



My Abandonment

Peter Rock

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A thirteen-year-old girl and her father live in Forest Park, the enormous nature preserve in Portland, Oregon. There they inhabit an elaborate cave shelter, bathe in a nearby creek, store perishables at the water's edge, use a makeshift septic system, tend a garden, even keep a library of sorts. Once a week, they go to the city to buy groceries and otherwise merge with the civilized world. But one small mistake allows a backcountry jogger to discover them, which derails their entire existence, ultimately provoking a deeper flight.

Inspired by a true story and told through the startlingly sincere voice of a young narrator, Caroline, Peter Rock's *My Abandonment* is a riveting journey into life at the margins, and a mesmerizing tale of survival and hope.

My Abandonment Details

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From Reader Review My Abandonment for online ebook

Tati says

This was not just boring, it felt like a waste of time.

I can forgive a book for being boring, it happens. But I find it harder to shake the feeling that I actually wasted my time reading a book. And that's the case here. I'm actually shocked by the fact that this was turned into a movie. It's so dull! Or maybe I'm incapable of understanding the deeper message of this (I don't think it has any, mind you).

This had so much potential that was just wasted. So many different choices could have been made by the author (choices which would have vastly improved this book), but nooooooo.

(view spoiler)

Sesana says

I had forgotten that *My Abandonment* was largely based on a true story. (The author's website has .pdf copies of the articles he was drawing from.) Somebody from Oregon, and maybe the Pacific Northwest in general, might remember when this was in the news, but I wasn't familiar with it. The second half of the book is Rock's imagined version of what might have happened to Frank and Ruthie (in this book, the girl is called Caroline, and her father goes by several names) after they vanished.

Entirely told in Caroline's straightforward, even oddly matter-of-fact voice, *My Abandonment* is a look at a life that's perfectly, entirely normal to Caroline and completely alien to me and most readers. She and her father live in a hidden camp in a national park, apparently living off of his military pension. It's definitely a strange way of life, but her father obviously loves her very much, in his own way, and has been trying to provide for her, in his own way. It's pointed out that Caroline is very bright and has been remarkably well-educated, mostly from reading encyclopedias. And yet, bright as she is, there's also an emotional strangeness to her voice, probably from being a teenager with the same level of exposure to society at large as a small child would. I liked that she was by no means a weak character, even though she did defer to her father.

Later in the book, Rock weaves in a few strands of story from the Elizabeth Smart case, which I'm uncomfortable about. Ruthie and Frank are real people, after all, and presumably still alive. I am not comfortable with writing a book transparently and obviously based on their life stories and adding an entirely new element to it. (view spoiler) Yes, he has artistic license in telling his version of the story, but it's a step too far in a book about obviously real and probably still living people. Actually, this probably wouldn't bother me if the first half of the book weren't so closely, even exactly, based on Ruthie and Frank's story.

I wouldn't call the ending satisfactory, but it certainly felt realistic to me. (view spoiler)

Ultimately, *My Abandonment* is a memorable, bittersweet book with an unforgettable narrator. I've seen a few books with this sort of off-the-grid theme for young adults (*Alabama Moon*, for example) and this was the best one that I've read yet.

Jonathan Ashleigh says

I like this book in a similar way to how I enjoyed Room, they are both innocent perspectives. Coincidentally, I didn't realize My Abandonment was based on actual events or that it was meant to be YA (it was recommended to me by a goodreads page that is definitely adult). I figured out it was actual events pretty fast because it states that some things actually did happen at the beginning of the book. The story is of a man and his daughter who were discovered living in a park and as I read I could tell it clearly follows the actual story for the first half of the book and then it became clear that no one knows what happened to these people for the second half. I have found out since that no one knows what happened. These parts are blurry to me and even the climax was poorly described and left me wondering what actually happened. It did make fun of stupid kids who drink to be cool which I enjoyed but at the end I was left wondering too much, including details that the book supposedly described...

Nicoal says

As a Portland resident, it was fun to hear descriptions of the city and Forest Park. I enjoyed the writing style from 13-year-old Caroline's perspective.

After reading some news stories about the true story behind this novel, it's even more intriguing to me!

