

Richard Haffey and his wife are longtime residents of southeastern Connecticut who seasonally vacation on Cape Cod. For the last twenty-two years he has been a small business co-owner and an industrial health and safety trainer in southeastern New England. Prior to that time he was involved in publishing in Connecticut and New Jersey and in high school and church related education on Long Island in New York State. He has written education materials in the past and privately published works of fiction and poetry. *Love Song* is his first public publication.

Richard Haffey is a graduate of Adelphi University in Garden City, on Long Island in New York State. He was a literature major on the undergraduate level and an education major at the secondary school level in graduate school, also at Adelphi. He taught for a short time at the high school level and spent several years directing church education programs on Long Island in the 1970s. He spent ten years from 1978 to 1988 in the publishing field as a sales and marketing director and author.

Mr. Haffey is currently an environmental trainer in Connecticut, where he has been president of an industrial hygiene, health and safety consulting firm, since 1988. His contribution to the development of the company has been "to create a working environment within which employees can fashion their talent strengths into specific activities to service clients and to strengthen their weaknesses by shared cooperation in a non-threatening partnership with other employees." He carries that environmental creation of behaviorally conducive space into his fictional account of his new novel, *Love Song*. He explains how in this author interview on the occasion of the Spring 2009 publication of this, his inaugural publicly published novel.

Mr. Haffey and his wife live in Connecticut and spend some time on Cape Cod. She is a secondary school world language teacher and department chairperson. They enjoy their friends and children and grandchildren in Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

So Mr. Haffey, what is *Love Song* about?

Love Song tells the story of a husband and a wife, Jay and Abigail Alfred, who are thoroughly in love with one another. When the story lets us look in on their relationship, which is the summer of 1969 in Manhattan, they are having a particularly hard time. Some undiagnosed illness has stricken Abby and left her comatose. Jay strives to take care of Abby at home in their apartment where she lies bedridden and helpless.

Has he no one else to help out?

Jay and Abby's two best friends, Estelle and Marge, are widows and the Alfreds' traveling companions at vacation times. They come in and out of the story as they visit to lend support, but they do not have a daily presence. There are two physicians who care for Abby, but her family is dead set against the home care idea and continually maneuvers to have her taken to a hospital or nursing home. Abby is Jay's only living next of kin.

They've no children?

No. Never did. But they have a cadre of adopted children from around the world whom they have supported financially and emotionally throughout their marriage. In fact one of the mainstays of their apartment is Abby's baby grand piano whose top is adorned with photos of their adopted family members.

They have a piano. Abby is a musician?

Yes. The cover photo on the book looks in on their apartment and shows her piano and the backs of the picture frames. Abby is a musician and a collegiate professor of music theory and history. That fact plays into the story line and is the basis for the title of the book.

How does that work?

Abby is Russian-born but her family expatriated to Ireland when she was a child. She developed an interest in music early on and became attracted to the story of a somewhat lesser known Irish composer and musician, John Field. He left his Irish homeland and became noteworthy in St. Petersburg, Russia in the early 1800s. His work is seminal to the development of certain music composition and instrumentation. He was one of the world's innovators with the forerunner of today's piano, an instrument called the pianoforte. Field is Abby's favorite composer and musician.

How does that become part of the story?

Jay Alfred is convinced his wife still has her hearing faculties, so he actually paces the passing of time from one part of the day to another by playing recordings of appropriate Field compositions. Jay uses music for Abby like you or I would look at a clock.

So how does Jay know Abby can hear the music?

That's a big part of the story. And not everyone agrees. Jay has tremendous arguments with his brother-in-law over this. Abby's doctors are skeptical while Jay's friends and colleagues humor him; all but Jay have their doubts.

Jay is a medical professional then? Or is he also a music expert?

Neither, really. He is also a college professor. But his field is literature. He specializes in the life and work of Thomas Stearns Eliot. He just has immense faith in his wife and her will to survive, based on her love of life. He knows how much music means to her emotionally, how music plays a big part of how she sees things on a day to day basis and what an essential support music has provided Abby previously during trying times in her life.

What about you, then. As an author are you involved in music or literature that you built a story around it?

Literature, yes. Music and medicine, no. I had to do a considerable amount of research to address the latter two. For the literature I still had research, but I was on firmer ground when I began.

