly funny story about loss and redemption, **The Ravine** is also about how stories are made — how they can pull us out of disasters that seem too much for anyone to bear — and about how, sometimes, what we need to forgive ourselves for is not what we think it is at all.

The Ravine Details

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From Reader Review The Ravine for online ebook

Ben Babcock says

This is my first Paul Quarrington book, but after reading it, I will definitely read more of his work. His writing reminds me of Douglas Coupland, only with a slightly more Ontario flair. As a resident of Thunder Bay, I smiled at the few scenes set there. It's nice reading fiction by Canadian authors set in Canada.

The last book that I read, *Mistress of the Sun*, had a great beginning but a lacklustre ending. *The Ravine* is the opposite: I wasn't too impressed by the beginning, but by the time I read the last page, the book had me hooked. I was utterly committed to reading about the life of one Phil McQuigge.

Quarrington got away with writing a novel that is intentionally bad and self-referential: the novel is written from the point of view of Phil, who is writing an autobiographical novel. These sorts of books spring up every so often, but it's very hard to do it well. Quarrington manages that--I admit I was sceptical at first, but it really improves once you get to know Phil.

The eponymous incident is a fulcrum on which the rest of the book's events rest. Phil refers back to it constantly; indeed, the climax of the book occurs after the culmination of a search for answers about the incident in the ravine. In addition, Phil always brings up a movie, *The Bullet and the Cross*, in which one of the characters makes a noble self-sacrifice in order to save the day. The climax of the book builds toward a recreation of the incident in the ravine, and through it, Phil experiences a catharsis.

I love authors like Coupland and Quarrington, because their characters are *people*. They don't write contrived plot devices who have flimsy motivations. Their characters get into the same absurd, melodramatic situations that we experience in real life. Quarrington is talented at making minor characters come alive in a couple of paragraphs. Characters who drift in and out of the story, like Rainie van der Glick, are like a television picture slowly coming into focus.

Phil, self-described as "formerly of the television business," compares his life to TV. Many of us seek this comparison. Do we live in a sitcom, a soap opera, a procedural? What sort of entertainment milieu do we occupy? After all, is not the reason TV fascinates us because it mirrors our own lives, our problems and flaws? It is a mechanism, a means of escape into another dimension, as Phil's hero Rod Serling maintains. But escape from what?

Our own lives are a fiction that we create, although at times we feel as if we have no control. Television offers an escape from that fiction. But just as a novel within a novel is self-referential, so to is TV to real life. In the end, the only way you can get over your "ravine" incident is to seize control.

The Ravine is a powerful character-driven novel full of wit. It's a fun light read, but it also holds essential truths about life. Some of the style is uncharacteristic, but the quality of Quarrington's quips and the development of Phil McQuigge makes this uncharacteristic style worthwhile. This is not about saving the world from terrorists; it's just one man trying to sort out his screwed up life. Most people, at some point or another, can relate to that.

Aban (Aby) says

I enjoyed this book which is sad but, at the same time, very funny. It's the story of Phil McQuigge who, having thoroughly messed up his life, is trying to reflect back on it and come to some sort of understanding of how it all went wrong. Pivotal to his retrospection is an incident that occurred in his childhood when he, his brother, and a friend were attacked by two older boys.

Then book tends to go back and forth in time and between a large variety of characters. Scenes and language are also 'racy' at times and might be distasteful to more conservative readers. However, if one has no problem with those aspects of the book, it makes for a great read.

Harvey says

- from the jacket: "One morning in Don Mills, Phill and his brother Jay agree to let their friend Norman Kitchen tag along on an adventure down into a local ravine - and what happens there at the hands of two pitiless teenagers changes all their lives forever. Years later the horrifying details are still unclear, smothered in layers of deliberate forgetting."

