

Paddle Your Own Canoe: One Man's Fundamentals for Delicious Living

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Parks and Recreation actor and Making It co-host Nick Offerman shares his humorous fulminations on life, manliness, meat, and much more in this New York Times bestseller.

Growing a perfect moustache, grilling red meat, wooing a woman-who better to deliver this tutelage than the always charming, always manly Nick Offerman, best known as Parks and Recreation's Ron Swanson? Combining his trademark comic voice and very real expertise in woodworking-he runs his own woodshop-Paddle Your Own Canoe features tales from Offerman's childhood in small-town Minooka, Illinois-"I grew up literally in the middle of a cornfield"-to his theater days in Chicago, beginnings as a carpenter/actor and the hilarious and magnificent seduction of his now-wife Megan Mullally. It also offers hard-bitten battle strategies in the arenas of manliness, love, style, religion, woodworking, and outdoor recreation, among many other savory entrees.

A mix of amusing anecdotes, opinionated lessons and rants, sprinkled with offbeat gaiety, Paddle Your Own Canoe will not only tickle readers pink but may also rouse them to put down their smart phones, study a few sycamore leaves, and maybe even hand craft (and paddle) their own canoes.

NICK OFFERMAN is an actor, humorist, and woodworker. He is married to the most beautiful and talented actress working today, Megan Mullally. They live in Los Angeles, California, with their poodles and an impressive collection of assorted wood clamps.

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Not-? So-? Little House on the Prairie

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Where do I begin chapter 1? I suppose we'll do a chronological thing and start you off with some of the early years, a taste of the vintage stuff.

I showed up on Earth, in the tri-? county area of Illinois, to be more precise, in 1970. This was, reportedly, the year Tom Waits showed up in LA to start pushing his demos around town. I haven't had the chance to ask Tom if he was trying to send me a personal message of serendipity with his beautiful and haunting songs of the day like "Grapefruit Moon" and "Midnight Lullaby," but it seems too crazy-? on-? the-? nose to just be coincidence. Right?

Somewhere in the Arizona desert, Tom Laughlin was shooting the movie Billy Jack, and warlock-? style wax albums were dropping all about the realm with names like Look-? Ka Py Py; Black Sabbath; Sex Machine; Moondance; Bitches Brew; The Man Who Sold the World; After the Gold Rush; Free Your Mind . . . and Your Ass Will Follow; Kristofferson, for cryin' out loud; Let It Be; and the most weirdly kabbalistic-? Randy Newman's 12 Songs. Potent magicks coalesced and fluctuated across the void, whilst strange nether-? clouds swelled with great portent above the green crop fields, awaiting . . . what? Some child? A chosen man-? cub?

Despite some loose popular misconceptions, I did NOT in fact drop from my mother's womb wielding a full moustache and a two-? headed battle-? axe. Nor was there sighted evidence of even the first follicle of the first hair of my chest bracken. Those laurels would come later.

The luckiest part of my very lucky life (pre-Megan) has been being raised by my family in the environment they created for the rearing of my siblings and me. My mom, Catherine Ann Offerman (née Roberts), and my dad, Frederic Dames Offerman, grew up about three miles from each other in the middle of the countryside, outside of Minooka, Illinois. Where is that? Right next to Channahon, as I like to joke. (I told you this shit was gwine to be humorous.) Southwest of Joliet. My mom grew up in a family of four kids, born to Mike and Eloise Roberts, and they raised pigs, soybeans, and corn. My dad, born to Raymond Offerman and Marilyn Dames Offerman, grew up on a dairy farm with two siblings before moving into town as a teenager. They attended all the same Minooka schools that I eventually did, and married young. Dad was twenty-four and Mom was nine-teen. Which seems batshit crazy to me these days.

Minooka is, surprisingly, only about an hour from Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, if there's no traffic. But it seems like it's fifty years distant, or at least it did in my youth. It was very bucolic and idyllic, like *American Graffiti* or *Happy Days*. Saturday night you would get together and "buzz the gut" in your jalopy, which meant drive past the five businesses on Main Street. At the time I was growing up the population was 768. It's grown ridiculously—it's up near twelve thousand now. It used to be primarily a farming community, but by now, the commuting suburban population has reached it and subsumed it. There are now many inhabitants of Minooka whom I would consider "soft," and yes, that is a judgment.

My dad went to Illinois State University. I had always heard various legends of his prowess as an athlete as a young man, primarily in baseball and basketball. I wrote to him, asking for some facts on this subject for my book, because he has always been pretty humble about it to the point of being mum. Here is an excerpt of his reply:

Well, I don't know what you heard but remember it was a very small high school. In baseball I started every varsity game for four years except one as a freshman and in that one I pinch-hit and hit a triple, then later in that game I hit another triple (that never happened again). As a sophomore I batted second, third as a junior, and fourth as a senior and was the shortstop the last three years. . . . I hit .333 (22 for 66) and led the team in RBIs. That was second to your uncle Mark, who hit 1.000 (1 for 1). I never considered myself as a terrific player but I had one damn burning desire to play and was surprised many times when I did well.