How did you come to select John Field and to research his music for *Love Song*?

I began writing about this couple and how the husband would use music to reach out to his ill wife. The longer I wrote and the deeper I mined the story, the more they took control of their own lives. So the writing transitioned for me from creating to discovering. Abby's background was not clear to me at first. But her love of music was. So when it came time to approach the question of what music Jay would pick to play for Abby, I was at a standstill.

I listened to a considerable amount of contemporary 1969 music. I had a hard time picking a genre. Popular music was all over the place and did not really fit the character of this person. One day while driving and working on the music question, I just turned off the CD I was studying. I think it was Paul Simon. By default the AM tuner came on. It was pre-set for Connecticut Public Radio. I heard a classical type piece of music that I enjoyed, but certainly did not have the background to recognize. I still don't have such a background. But I jotted down the time and date and John Field's name on a little notepad I kept in the car to remember writing ideas. At the time, back in the 1990s, NPR published a playlist on the Internet. Good thing. I checked the playlist a week later and found the name of the piece. It didn't mean anything to me at the time. That's an indictment of me, not Mr. Field, for sure. And one thing led to another ...

Where did that lead you?

Well, my dad was still alive at the time. He used to buy classical music CDs through mail order. My siblings were accustomed to gifting CDs to him for birthdays and Christmas that way. So I asked him the next time a catalog came in the mail to look for the work of a composer named John Field. He found that Chandos records had several disks of Field's music arranged and performed by an Irish impresario named Míceál O'Rourke. I bought them and started listening to them. They were terrific to my ear. But what did I know? Not much.

What do you mean?

Well I knew nothing about the man and his place in music development or history. So I started a few months of researching him in music anthologies, histories, encyclopedias and the like.

What did you find?

I actually discovered two people in the research. One was John Field. I learned of his life and personality and contributions to contemporary art, music and culture.

He was actually quite a character. His life and work spanned from Ireland to Russia to France and back to Russia. His impact on high society and the fashionable elite of Europe in his day is quite a tale in itself. At first, I thought it took me pretty far away from Manhattan and 1969. But then, a rather remarkable thing occurred that is one of the joys of writing. Through John Field I met another person.

Yes, you said you discovered two people in your research. Who was the other?

The other was Abby Alfred. Once I discerned that there was enough variety and purpose in Field's music to make him be the sole source of Jay's playlist to get from one end of the day to the other with music his wife would like and from which she would draw meaning and by which her memory would be triggered, I discovered more about the woman herself. Why did she care for Field's music, when it was not the most superior of his age? Why was she attracted to a man who lived so long ago and who sported a lifestyle that she would not particularly want to emulate? What aura did his nationality and travels present to Abby? And all the answers to those questions unfolded into my learning more and more about her.

You speak of her as if she pre-existed your writing the story and your creating her character.

That's true. That's exactly what happened. And it doesn't always. But if as you write you stay open to those dimensions of possibility it is richly rewarding and somewhat magical. It's part of the fun of becoming immersed in this enterprise of writing.

How do you convey that to a reader who doesn't write?

Some people believe that those who love us know us more than we know ourselves in some regards.

In *Love Song* we readers grow to know Abby through those who know her, not just by what they say, but by how they behave as a result of having met or known her. We find ourselves mirrored by some characters in the story who come into Jay and Abby's lives only after she is comatose. They become advocates of her well-being solely because of the respect for her they gain by witnessing the intensity of Jay's love and the single mindedness of his energy in the pursuit of her care. That is especially true about two physicians who assist her. They, like we readers, gradually grow into the awareness that the source of Jay's drive resides in who Abby is and what she means to him. That energy is kinetic and it creates an appeal that attracts us to both these people and we get to know Abby as she was, as well as the way she is in the time frame of the story.

Speaking of doctors, you said you needed to research the medical parts of the story.

My lack of medical background and knowledge was, at first, the reason why Abby's illness is "mysterious" and "undiagnosed" as the story opens and we are invited into the Alfreds' lives. But having that "unknown" was also purposeful. It grew out of the necessity for setting up the story line. And it derived from the need to have an unresolved issue that could have its own power to move things forward – or sideways as the case might be – in a manner that was not within human control or manipulation.