<http://www.infowars.com/articles/us/1...>

<http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2004...>

Marigold says

A compelling and thought-provoking book. I live in Portland so I was familiar with the setting in Forest Park & the city. I was also familiar with the true story behind this novel. A father & daughter spent four years living in Forest Park in a shelter the father built. He home-schooled the daughter using his own knowledge & a set of encyclopedias. The father was a veteran & had a small military pension, so they were able to go into the city & buy groceries, clothing as needed, & go to the library. They used a nearby creek for washing & grew vegetables. When they were found living there, the girl, age 12-13, tested far above average academically. Peter Rock's book is based on their story & takes off from there.

Caroline is the narrator, & though I've read some criticism of Rock's writing in this regard, I thought it was very well done. Her voice is simultaneously innocent and fierce; very detached yet filled with the ghost of hidden anger & sadness. Rock uses Caroline's perspective & language ability – which is high but spare in its expression – throughout. It's apparent that Father taught Caroline many things – but he never taught her much about feelings or how to express them. When he wants to talk to her about important things, he does so in a very factual way, or he quotes from his favorite writers. Caroline is never going to do "the reveal." Her life is all about hiding. She is reporting what she wants us to know, & that's all you're going to get.

I enjoyed the spare, detached quality of the writing, which seemed sometimes elegiac & sometimes so

brutally factual I could hardly breathe. I find my reaction to many books is that they need an editor. This is not one of those.

The first part of the book is almost idyllic as you learn about Father & Caroline's lives in the park. The relationship between them seems sweet at first – but always has an edge that leaves you wondering. Of course, they are eventually found & the rest of the book focuses on their journey after that.

One thing I really enjoyed about the book was its very subtle creepiness. What sounds idyllic, isn't. First & foremost, we're not really sure about Caroline's relationship with Father. We know that they care for one another as best they can in their own ways. But we know Caroline is in, or entering, puberty – and an unanswered question is how this might affect her relationship with Father. When they're not in the woods, things can be scary. Caroline talks about living in a hotel that's about to be torn down, & how she has to negotiate through the partially ruined building, & stay locked up when Father isn't there, to stay safe. Father negotiates with people who are stealing & transporting copper wire. There is some harrowing information about people who are tapping into electricity. Caroline finally reveals a little about her past, which brings up other questions about her relationship with Father. My heart stopped for a moment when she mentions – in passing – handcuffs.

Who is Father, really? Rock is genius at giving a mostly sympathetic portrayal of a man who was, at best, unconventional, caring, smart, & a victim of PTSD – or, at worst, a kidnapper, child molester, & high functioning mentally ill person. These glimpses of who Father is or might be, left me wondering, which was fine with me. I also thought Rock's handling of Father's gradual deterioration was very well done. I thought Father, as a character, maintained his integrity throughout. Can a good man be misguided? Of course. Can an evil man be good in some ways? Who knows? Which kind of man was Father "really"? As a reader, you have to form your own conclusions.

In Caroline, we see that we all learn from our circumstances and upbringing, no matter what that is, & though we might be horrified by what's happened to her, we also see that she's strong, intelligent, resourceful – and detached. Another source of subtle creepiness comes when Caroline starts to wonder about having a companion that she can bring into her life. We are left wondering: Is she just lonely, at that point? Does she think of her father & think, I too can choose someone & make them mine? How will this play out for her? I think some reviewers felt confused by her actions toward the end. She seems to be reaching for what we might call "normal life" with one hand, & rejecting it with the other. I found this to be understandable within her character also. It's pretty clear to me that she wants...both. How would you not?

I also loved the play on words & themes that comes from thinking about "abandonment" within the context of this book.

"Every problem I have comes from believing something to be true that is not true," Caroline writes in her journal. This is a powerful statement that might apply to most of us. In Caroline's case, particularly so.

This book brings up and leaves unanswered, many questions. If you need your books tied up with neat pretty little ribbons so that you "know" what happened & every character is typed and labeled, you won't like it. If you like to think & draw your own conclusions, & you want a book with compelling characters, subtle creepiness, interesting setting (yay, Oregon!) & a story that will stick with you, this is for you.