This might begin to give you an idea of from whence I sprung.

They have yet to make a man I like better or respect more than my dad. And he'll be the first to tell you that my mom is even better. They married young, and my mother had my older sister, Laurie, when she was twenty. Twenty! The balls on these people! They rented an old farm for one hundred dollars a month plus utilities. It was right in between the two farms they grew up on, and that's where I lived for my first five years.

Looking back on it now, I am just astonished at how little income we got by on. The older I get, the more my parents just seem like absolute heroes to me. My dad was teaching

junior high geography, history, and social studies in Channahon, as well as tacking on every bit of extra income that he could squeeze in. He drove a school bus, he coached basketball, and in the summer break he would work on a local blacktop crew or earn wages on the Roberts's farm, where my mother grew up. Meanwhile, my mom was running a household with four children, making a lot of our clothes, and cooking up a storm. Not too far off from Ma and Pa Ingalls. They raised us four kids, Laurie, me, Carrie, and Matt (the baby, aka "Matt Mailman"), as solid as Illinois livestock. My sisters and brother are the cut of folk who I'd be damn glad to stand beside in a bar brawl, a square dance, or a pie-eating competition, and preferably the latter.

It was an old farmhouse, and drafty, so we nailed blankets over the doors to combat the drafts. We had our first big garden there, and I have the most wonderful memories of my parents' gardens. To this day my dad has two huge gardens, one at home and one out at the Roberts's farm. One of my earliest memories is of sitting in the garden, in the strawberry patch, in my diaper, probably fertilizing the strawberries more than I'd care to admit, ironically happy as a pig in shit, just sitting in the mud and eating strawberries.

We were right across the road from the Aux Sable Creek, which is the creek that ran through my life. No matter where my mom's family was farming or where we lived, we were always within a few miles of the creek. That's where I learned to fish and eventually canoe.

* * *

My first job on the farm was shoveling pig shit in the barn basement for my grandpa Mike Roberts. He probably paid me a nickel for lending him a hand in procedures of animal husbandry. One of my most distinct memories as a small boy was handing my grandfather the one-year-old pigs, which he would then sequester upside down in this clamped bracket so that he could handily cut their nuts out with a razor knife and then spray the wound with a medicinal purple spray. You may begin to understand why this memory is particularly poignant, for I promise you've never heard anyone scream like a one-year-old pig screaming for its balls.

It was never so Little House on the Prairie that we'd have our own pig-killing day. It was something I always loved reading about, though. The whole neighborhood would come out together, as I've read in Little House on the Prairie and also in the fiction of Wendell Berry (our nation's most venerated living agrarian author and far and away my personal favorite writer; he has a great short story, "Don't Send a Boy to Do a Man's Work," where somebody uninvited shows up with some whisky and it turns into a very messy hog-slaughter day).

We were eventually aware that a couple of Grandpa's pigs would come home from market and go straight into the freezer. As kids, we'd have our favorite pigs and we'd name them. There were a few gray years before we realized, "This bacon used to be old Fat Albert."

As the oldest male grandchild, I suppose the guys were trying me out at different tasks to

see if I would take to farming. I remember a time when there was a pig who died of an intestinal sickness, and a vet came out and removed its intestines to determine what it had. My uncle Don Roberts and I took the pig on the end loader—which is a tractor with a bucket in the front—out into a field and buried the pig and the intestines separately. This may be revisionist history, but I recall that pile of guts being the same purple as the neuter spray. That color purple was ruined for me. I was later a big fan of Prince, but his greatest album unfortunately gave me visions less redolent of Apollonia's beauty and more suited to the abattoir. On that day in the field, I remember Uncle Don explaining that you had to bury both deep enough and cover them with rocks so the coyotes wouldn't dig them up.

Out in the hog lot there were big, round feeder bins into a top central hatch of which one would dump hog feed. The pigs would then access the feed off the chutes at the bottom, which was handy for them, but unfortunately it was also handy for the rats, which are always a big problem on a farm. So, when the rats got bad enough, Grandpa and the uncles would hoist this feeder up in the air with the same bucket loader. We would assemble a whole neighborhood of friends, who would surround the feeder. There would be twenty neighborhood men and boys armed with pitchforks, spades, and hoes. They'd have half as many dogs, standing at the ready. When the feeder took to the air, maybe a hundred rats would scatter in every direction. Many would elude the weapons, but I don't believe a rat ever escaped the dogs. Those pooches had a field day. It was really quite something.