When Abby's health starts to fail and a treatment regimen has to be established, I did have to learn about a plausible secondary ailment, a reason for it, and a course of action that doctors back in 1969 would have chosen. So that's where I had to study up on kidney failure and related matters. What I learned dictated certain necessary actions in the story.

Whereas at the outset of the project I would have said I was required as the author to add these actions to the story line, I came to follow and write the course of action that the dialogue of the characters peopling the story disclosed to me. At a given moment in the creation of this story, the medical information that I had learned in research actually evolved from within the characters themselves in a way that was more true to their personalities than any preconfigured manner I might have at an earlier time imagined I would have had to proscribe for them externally.

**What is it about Jay's personality that allows him to be so effective in Abby's behalf?
All due respect, most people don't expect that out of a college literature professor.**

Well, it's certainly not an Indiana Jones stretch. But one of Jay's motivations is related to his studies. He is an expert in the work of T.S. Eliot. Clearly, he doesn't buy into the sense of despair and meaninglessness of life that exudes from some of Eliot's work like "Prufrock" or "The Hollow Men."

Why is that? It would seem likely, with what is going on in his and Abby's lives.

Jay's optimism and personal views are really core values of the story. They are also the genesis of the story. I first was introduced to Eliot while in high school, principally through a performance of *Murder in the Cathedral* and classroom study of "Prufrock". They feature largely in *Love Song*.

To what extent?

One of the things Jay does for Abby is to get from the university film department a projector and screen to play movies to which Abby can listen – remember in 1969 there were no DVDs and few VHS copies of films. Two of the movies they watch are a film rendition of *Murder in the Cathedral* and a derivative of the story in a more commercially successful film, *Becket*, with Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole.

Are there any other films from that time period incorporated into *Love Song*?

Actually there are. Jay and Abby's nephew is a communications major at Fairfield University, because that's where one of my best friends went for film study. Their nephew writes to Abby and Jay about *Easy Rider*, *The Endless Summer*, and *Midnight Cowboy*.

Are there other cultural events or contemporary happenings of the time that show up in *Love Song*?

There actually are several. Some are mentioned to anchor the story in its time frame. Others are definitely placed to establish values and concerns and interests the Alfreds shared before Abby became ill and that Jay tries to keep her aware of by reading news magazines and newspapers to her. Some examples are highlights of the US and Soviet space programs, the first manned landing on the moon, the Woodstock music festival in New York State, the anti-Vietnam war movement, protests concerning Native Americans, the controversial

program of methadone clinics for heroin addicts that New York City began that year, and most centrally the 1969 baseball season of the New York Mets.

Why the Mets?

On one level, the New York national league baseball team's surge toward the pennant mirrors closely the time period of Abby's illness. Developments in her treatment and the decline in her health are connected "play-by-play" to the Mets' trip to the league championship and the World Series, which they won.

But the subliminal text of *Love Song* is entwined in Eliot's poem about "Prufrock". One of the questions Prufrock asks himself is whether he should roll the universe into a ball. Baseball becomes that ball, and for a crucial moment, the touchstone of the Alfreds' universe.

Getting back to Jay's being a literature professor, what do you mean the subliminal text of your book is Eliot's poetry?

From the moment I was introduced to "Prufrock" in 1967 I knew that I had to write a response. *Love Song* in large part is that response, though there is much more to the story.

Over the years I learned, from others and from reading, the dictum that Stephen King notes when he says that fiction writing is about the "story." If you are trying to do other things, nothing is going to happen if you can't create a story that is compelling enough to stand on its own. So for me there is an entire layer below the surface that refutes Eliot's views. But you should be able to read *Love Song* and be engaged by Abby and Jay Alfred without any foreknowledge of "Prufrock".

The subliminal is a bonus, an extra; not at all necessary to meet, get to know, and become involved in the lives of this wonderful couple. *Love Song* is their story; not Eliot's nor Prufrock's, nor even mine, for that matter.

How would interested readers, or a book club group or a college class, who wanted to get at the subliminal levels of the story best go about it?

The first thing would be to read and, hopefully, enjoy *Love Song*.

Afterwards, read “Prufrock”. There are many available versions in print and on the Internet. I recommend reading it aloud, several times. Allow a few days to go by in between readings. Let the vision Eliot draws percolate. And certainly, get a sense of the pacing of the lines, the phrasing of contemplations, the dynamic of just how lyrical the poem sounds. It might be useful to look at some annotated notes after going through the poem like that several times. It is really a powerful piece. It has stayed with me personally, haunted me actually, for over forty years.