Heidi says

Despite its rather unappealing title, the book offers an original and interesting insight into homelessness and mental illness, inspired (in part) by a true story. Narrated in the voice of 13-year old Caroline, the story follows the unconventional life of a man and his young daughter in a cave in Forest Park just outside Portland, Oregon. A Vietnam veteran still in the grips of PTSD, Caroline's father is constantly on the run from authorities, which is partly due to his paranoia and to a secret in his past, which is gradually uncovered in the course of Caroline's narrative. Growing their own food and having minimal contact with people, the pair lead a peaceful if lonely existence, until one small mistake leads to events which will see them on the run again and trigger a chain of events that will change Caroline's life forever.

Despite some major holes in the story, I enjoyed Caroline's fresh voice and innocent view on a life which is unconventional to say the least. On the run from authorities, with no friends her own age and schooling only provided by her father, Caroline grows up in the company of wild animals and other homeless people in the park, with whom they have sporadic contact. Living by their own moral guidelines taught to her by her father, Caroline often has wisdom beyond her years, and is able to live in harmony with nature as few us would know how to do. What I liked most was Caroline's innocence and her simple explanations of all the things the reader may consider to be "wrong" with her life. However, her blind acceptance of these unconventional views is also the catalyst that ultimately leads her to make drastic decisions that will alter her future forever.

Now to the holes in the story. Without giving too much away, the possibility of the police relinquishing Caroline back into the custody of a mentally ill father, especially after overlooking the fact that this young child has no proof of identity, was doubtful to say the least. The ending, too, was a major disappointment, when there were so many alternative possibilities to conclude the story, tie up loose ends and answer the many questions raised by the events in the last 1/3 of the book. For me there was a sense of disbelief and intense disappointment that these explanations were never offered, especially after teasing the reader with the mystery of Caroline's past throughout the whole story.

All in all, Caroline's fresh young voice gave me some refreshing insights into homelessness and living with a mentally ill parent from the point of view of a young child – which made reading the story worthwhile, despite the disappointment of being left in the dark in the end.

Geralynn says

Let me start with the following: I am so freaking confused by this book.

When I read the back of the book, I knew it was about a father and his 13 year old kid and they're trucking around all of Portland and living in the woods and all that. That much is true. And before I attempted to really get into the book I did some research on here and found that mostly it was well liked, and the ones that weren't well liked, well, didn't give enough reason for me to be completely turned off.

My issues aren't that it's not well written. It's written just fine. I guess my issue is that it's very bland -- "I went and did this. And then I did this. And then I turned the corner, making sure I was away from Father." It's very dry. I never get into the mind of this character (the book is through the daughter's perspective), I never understand how she is feeling or what is going on with her psyche. I mean this guy is basically

shlepping her around these random places and you have no idea where they're going or what she REALLY thinks of it. And that just bugs me.

What also bugs me is the fact that the father is a bit on the creeper side. He continuously calls his daughter "my heart" which...just freaks me out. I don't know, it rubs me the wrong way. I was worried that at any moment it was going to get incestuous because the relationship between these two individuals is just...not healthy. I get why she might be clingy to her father seeing as, I don't know, she's been living like a nomad for about four years of her formative life in the woods, but the way her father brushes her hair and says all these things to her sounds like he's in love with her and not caring for her in a father to daughter relationship.

Another thing that really bugs me is the fact that the father is **clearly** not right in the head, and I don't ever think it is established how un-right in the head he is. It's just one big ball of confusing mass -- he keeps saying they're being watched, and eventually his excuses of move move move get so grating and annoying that every time he talks about "them being watched" I literally react like this:

Maybe I'm being too harsh, but do you know when you finally figure shit out? Like, in the last twenty pages. That's frustrating as hell. While I kept reading it because I was nervous that something awful was going to happen to the girl, the ending is just...ridiculous. There are so many questions I want to ask and I want to understand but I can't because the book never actually answers anything.

I don't know. I just feel like this book was 200 pages of nothing. I really didn't understand anything that was going on. This girl had someone who may have been her father? May not have been her father? I'm just sitting here confused. I feel robbed. I want those hours back, and I want them back now.

Robin says

Even though I have already sent this, I am updating for my Best of 2009 list, and this review goes along with Jennie Shortridge's **WHEN SHE FLEW**:

Both of these are based on the true story of the father and pre-teen daughter who lived off the grid in Portland's Forest Park for four years but each author treats the story a little differently. Rock's story is told in an almost surreal and disassociated manner and Shortridge delivers more of an emotional punch. Both are interesting and would be great for book groups.

