

Greet the Day with the Breath of Fire!

The book version of the early seventies cult film *Harold and Maude* by Colin Higgins has long turned into a class room classic and the movie is now available on DVD (code 1). Read the text (ISBN 0 330 23204 5), let yourself be inspired by its great number of thought provoking ideas, watch the movie – depending on your English competence – with or without subtitles in English; and enjoy the catchy Cat Stevens soundtrack while you're at it.

by Lorenz Becher

A Weird Story to Begin With

The love story of an adolescent boy and a nearly 80-year-old lady might not strike you as immensely realistic and serious but rather as a bit odd, macabre, grotesque – maybe even sick; or disgusting, as a 17-year-old student of mine thought after she had finished the book. Whether your sense of decency is offended or not, you will surely find that beneath the off beat surface there lies a world of emotionally realistic detail and a symbolic depth which is universally relevant and understandable.

Harold is the pale and sickly adolescent and only son of a wealthy widow and socialite, whose mind mainly revolves around dinner parties and hairstylists. After causing an explosion in a school lab Harold doesn't have to go to school anymore. He spends his idle days alone and friendless, driving a hearse and going to junk yards, house demolition sites and funerals of people he has not known. In the past few months he has expertly staged his own pretended suicide about 15 times. As Harold is a great trickster those suicides always look very authentic and he seems to perform them to evoke some emotional response from his mother. His attempts prove to be quite futile though. His mother, who can't cope with this difficult son for whom she hasn't got any time beside her social obligations anyway, sends Harold to a psychiatrist whose attempts at fathoming Harold's soul are in vain. Harold is also sent to see his uncle Victor, who is a high ranking army officer. The man, however, proves just as unable to change Harold into normal. As a last resort, Harold's mother decides to get her son married. She arranges for three computer dates to come to their house and meet Harold. Harold, however, shocks and scares them all off by setting himself on fire in the garden, by chopping off his left hand and by performing harakiri. When Harold's desperate mother wants to get Harold drafted he plays a trick on uncle Victor that will keep him out of the army for the rest of his life. For this ingenious trick he needs the help of his only friend and lover Maude. Maude is almost 80 years old and the two have recently met at a funeral. They have been spending quite a lot of time together lately, going to parks and places in nature to enjoy the beauty of life, to play, to jump and dance, sing and make music. They save a public tree from certain death by suffocation, i.e. they steal it from where it stands by the side of a pavement and transplant it into a forest. They drink tea and do drugs a little, they look at Maude's collection of art, musical instruments and aesthetic and practical inventions. They steal various cars whenever they need one, they fool the police, they dance and above all, they talk, with Maude teaching Harold hundreds of new questions about life and all. On Maude's 80th birthday Harold decorates her home, a train carriage, by the way, with hundreds of sunflowers. He brings champagne and is about to propose to her when she informs him, that she has swallowed lethal pills an hour ago and that she will be gone by midnight. She thinks eighty is a perfect age to die. Harold is shocked and takes her to hospital where she dies. Shattered with pain he frantically drives around for a while, and finally stages his last pretended suicide. He drives his hearse over the cliffs and smashes the car on the shore. He is not in the wreck, however, but walks away from the cliffs and into life with Maude's banjo and ring of keys in hand.

Maude the Guru versus Church, State and Family

For Harold Maude functions as inspiration, lover, redeemer and teacher saving him from the fangs of church, state, family and shrink (US slang for psychiatrist). She teaches him about the beauty of life and the spirituality in everything alive. He learns that there is nothing sad or tragic about death, for life and death belong together in an eternally cyclic pattern of birth, rebirth and transformation. The rules, confinements and fear preached by the church are irrelevant for her. Man is free, and his life is what he makes of it with the creative power of his love.

Maude's ecclesiastic irreverence is only surpassed by her disrespectful attitude towards the state. She absolutely rejects the notion of private property and she doesn't take the police or any other representatives of state authority seriously at all. An absolute virtuoso at fooling the cops, she steals cars, breaks the speed limits and unearths public tree property to save it by transplanting it into a nearby forest. And the way she assists Harold's draft evasion and ridicules uncle Victor the army officer is both a sight to see in the movie and a hilariously comic piece of literature.

Maude furthermore teaches Harold how to leave family ties and mother fixation behind, how to transcend class and taboo and how to chuck the morbid shrink. The sixties background is obvious, the underlying wisdom of it all, however, is not dated at all.

Sunflowers and Daisies

In her next life Maude would like to be incarnated as a sunflower. Harold sees himself as a daisy, unaware of the fact that there are no two daisies (or people for that reason) that look the same. Compared to weighty literary classics, this novel might be a daisy-like lightweight, yet there are plenty of universal motifs constituting a nutritious literary diet. There are all those macabre suicide fakes, the scenes of demolition and destruction and both the mother's and the psychiatrist's lifelessness symbolizing wasted life on the one hand, and there are the flowers, the musical instruments, Maude's train carriage full of sweet little monuments to man's unlimited creativity, imagination and vitality. My favorite artifacts of Maude's, by the way, are her bird feeding machine, which has the makes to scare the living daylight out of any creature on earth, and of course her odorifics, from odor = smell, i.e. machines that recreate situations and atmospheres through and for nose perception. Then there is dance, nature, movement and breaking of rules and conventions, and there is the ring of keys Maude uses to steal cars. For Harold the keys become the keys to life, opening all sorts of social, creative, mental and spiritual doors. Those keys, by the way, were passed on to Maude by a criminal who decided to move into a monastery in Tibet, before they were put into Harold's hands; for Harold, last but not least, they have opened the door into the energizing and rejuvenating Maude and Tai Chi knowledge that greeting the day with the breath of fire and making every day a new and special experience is a maxim to build a life – and a cult novel – on anytime, be it in the 70ies or the year 2001.