

# rites of passage

By Michelle E. Friedman '74

MY ELDEST DAUGHTER WAS assigned to read a long novel of her choice over spring vacation and came to me for help in making her selection. I know her to be an absorbed reader who delights in being lost in her book; I had been the same way. Maybe she's a little young, I thought, but she had already read Louisa May Alcott's complete works. So I decided to go for broke. With a false veneer of calm, I bravely suggested my all-time favorite: "Emily, why don't you try *Gone With the Wind*?"

Buoyed by her casual shrug and offhand mutter of "Okay," I dashed to a local bookstore. I had packed away the worn-out paperback from my girlhood because I found the temptation to pick it up overwhelmingly distracting. Margaret Mitchell's epic romance had absorbed and obsessed me for what seemed like years of my early adolescence. It was a delicious and tortured preoccupation, a literary coming-of-age that I felt compelled to pass on to my first-born. Was this what Freud meant by "repetition compulsion?"

Thirty-something years had passed since my first reading, and I wanted my daughter's initiation to be more elegant. My heart pounding, I plucked a king-sized hardcover off the Barnes and Noble shelf and brought Scarlett O'Hara back home.

Emily took up her task admirably, reading late into each night of her vacation. Scarlett and her entourage flirted, fought, and loved as the Civil War ravaged the South. My daughter was surprised to discover the Confederate point of view and was touched by the plaintive voices of its citizens. She finished on a Saturday, and that night we rented the video.

Just as I had steered clear of the book for decades, so too had I avoided the film. The day my mother took my sister and me to see *Gone With the Wind* was unforgettable. More than the dressing up or the special trip into the city, it was my mother's giddy spirits that most astonished me. The character of Scarlett's mother, Ellen O'Hara, could have been modeled on my mother, demure but distant. Ellen O'Hara's refined elegance concealed a heart broken when her first and only true love was banished then killed in a brawl. Similarly, World War II had cast a shadow over my mother's spirit. But the movie stirred my mother and fluttered that protective veil. In that uncommon, unguarded moment, I blurted out the question that had been plaguing me for months: "Mom, do you think Rhett comes back to Scarlett?" But her guard was already back up.

I couldn't stop. The tantalizing uncertainty of Mitchell's ending had me in a fierce grip. I posed the same question to Tibey, the cousin with whom my refugee mother had come to live after leaving Europe. Bronx-born Tibey had dyed red hair and a flamboyant tem-

perament to match. She did not disappoint me. "Michelle," she answered with conviction, "if I didn't believe that Rhett came back to Scarlett, I could not go on living." Tibey's answer satisfied me for quite a few years, but somewhere in my twenties I began to have doubts. My own romantic pursuits were not going so well. Now when I occasionally thought of *Gone With the Wind*, I figured that Rhett and Scarlett had gone their separate ways.

Over the years, my obsession with Margaret Mitchell's epic slipped into a tolerable dormancy. Until now. The video was playing, and I could not escape the siren song of Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable. Like a slow, cunning virus that knew when to attack its weakened host, my obsession with *Gone With the Wind* roared back to life. I watched the entire film, then started paging through Emily's lovely hardback.

Later that evening, as I sat beside her in bed, I tried to sound casual: "Em, what do you think—does Rhett come back to Scarlett?"

"Mom," she exclaimed with mock horror. "He doesn't 'come back.' She goes and gets him!" That was it.

Could this bold child be mine—such confidence at so tender an age? Was her response the result of a more secure, empowered upbringing, or did my daughter lack romantic wonder? Tendrils of a chilling, new suspicion began to emerge. There was no stopping my investigation now. "Emily," I ventured, "do you think that maybe you liked *Titanic* better?"

"Yeah, probably. Rhett and Scarlett had about ten years. Jack and Rose just had a few days."

I sighed with relief. Of course! An afternoon of suggested sensuality aboard a doomed ship was far less threatening than years of protracted passion. Whatever heated fantasies were stirred by *Titanic* were quickly cooled as the hero froze to death in the Atlantic. My daughter may be entering adolescence on the eve of the millennium, but she is, after all, only eleven.

My girlhood notion of paradise was to find sequels written by the original authors to all the novels that left me hanging. Short of that, I sought the company of fellow readers and dreamers to construct our own endings. I am now a year younger than Rhett Butler at the end of *Gone With the Wind*. I think he and Scarlett do get back together, mostly because they both get tired of running from themselves. It will take a few years for Emily to get involved in a really good discussion, but I can wait. After all, tomorrow is another day.

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