- not bad

Sooz says

not an overly long novel, the author tells the tale he sets out to tell without dragging it out. it's sad and funny and the characters are hapless and at times careless with their lives, but they are likeable and i find myself rooting for each of them. and i loved the ending. simple and in keeping with the story - it feels true.

endings seem difficult for story tellers, so i really appreciate the ones that feel right - the way this one feels right

Shane says

"I went down a ravine and never came out," is the introduction to this novel, and it sums up the life of narrator Phil, a proxy for the author, in this his last and most autobiographical novel.

Something happens when Phil and his younger brother, Jay, go down a ravine near their home with their school friend, Norman. Although we never find out what the two older boys, Ted and Terry (or was it Tom and Tony? Even the younger boys' memories are selective about the event) did to the three pre-teens, it certainly scarred the latter for life, leaving them angry with the world. Phil's anger is compounded with guilt, for, being an expert knot-tier, he is forced by the attackers to tie the other two boys up. It takes no stretch of imagination to know what happened, but Quarrington plays with effects not the gory details. The boys grow into adulthood to become artists: Phil, a playwright turned TV screenplay writer turned novelist; and Jay a classical pianist until his anger boils over and he damages his promising career, leaving him to thump piano keys in a bar. Both brothers have troubled personal relationships, between each other, and with their spouses who all end up exes. Only Norman escapes the ravine of their souls to become a priest and have a normal

family.

The book converges along two story lines: the first from Phil's early days as an artist, pre-marriage to budding actress Veronica (Ronnie), and the second from his post-breakup with Ronnie when he is writing his autobiographical novel and trying to recall and reconcile with what happened in that damned ravine, the source of all his emotional unrest. Phil admits that he is a novice at novel writing and that his prose is pedestrian (I have to agree, the humour notwithstanding), and mixes screenplay format with novel format to get his points across; he also uses a telephone call at the end of each chapter with one of the characters in the story, during which Phil is seen furiously trying to find out information about the past, especially about what happened in that ravine. The story lines, once merged, take the brothers on a hilarious road trip to find Norman in distant Thunder Bay, Ontario, the one person they believe has the answers to their dilemma. And he has: "Evil is a choice, and forgiveness, including forgiving oneself, is the answer." Easy for a priest to say, hard for artists to practise, especially siblings.

Phil admits that being a novelist was his true calling and that instead he sold his soul to TV for the "rivers of money" to be made in that industry. We are treated to insights in the life of an executive producer in the television industry. Quarrington must be laughing from the other side of the grave at the shenanigans now emerging in that industry with respect to sexual harassment, which are par for the course in this novel. He also pokes fun at this business where with the copying of a couple of plot devices from books or films one can turn a new "teevee" program into a money spinner. Ironically, the plot devices that provide Phil with his success also play out in real life for him, damning and saving him in equal measure.

Of course, like in TV, all conflicts must be resolved before the show ends, and Quarrington does that well by implanting a contrived bad guy in the last chapter, and using Phil's rope tying skills to...well...tie all the loose ends.

I kept reading this easy-read because the humour and original jokes took me beyond Phil's disjointed narrative. The repetitious arguments between the brothers, and between Phil and Ronnie, mundane though they become, also provide insight into their flawed characters. Some of the larger-than-life characters such as Hooper (Giller prize-winning author), Edward Milligan (star actor) and Rainie (Phil's mercy fuck during his estranged days) provide added colour.

The humour lightened the dark theme of rape and its lasting damage on the victim(s), and watered down the impact for me. Given that Quarrington was a humorist, he obviously chose to tell this story laced with laughter, a sure-shot way to garner readers in our genteel North American culture that has difficulty dealing with unpleasant themes (hence probably why we never see what went on in that ravine). I wonder how he would have fared had he chosen to bare the evil that took place, in all its starkness and misery?

Miriam says

There are moments, including the ending, that are terribly clunky and I think the central conceit is lame, but Quarrington is funny and finally, even though the protagonist is a complete putz, he is endearing. Plus I was never bored, and I looked for opportunities to pick it up.