For working with *Love Song* and “Prufrock” it would also be good to get a set of the lines that Eliot deleted from the poem at the recommendation of Ezra Pound. Readers can find this on the Internet, or in certain bound volumes of Eliot’s work, by referencing Prufrock’s pervigilium. These lines reflect an evening walk Prufrock takes. As with the published text, the pervigilium is also glorious to read aloud and to listen as the sounds of the language resonate.

Are you saying that *Love Song* is lyrical?

That would be for others to judge. I did try to make it that way on both accounts: music and poetry.

Musically, John Field was an innovator. He was creating new styles of expression and composition. But critics say he did not have the talent to execute completely what he envisioned. For example, he would compose a deviation that strayed from his melody line and somehow he was not able to get back to the melody line for a resolution of the piece. In *Love Song*, there are moments of story line conflict related by way of sentences whose structures get complex and wander as the characters waffle or are indecisive; these mirror Field’s compositional tangles as my way of honoring him, as this sentence does.

Poetically, there are places in *Love Song* that intersect with Eliot, either by my use of the same word or by depicting an action reminiscent of an image Eliot drew. Eliot used images in an extraordinary manner. If he wanted to evoke an emotion from you, he would draw a picture of an experience you might have had. As you recall that experience, the emotion you felt before comes back to you. It is immensely powerful because it is something you have felt before and not just something you know about only cognitively. This has been called by some an “objective correlative.” That is, Eliot draws an objective picture, but we as listeners or readers correlate directly into that picture our previous, deep-seated emotions. We owned those emotions before and they surge back viscerally because Eliot evokes them from within our own past.

Certain scenes in *Love Song* depict some of Eliot’s images in a way that reverses the emotions we feel. Whereas in Eliot’s use the emotions evoked are negative, *Love Song* touches more positive recollections.

Like what? Could you give an example without giving too much away about *Love Song*?

Eliot’s Prufrock muses that “women come and go talking of Michelangelo.” His image pulls us personally back to a time when the way some one acted in public left us cold and angered. In doing so Eliot is not just telling us that these women are superficial and casually disrespectful of this classical artist and his work. He is powerfully leading us first into ourselves, from our own emotions we recall we had at the time of our former experience, then back to his subject. The result is that rather than just conveying information, Eliot elicits our affirmation, we find ourselves nodding our heads, saying to ourselves “I know just what you mean. Those women are behaving horribly.”

Two women in *Love Song* are Abby’s and Jay’s best friends and travelling companions. They had gone to Italy and brought back 35mm color slides, among others, of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel and his sculptures of David and Moses to marvel at with Abby and Jay and to show as they tell Abby and Jay all about their trip. Readers of *Love Song* who have shared a friend’s vacation pictures can go back to their own feelings of engagement, interplay and

camaraderie of having done this, and can feel what is happening within the book's personalities. Of course, doing that in a person's bedroom while she is lying comatose in her bed is a further emotional step I invite the reader to take.

So you take Eliot and his poem to task?

I don't think so. On that subliminal level *Love Song* is a tribute to the power of Eliot's poetry. I wouldn't be hobbing this horse for four decades for an unsubstantial verse. And I most certainly would not presume to be fit to take Eliot to task.

I just have always wanted to write a counterbalance that would be more positive and life affirming than Eliot found himself being in this particular poem. I have not been as suspect of women in *Love Song* as Eliot was in his poem. I see human sexuality as a creative and integral reality, not the dissembling provocation Eliot depicts. So the personalities who embody our differing views are by necessity very much at odds with each other.

Have you done this with other authors or writers?

Not in *Love Song*. But Geoffrey Chaucer's unfinished "Cook's Tale" plays a major role in a story I wrote set in Great Britain and New York during the Second World War. And Walt Whitman has a part to play in a New York setting with a young man looking to rebuild his life during the period of Reconstruction after the American Civil War.

So readers will find music, poetry, baseball, pop culture, news headlines, cinema, social unrest, politics and the space program in *Love Song*. Anything else you hope they'll find?

Yes. Most importantly. Two truly beautiful people, Abby and Jay Alfred. And, hopefully for readers, a piece of themselves they may not yet have discovered, or have for a while forgotten.