



Caroline B. Cooney

bestselling author

as a child



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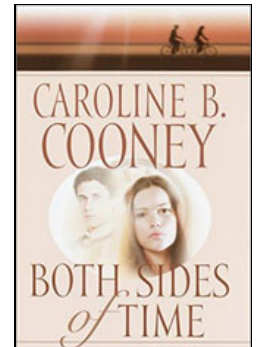
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The nineteen fifties were a wonderful time to be a kid. We had much more freedom than you have. When we came home from school, we changed our “school clothes” and wore “play clothes.” Then our mothers sent us outside. We were expected to get lots of “fresh air.” We lived on street lined with enormous trees. Most of the houses were built around 1910, and had seven or eight rooms, big front and side porches, and flat front yards. All the kids in the neighborhood gathered for yard games—Spud and Red Rover and Hide and Seek. The girls my age were Susie and Janie and Jennie.

We were always in the woods behind my house, where our favorite games were Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians. A golf course lay beyond it. Rich people played golf. We didn’t know any rich people and the golf course was forbidden. Naturally we played there all the time. Our mothers didn’t usually know exactly where we were. Nobody worried about that and somebody else’s mother would send us home at suppertime.



We lived a few miles from a beautiful beach called Tod’s Point. This is the setting for my time travel series whose first book is *Both Sides of Time*. I was going to have Mr. Tod as the villain, but when I researched, Mr. Tod turned out to be a wonderful man and a great philanthropist, so in the books, I called the peninsula Stratton Point. We spent most of our summer days at Tod’s. I liked low tide, because then I could build castles and towns with wet sand while my brother trapped minnows in the shallow tidal pools. We brought picnics. For a sandwich picnic, we stayed on the blanket on the sand but if we were going to cook hamburgers and roast marshmallows, we took turns choosing a favorite place. My brother Steve liked a particular field with a tall tree. He loved to climb this tree and way up there now, a half century later, invisible, are his initials.



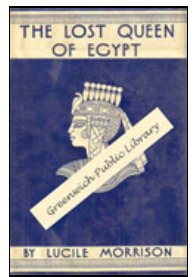
People didn’t watch much television then. It was new, and parents weren’t sure they liked the concept. My friend Sayre never had a television in childhood. When I was in elementary school, an after-school program called “The Mickey Mouse Club” began. I was not allowed to watch TV after school but, on rainy days, sometimes I would play at Susie’s house, and Susie was allowed to watch it. Mostly, on rainy days and sunny days, I read books. My bedroom was large and faced the woods and had a big ugly red armchair and I used to curl up in it and read my library books.

We went to the Perrot Memorial Library. When I was little, the downstairs was the Historical Society, and you went up steep curving white marble stairs to find the books. There was a small sunny rotunda with a white marble statue. Children’s books were on the left in a dark paneled room. You could get a library card as soon as you could write your own name. You had to enter your phone number, which had five digits. Our number was 7-0221. The next year the phone numbers enlarged, but nobody was expected to memorize such a long series of numbers, so words were added. Our phone was now NEptune 7-0221. For years I was in the reading club called The Neptunes.

One day we drove to Greenwich to the Main Library. This was a big excursion because we never went anywhere except the beach. We probably packed baloney sandwiches to keep us going for ten whole miles.



In the Children's Room, I was overwhelmed by the number of books and could not pick one. The librarian asked questions about what I liked to read and she chose a book for me which was fatter and longer than anything I had ever read. It was called *The Lost Queen of Egypt*. I don't think I knew there was such a thing as history, never mind historical fiction. I did not think I could read a book that thick, but I read it, and then I read it again. I loved every word. It was my first taste of ancient history, and I have loved it ever since. When it was time to return the books, we made the big journey back to the Main Library, but I could not bring myself to part with that book. The librarian sat in the middle of the room at her big wooden desk, which had file drawers on each side and a long shallow drawer in the center. I clung to my book and told the librarian every single thing that had happened in it. She tapped her desk, reminding me to set the book down. But I couldn't. Again I told her every single thing that had happened in the entire book. When I finished, the librarian opened the wide shallow drawer and took out a stamp pad and a rubber stamp. She stamped the book DISCARD and she gave it to me. I still have *The Lost Queen of Egypt*. Every now and then I take it down, admire the discard stamp, and reread it. Librarians are always your best friend.