If you want to read more of what I previously wrote:

Update: Again, I really wish they had .5 stars because this really does fall in between 4 and 5 stars.

In 2004 a man and his 12-year-old daughter were found living in Portland's Forest Park and had been doing so for 4 years. The girl was clean, well-fed, and well-educated, but they were forced to leave. A police officer found them housing and work on a horse farm in Yamhill County but five days later they disappeared, never to be heard from again.

The author, a writing professor at Reed College has written a novel based on this event and the first half is based on their life in Forest Park. In the second half of the book, he imagines what happened to them after

they left the horse farm. This took a strange little twist and some of the girl's experiences didn't seem quite realistic (I won't say more for fear of a spoiler) but for the most part I found it fascinating.

One weird event happened for me, though. This past week I was attending the library conference while also trying to finish the book. When I neared the end of the story, the girl in the story described the Sisters Library to a T and also mentioned the librarian's name, which was Peg. Well, Peg was the actual librarian at the Sisters Library AND was also at the conference! I was able to show her the passage and she got really excited. Stranger than fiction...

Ian says

This was an interesting and absorbing book and made for a quick read. I was somewhat familiar with one of the real life stories this book is based on, that of the girl and her father living in Forest Park. After reading *My Abandonment*, I was left with more questions than answers -- there is no obvious line of distinction between reality and fiction here, and in some ways this seems a shame as the real life story is what brought me to this book. I got the impression reading this that it started off as a fictionalized but realistic portrait of two people in an interesting situation, but at some point the book begins to spiral outward into something closer to fantasy. By the time I reached the end, I really felt like I knew / understood less about the main characters than at the beginning, with much of the framework that the author builds around his protagonists during the first half of the book utterly destroyed by the end. Who are these people? How did they end up where they were? Why did they do what they do? At the beginning it seems understandable and by the end, it's a mystery. This is the opposite of most books, and in itself helps make it a worthwhile experience, but also somewhat frustrating.

Judith says

Based on a true story, this book tells the tale of a young girl and her father who live in the woods on the fringes of society outside of Portland, Oregon. The girl is heartbreakingly sweet and naive and the father appears to have raised her with loving kindness. They want nothing more than to be left alone by the world, but you know that's not going to happen. You may think you know where this story is going, but you have no idea. It combines the best aspects of crime story with psychological drama, with a coming of age novel. I could not put the book down till I finished and fortunately, it can be read in a night. I hate to use cliches, but it was captivating.

Betsy says

Spare prose and an intriguing narrative with a narrator whose view of the world has been skewed by her unusual experiences with Father, living in a cave in the forest park in Portland as well as the streets and condemned hotels of the city. Caroline's judgment is clouded by her love for Father and her need to continue their routines and follow his lead.

SPOILER ALERT ***** SPOILER ALERT ***** SPOILER ALERT *****

The fact that "Caroline" wasn't who she had made herself believe she was - kidnapped at 10 from her foster family was, not a huge surprise, but somewhat of a surprise as the narrative was steering me towards thinking her "father" was paranoid schizophrenic which would explain why he always thought people were watching him. The whole psychology that Caroline has bought into in order to live her life the way Father has convinced her it must be lived means that, even when she is free of Father in the physical sense, he is still guiding her thoughts and actions. She returns to the suburb where she was taken and realizes she is not like the people there or who she was when she lived among them. Functionally she's an almost adult but she still retains the values that he taught her - to be self-reliant, not to let people know too much about her, to be constantly aware and in harmony with nature. But there's also that creepy part that he taught her -- to look for someone not unlike who she was at 10, to be her "daughter/companion".

The whole scene with Susan and Paul, who they met in the yurt with all the electrical wires during the snowstorm was extremely creepy. Who were those people? Had Susan kidnapped Paul at a young age (which would make them "like us" to Father's way of thinking)? Was she using crystal meth or something along those lines which would explain the lack of affect? That Caroline pulled Father, who had been electrocuted, on the sled, hid him during the party in the cave, and afterwards found a place to secrete his body in the depths of the cave where he would not be found was fascinating. This is an extremely thought-provoking, difficult read. You want to root for Caroline and yet her choices are not the ones that most of us would make but they make sense given her circumstances.