There were lessons of life and death pretty much from the get-go on Grandpa's farm. Hilarious book, right, people?

When I was five my dad had an opportunity that seemed very Little House on the Prairie to me. There was a farmer named Bob Heartt who was going to tear down his old two-story farmhouse and build a newfangled, single-story ranch house. He offered my family his old house if we could simply ROLL THE HOUSE ON WHEELS to a new three-acre plot of land in one of his cornfields. In exchange, Bob Heartt would receive a new heater in his expert-machinist tractor shop, new cabinets for his wife's kitchen, the filling-in of the old basement hole, and compensation for the three acres. Still, it was a great deal. My folks borrowed \$27,000 and spent most of the \$10,000 they had in savings. My dad still says it's one of the best financial moves he ever made.

Until this writing, I had never put together my own penchant for moving audacious loads of scenery (or tree slabs) with my dad's Paul Bunyan-esque relocation of a gargantuan two-story farmhouse. I could write a whole book on the lessons I received from Dad, and Uncles Dan and Don, and Grandpa Mike, as well as Grandpa Ray, my dad's dad. I learned early to respect my tools and my machinery, knowing that with the proper lashing-down and utilization of simple machines—the wheel, the lever, the screw, the inclined plane—there was no job of work that could defeat us.

Over and over, for years, I would accompany them in tasks of carpentry and mechanics, and they would set me to work with a hammer and nails and patiently repeat, "Hit it! Don't

make love to it, hit the gol- dang thing!" After years of attempts, I was finally able to feel the strength come into my arms and shoulders and operate a tool in a manner that they would pronounce satisfactory. For one of those impossibly proficient men to deem my work a "nice job" filled me with more satisfaction than any A- plus grade I ever received in school. In my burgeoning competence with a ratchet and more importantly, their approbation thereof there was a complicit understanding that I was on the right path to one day have the ability to use tools to my creative benefit, just as they did every day.

My mother has two brothers and one sister. My uncle Don is the baby of the family. Later I was astonished to realize that he is young enough to have been my older brother. He was so great with us all my aunts and uncles were like the Super Friends to me, but Uncle Don was Aquaman (the coolest). My mom's younger sister, Michele, whom we called Aunt Micki, she was more mature and studious, as well as being fun like when she used to name our freckles for us. She's a librarian/historian in Minooka now, and my older sister, Laurie, works with her. Aunt Micki turned me on to the Chronicles of Narnia books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the Madeleine L'Engle books. I can't give her enough "props," as the kids are saying, for turning me on to such great fiction. (My brother and sisters didn't like reading in the same way. They eventually caught on.) And Little House on the Prairie. I got so turned on by a series of books set in an alternative world. I wanted to know everything about the world what has Pa got in his pockets?

Uncle Don was the tangible version of that notion. I don't know how it came to happen, but he bought this little motorcycle and left it at our house. I think it was just generosity, knowing we couldn't afford to get something like that for ourselves. My mom's oldest brother, Uncle Dan, and his wife, Dee, became the overseers of the farm as my grandparents grew older. They had a boy and a girl, Ryan and Angie. Ryan is six months younger than me, so we grew up like brothers. They had the resources of the farm at their disposal, so Ryan had a go-kart and a snowmobile. But I couldn't afford that stuff, which could have been why Uncle Don left the motorcycle at my house.

Uncle Don was just fun. He was and is really funny. He went to college and studied mechanical engineering. Motors, basically. He worked for a while in town as the bus mechanic for the school. But I think he and Uncle Dan were both destined to stick on the farm. Their knowledge is just amazing. To be a successful farmer you have to be a high-end mechanic, a botanist, and a soil engineer. You have to be a carpenter. Uncle Don was an incredible student of life but also loved to have fun. He was so free-handed he would take us with him on snowmobiling trips and motorcycle rides, or we'd just go ride bicycles. Our family loves to fish, so we'd go boating. We've always had some version of our own boats, and now everybody's got his/her own getaway cabin in Indiana or Wisconsin or Minnesota.

Uncle Don had the most throbbing boner of a vehicle you could have in 1978 the Pontiac Firebird with the phoenix on the hood and the T-top. It was so badass. He would take us for a treat to Shorewood, the near suburb of Joliet, to the Tastee Freez to get ice cream. I'd get a vanilla cone dipped in cherry whatever that cherry candy shit is; it's the greatest. And he'd play Frank Zappa, which was forbidden.

We had a very decent household. We weren't allowed to watch The Three Stooges. Our TV was governed pretty closely. There was a ban for a while on Tom and Jerry, but eventually that was lifted. My parents didn't want their kids to see things with violence in them, which is so hilarious and sad now. (Looking at you, video games where one can chop the heads off...

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