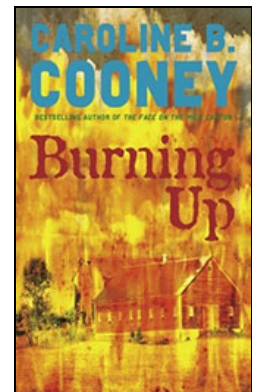
My brother and I and everybody else on our block walked to elementary school. It wasn't far. Down Highview Avenue to Arcadia. Down Arcadia to Sound Beach Avenue. A few more blocks and there was the big brick school. I loved school but I wasn't outstanding. There was always so much to think about that I was hardly ever thinking about the same thing the teacher was thinking about.



I had a wonderful sixth grade teacher. His name was Mr. Albert. We were the first class he ever taught. All the girls wanted to grow up quickly and marry him and all the boys wanted to be just like him. Mr. Albert gave lots of writing assignments. He had a big stack of *New Yorker* magazines, whose covers had detailed cartoon-like art. He'd pass these out, and whichever picture you got was the basis for your next short story. Sometimes he would set a timer, because you can do anything for fifteen minutes. I still use a timer when I face some really annoying chore, and I work very fast to cram the whole chore into my fifteen-minute space.

Mr. Albert loved also ancient history. He introduced us to Sumer, Greece, and Rome. I began collecting books about the ancient world, and at one point I had hundreds and hundreds, many in Latin or Greek. I can read fairly well in both those languages. A few years ago, I took a semester of hieroglyphs, as a vacation from Greek and Latin. I didn't learn a single thing. It was too hard!

Junior High was a couple of miles away, not far enough for us to be on the school bus route. We rode our bikes, or walked or got rides with parents. Janie's father next door had one of the first Volkswagens imported to America. He took out all but the driver's seat and lined the floor with thin plywood. On really rainy or really cold days, when he felt sorry for us, he would cram as many kids as he could into the car and take us to school. Seat belts hadn't been invented yet. Sometime we were too heavy for the steepest hills, and some of us had to get out, walk up the hill and get back in the car at the top.



That building is a middle school now. One day when I drove there as an adult, I had a sudden memory of something tragic, and eventually I wrote *Burning Up* which is set in that very building.

Our parents made my brother and me take piano lessons. We had to sit on the piano bench thirty minutes a day. My brother rebelled and really did just sit there. I practiced. I loved the piano. My brother went on to study flute, piccolo, and bass. He became very good at these, although he never practiced them either. I went on to study organ. I became a church organist in high school and did that for years. Church and music were a big part of our lives. Our father was the superintendent of Sunday Schools and briefly, our mother was church secretary. My book *The Lost Songs* is about one girl whose life was like that, and another girl whose life was utterly different.



We kids in the area called Old Greenwich took the train every day to Greenwich High School. More kids got on at Riverside and Cos Cob, and we all got off in Greenwich and hiked up a very steep hill to the high school. In winter, it was so cold. Back then girls did not wear trousers to school—we wore skirts and froze. The high school had several floors and its rear

windows looked out over Long Island Sound where you could see the two little islands that were public beaches—you got there by ferry. We had a terrific music department and my brother and I did everything we could in music. My favorite subject was Latin.

When I turned fifty and asked myself, “What have I not done yet that I really want to do,” I wanted to do two things: relearn my high school Latin and live in Manhattan. So I did! I was in love with New York City. I had a one-room apartment for three years, close to Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, and I walked over for tons of concerts. This was close to Central Park, too, and walking in that incomparable park was a great joy. I used this Upper West Side as the setting for *Code Orange*.



Sometimes my days at school were rough, and some years I had few friends and few successes. But at home, we had a sunny childhood. My brother said once that we two were the only people he knew without a single unhappy childhood story to tell.



I’ve read many times that writers call upon the sorrows and tragedies of their youth; that writers are lonely people; that writers write in order to pour out their frustrations. Don’t believe it! Writers are having a terrific

time. They get to make things up for a living. How fun is that? On paper, they get to lead the life that they practiced when they played in the backyards and the woods—full of bad guys and good guys, action and excitement.