Carol says

I have mixed feelings about this book. It was a fast, thought-provoking read; but it left me with many unanswered questions, particularly since it was based on a true case. The beginning of the book seemed to include many facts that had been published in news articles, but the ending was Peter Rock's fictional version. I found some of this not to fit the characters. The reference to Elizabeth Smart in the Acknowledgments was disturbing to me.

Tessa says

This book is a really solid read while you're in the process of reading it. Strong voice, beautiful writing, compelling storyline. Once you surface and start to survey it as a whole, though, it starts to fall apart.

Spoilers on minor plot points follow

Rock was basing his novel on real life events. For the first hundred pages or so, he follows the story almost exactly as he first encountered it in the news: a thirteen-year-old girl and her father have lived off the grid in

Portland's Forest Park for four years. Upon discovery, they're relocated to a farm to provide the father with work. The girl, who has been home-schooled, tests beyond her age group and is promptly enrolled in middle school. Just when it seems like a happy ending, the couple mysteriously vanishes. Apart from a possible sighting in the city a few weeks later, they're never seen or heard from again.

Fascinating, right? The novel's told from the girl's point of view, and as mentioned above, the voice absolutely swept me away. But here's the thing: right around the time Rock runs out of source material and must rely on his imagination, the novel seems to drift off-course. Bizarre events occur. Tragedy strikes, yet leaves almost no impact. Caroline's past suddenly materializes in a rush of memory and detail after having been coyly withheld for almost 200 pages. If the book wasn't going to offer an explanation for these shifts, I at least wanted it to acknowledge them in some way. But it can't: It's too trapped in the perspective of the very intelligent, but ultimately deadpan and naive, narrator, Caroline. We can't question what she doesn't question, and she questions nothing--least of all her father, the most interesting and controversial character of all.

I still recommend this book. But I can't give it more than three stars when it comes with the major caveat, "Just don't think about it too hard."

Andrea says

4.5 stars

Lots to love in this novel, starting with the cover. That ghost-like white horse is Randy, 13-year-old Caroline's little plastic companion and familiar daily presence. If she were a suburban kid living a mainstream life, she would have probably had a cell phone to fondle by now, but she lives in a hidden camp in the woods with her father and Randy accompanies her as she tells the story of her marginal existence.

Written entirely from Caroline's perspective, the sentence structure is at times slightly askew, which I liked:

The lights hum, inside Safeway, up by the voices that call out of speakers. They are an unhealthy kind of light to be under and so we hurry. Father's in the bathroom by the bakery department, shaving, and I'm buying what we need by the time he's done.

Other passages are childlike yet striking:

Behind Clarence is Richard, who is looking at me. He has drawn lightning bolts in black pen on the sides of his jeans and he's wearing a bright orange T-shirt that anyone could see through the forest from a mile away. He's twenty or so, Richard. His bleached out hair is pulled into rubber bands like ten nubby horns on top of his head. He won't get too close or talk straight to me because he's afraid of Father.

The wealthy ladies are riding their horses. Horses smell thicker than I expected them to. Dustier. But it's okay and they hardly make me sneeze after the first few times.

The whole novel carries throughout it a trance-like, subdued quality; a kind of even-pitched humming from a distance, interrupted here and there by disturbing or seemingly misplaced elements. I found the subject matter, the characters, and the style infinitely intriguing in spite of the outcome, which may not be the most satisfying of solutions to many readers, but I can stretch a little to get on board with it. *My Abandonment* was a strange and wonderful surprise – something I'm always looking for – and I'll definitely read more from

Peter Rock.

Tara Lynn says

When I read the blurb for this book, I couldn't wait to read it. Totally my kind of story, mixing human relationships against the backdrop of nature. And it didn't disappoint; in fact, it exceeded expectations. I didn't expect it to be so well written. Why? I admit I'd never heard of writer Peter Rock before. But based on this book, I hope he has some awards waiting for him down the road. He's another one of those writers who flies under the radar because they don't get the big promo deals. But I thought this book was MUCH more impressive than Mathilda Savage, and from what I've been reading on goodreads, could even compete with Room. If you can take a few dark scenes, I guarantee you this book will have you mesmerized with its story-telling ability and pitch perfect prose. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.