Julie says

I am putting today's date as the date I finished reading this book. To be honest I tried and TRIED to get through it but was completely uninterested in it and finally gave up. I think this is the only book I have not completed in the last 6 years at LEAST. I RARELY do not finish a book even if I don't like it. Sorry... I couldn't even force myself through this one.

Debbie says

The Ravine is the 2nd Paul Quarrington book I have read and I love his quirky writing. This story follows 2 brothers as they deal in adulthood the trauma they suffered in childhood. I love the dialogue, it is realistic and humorous even if it is dealing with the darker side of life.

B. Glen Rotchin says

This novel kept me at a distance most of the time. Partly, this was due to the nature of the protagonist, a guy who is essentially in denial (or as he puts it The Twilight Zone) about a traumatic incident that has supposedly altered the path of his life culminating in screwing up every decent and worthwhile relationship he ever had (wife, brother, friend). Phil is a hard guy to like and the only thing that keeps his voice from sounding self-pitying is its comic edginess, which kept me engaged. The other aspect of the narrative that distances the reader is the novel within a novel gimmick. Phil is a bullshit-artist of the highest order, believing his own lies (part of living in denial), and partly why he ends up writing for teevee, the flakiest and most commercial medium of all. So now he has taken to writing the novel - for reasons he can not quite understand himself - that the characters of the novel are reading and reacting to. This is either Phil's therapeutic act of re-constituting memory and coming to terms, or just another attempt at rationalization and denial, we're never quite sure which. The novel playfully ties together a variety of narrative motifs and allusions, factoring in a Twilight Zone Episode, with a play that Phil has written for his ex-wife Veronica, and an episode of the TV show he writes, as well as the fateful childhood event he is trying (or not) to remember. Finally, it's enjoyable to watch Quarrington/Phil, the author qua author, pull the ends together into a tight but forgiving slipknot.

Tina Siegel says

I wasn't sure Quarrington's meta style of narrative, the writing about writing and self-awareness of the storyteller. But it did. It was distancing (which the narrator himself admits that he's trying to get from his own life) but I still enjoyed the book. I kept on reading. That's a testament to Quarrington's skill as a writer. Not for everyone, but definitely a good read.

Lynn Kearney says

Probably only a 3.5 - the ground has been covered before - but I'd forgotten how funny he is. Good old

Canadian content doesn't hurt either.

Tiffany says

I'll admit I rolled my eyes a little when I discovered *The Ravine* is a "novel within a novel." I thought, *Ugh, this has been DONE--to death*. But Paul Quarrington ensures that Phil McQuigge's voice is sound and distinct, and I enjoyed reading his "novel", especially because it is made clear that his perspective is flawed. For me, that is what made the book interesting, as it allowed me to imagine the "truth" rather than knowing it outright.

However, the book slowed down for me as I discovered there was very little story about the search for Norman Kitchen. I wish there would have been more to this, as I grew a little weary of Phil's alcoholism and stories about the television industry; it became a bit repetitive near the end.

Magdelanye says

This was my first encounter with Quarrington and I must say I expected more. its not that I'm totally unsympathetic to middle aged angst nor the tragic necessity of coming to terms with ones own choices and false authenticity, but i quickly grew tired of the whiny protagonist and his too clever tricks. in his attempts to endear himself to his readers with self conscious asides and disclaimers bumping into bald admissions of appalling insensitivity, he certainly alienated me.
what saved this book from a 2 rating was for me the secondary characters and a few pertinent insights that encourage me to give PQ another chance.
sure hope whale music is better.

Carolyn says

Paul Quarrington continues to be one of my favorite writers. The fact that he is Canadian only increases the bliss.

His description is delightful with language such as, "The hair was sandy and tired and would have been happier on the head of a bank manager. It lay on top of his head like tangled bedsheets, and no doubt contributed heavily to his air of bitterness. Which was obvious."

Quarrington is funny even at the most sensitive moments and slaps you in the face when you are not expecting.

Try an author who is truly Canadian.

