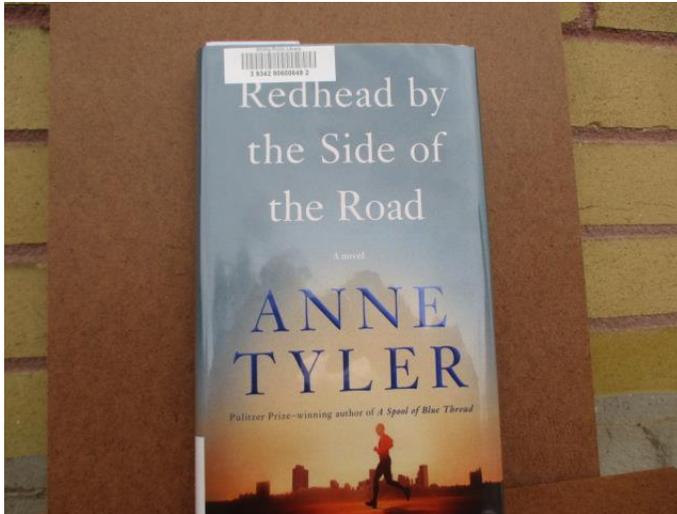


Redhead by the Side of the Road

By Rod Fraser



I ordered '*Redhead by the Side of the Road*' from the library a few months ago and received the book last week. It was well worth the wait. It is a great story, and a thin book — clocking in at 178 pages.

Normally I like books that have fewer pages. But in this instance, I didn't want the story to end. I liked the main character, Micah Mortimer — inadequate though he was — and enjoyed learning about his life, at a time when he was at little over forty.

Micah lives in a basement apartment, earning part of his living, acting as a superintendent for the

building where he resides. Minor repairs, garbage day, solving problems and keeping the tenants happy are part of his job description.

He also is a computer guy. His business is called '*Tech Hermit*' and he has a host of clients who call him when their computer is on the fritz. Although Micah attended college and seems quite bright, he is a man without drive, who is quite happy (most of the time) with his hardscrabble existence.

For those who aren't familiar with the writings of Anne Tyler, her stories may seem like a '*Seinfeld*' episode — '*a story about nothing*'. This is deceiving. Ms. Tyler champions the charming misfits in our society, their families and their longing for connection. After only a few pages, you are cheering them on, laughing at their foibles — hoping they will make the choices to right their lives. Often they do.



The title of the book, '*Redhead by the Side of the Road*', led me to imagine it would tell the tale of a charming young woman, hitchhiking on a two lane road, in a rural part of America. Not so. The redhead in the book is a young man of college age, who visits Micah, on the assumption Micah is his father.

He came to this conclusion without much in the way of evidence. He found Micah's picture at home

in a shoebox. When he asked his mother about it, she told him Micah had been the love of her life in her college days.

The young man — Brink Adams — is soon at the door of Micah's apartment, where he announces he is the son of Lorna Bartell, one of Micah's girlfriends from the past. After some initial chatter, while he and Micah are having coffee, he states the reason for his visit. He wonders if Micah is his father.

Micah's first reaction is to ask Brink if Lorna told him this. Because it just wasn't possible. Lorna attended a fundamentalist church at the time they dated, and for this reason, they never had sex. Lorna claimed she was "saving herself" for marriage. Obviously this must have changed after they broke up; but it had nothing to do with Micah.



At the time of Brink's visit, Micah is in a relationship with Cassia Slade, a woman who teaches the fourth grade in a nearby school. They live in separate apartments, visit often, share meals and sleepover regularly. It is a comfortable relationship for Micah.

A few days before Brink's visit, Cass told Micah, she might be evicted. She sublet her apartment from a friend, who hints she is reclaiming it. When Cass tells Micah the news, expressing concern what might

happen to her, he replies, "You'll find another place — trust me."

Of course, this happens just as Brink is invited to share Micah's apartment for a night or two. Cass isn't happy. She wonders why Micah isn't eager to help her. Why doesn't he invite her to move in? Why is this Brink person more important than she is?



As the story develops, it becomes clear Brink had problems at college, ran off and disappeared. Micah speaks with his mother, Lorna Bartell, to tell her about Brink's arrival on his doorstep and his strange allegation. He learns she has no idea who Brink's father might be. It was a troubled time in her life when she made poor choices.

This troubled time arose from her breakup with Micah. It took her years to right herself, after being wanton in her search for love — and then pregnant and unmarried. It was a difficult time, but now she is a confident, capable woman, with three children, in a happy marriage.

Micah helps Laura find her son, and watches as her family is reconciled, and Brink returns to college. In the course of this, Micah and Laura have a frank discussion about their earlier breakup.

To Micah's surprise, he realizes Laura never

wanted to leave him and loved him dearly. It was his cluelessness that drove them apart. It is a chilling realization. He senses the same thing may have happened with his other failed relationships — and perhaps now with Cass.

Here is how Laura explained it to Micah,

"Well," Laura said steadily, "I am the bicycle you lost in the park the summer you turned twelve."

Micah blinked.

"You didn't think I was so great anymore", Laura said, "You started finding fault with all I said; you looked bored ... you had stopped properly valuing me."

I was just like that bicycle you lost when you were twelve. At first it was everything to you, but then you got used to it. "Now that it was yours, you were noticing things wrong with it, like the squeaky brakes or the scratch in the paint..."



Laura gave Micah some things to think about. The next day — very discouraged — he tried to make sense of it all. There was truth in what Laura said. His relationships with Laura, Adele, and Zara too, all followed a predictable pattern — ending in break up and moving on. Would it never end? Is there

anything he can do to change this pattern of behavior? Could he salvage his relationship with Cass?

This is a great book that you should read. I think I've told you enough. You'll have to read the book to find out how it all ends. I suspect you'll be pleased that you took the time do so.

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