Danielle says

Despite the unattractive cover art, Paul Quarrington's *The Ravine* is a charming and quick read for those who enjoy unconventional narrative formats. Phil McQuigge, our main protagonist and narrator, tells the story of his life through a combination of tell-all novel excerpts, conversations turned television screenplay and snippets of diary-like explanations. The novel opens with a transcription of a call to a suicide helpline, with

no context to frame it besides the dialogue itself. *The Ravine* is not the best example I've read of mixed media as narrative approach, but it's successful. The success is largely due to the fact that the character is a hot mess, and the patchwork quality of the story compliments his frame of mind and his story.

Trigger alert: This story does have scenes and discussions featuring a sexual assault. It is not graphic or explicit, but nonetheless may be difficult for some readers. This event in Phil's life is the cause of the awkward and disastrous soul searching that propels the story forward. I did feel that the subject matter was treated with respect and the gravity that such things deserve, and I found that the different ways that it affected the characters' growth as people was believable.

Readers may especially enjoy *The Ravine* if they have any experience in the television industry (as I do), since Phil dedicates a significant amount of ink to his work life. It's not necessary to have a background in television to understand what he's saying, especially since he clarifies several terms (while mocking them, as they deserve to be mocked). I don't think it is news to anyone that media in general attracts and sustains a crazy subset of people, but it made for fun reading nonetheless.

I would suggest that anyone who takes issue with potty mouths, mild perversity or drunken asses to avoid this book. I liked it, but some might not.

An excerpt (in the form of a teleplay script):

AMY leaves. McQUIGGE stares after her.

BECKETT

You are imagining Amy naked
with such intensity that I find
myself blushing on her behalf.

McQUIGGE

Actually, I wasn't imagining
her naked. I was imagining her
with clothes on. Not many. And
somewhat diaphanous.

BECKETT

I shall imagine this with you.

And this:

I awoke the next morning, although, again, I've used an overly delicate term. Rather, I was spat forth from a comatose void that was more deathlike than death. Spat forth screaming, I might add, crash-landing in a strange land.

And this:

I stumbled off, "stumbled" because sometimes I am literally hobbled by remorse.

And this:

Jimmy is from Hong Kong originally - specifically, a film studio in Hong Kong, one that specialized in martial arts movies. His father was a director and his mother an actress (indeed, his mother was Nan Yu, famous for her role as White Breast, a fierce warrior who often battled with a breast exposed, I suppose for tactical reasons), and although there was a family apartment nearby none of the Yuses ever left the sets. Not young Jimmy, at any rate, who still doesn't truly believe that there is existence beyond the sound stage. We (by "we" I mean the producers of *Padre*) supplied him with a hotel room, quite a nice hotel room, but he went there only reluctantly, after being tossed out of the production facilities by Security. (Despite which, he managed to run up an astronomical pay-per-view movie bill.) When he is editing (Jimmy is truly a filmmaker, he does it all himself and trusts no one) he sleeps and eats in the editing suite, although only to the tune of twenty-odd minutes a night and a few handfuls of peanuts.

I liked how Quarrington paired Phil and his brother Jay's unrelenting quest to bury themselves in their respective arts, creating their own realities and worlds, with how people deny and shelter themselves from bad memories or realities that they don't want any part of. To various degrees, most of the supporting characters are busy constructing their sheltering alternate worlds while meandering stunned through real life. I think that a lot of people do this, partly for enjoyment and partly to cope. Maybe it's a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Quarrington seems to raise the question, when is it too much, and how do you strike the balance?

I thought that the ending felt a little rushed, and also unfinished, although I couldn't say why. Most things were tidied, but I wasn't sure of Phil's trajectory past the ending of the book. Sometimes this uncertainty is done artfully and adds to the impact of a story's ending, and sometimes it is only unsatisfying; this was the latter, although only to a small degree. Others may find it totally satisfying, and I certainly think that overall the book was entertaining and had some great passages.

I'll be reading Paul Quarrington again.
