

How Cybill Shepherd helped inspire my new novel

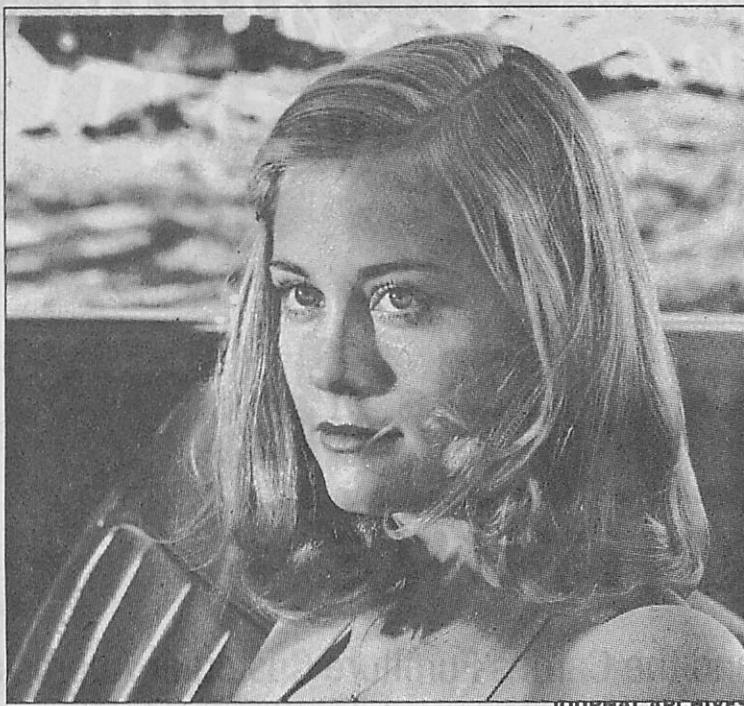
CHARLES PINNING

Irreplaceable" is the title of my new novel, which takes place in Rhode Island, mostly in Providence, with excursions to Newport and Boston. Normally, I have an easy time of it with titles; they either come to me just as I begin writing a story or soon afterward. "Irreplaceable" didn't. First it was "It Is My Pleasure," then it was "Swanson the Magnificent." Finally, with the publisher haranguing me with a deadline, the character of Aleda gave it to me, just as her real-life inspiration had brought me the story it tells, one I'd long sought to wrap around a single event that had intrigued me many years before.

As reported in the media, in the wee hours of March 18, 1990, following a long St. Patrick's Day celebration in Boston, two thieves posing as Boston police officers gained entrance to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, tied up the two guards and relieved the palazzo premises of three Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Manet, a handful of Degas and a few other items totaling, at today's prices, an estimated \$500 million. It remains the biggest art theft in history — in fact, history's biggest property theft.

I had visited the museum for the first time only two weeks before the theft. The first question that popped into my mind was: Who would steal art so famous it couldn't be sold? I knew I wanted to write about it in a fictional way, but nothing original came to mind. More than a decade passed without clues or recovery of the art, and my ponderings were still not yielding a satisfactory storyline.

More years passed and then my old friend, Cybill Shepherd, came to Providence, in 2005, to star in a movie. We hadn't seen each other for a while and she'd never been to



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Cybill Shepherd in the 1971 movie "The Last Picture Show."

Providence before, so after a nice lunch at Hemenway's, I took her for a stroll down Benefit Street. It was October and we were kicking the leaves and I was pointing out this and that sight: the John Brown House . . . the Athenaeum where Edgar Allen Poe would meet his beloved, Sarah Whitman . . .

In front of the Athenaeum there's a fountain, above which is inscribed: "Come hither every one that thirsteth." We both drank from it and I asked her, "What do you thirsteth for?"

"I can't tell you that," she replied, "because it won't come true. And I don't want you to tell me what you thirsteth for so it will come true for you, too."

We continued walking and she asked me what I was working on and I told her, and I told her too about the Gardner theft and that I wanted to write about it, but nothing original to say had come to me.

We stopped in front of the

Rhode Island School of Design Museum and she said, "It was an unconventional theft and it needs an unconventional story." Then she looked at me exactly the way she had when we knew were going to kiss for the first time, 34 years before. We kissed again now, in front of the museum, and suddenly the whole story that I needed started coming to me and I made sure I held her and kissed her again, then again, until I got to the end.

"Wow!" she gasped, pushing the hair back from her flushed face.

"I'll say!" I beamed. "C'mon, let's walk up to Prospect Park and I'll show you all of Providence."

That night when I got home I sat down and outlined the whole thing from beginning to end on one sheet of paper. After that, all I had to do was fill in the blanks. That took a while.

Finally, I was forced to confront the matter of the elusive title. I flipped through the Bible looking

for something pithy. I scanned poetry anthologies. Nada. Then I started re-reading my manuscript, and I reached the point in the story where Swanson and Aleda, the two main characters, are walking in Newport discussing the Gardner theft and Aleda says to Swanson: "You have the advantage of appreciating great art without ever having been able to own it. Therefore, you feel its theft keenly — it belongs to you in a way that really is irreplaceable."

Zing! Irreplaceable. Why hadn't I seen that earlier as the novel's title? The words had always been there. What had changed?

Me.

During the long revision process I'd come to understand what I had really written about. Yes, the stolen artworks are irreplaceable, but so is Aleda, the actress Swanson is in love with. And so are the two children, a brother and sister, of whom Swanson has become the guardian when the director of the RISD Museum disappears. In fact, what I had ultimately written was a story as much about creating a family as about art theft.

In any of our lives there are a precious few who are irreplaceable. They are the people whom we love with all our heart. The number has to be small.

Some mind meddlers might try to tell you that we are all, in truth, alone. Don't you believe it. You can get by with one, but the danger is if you lose that one, it will be hard to go on. You want to have several people, at least, in your life who are irreplaceable. If you don't, try to find them. If you have them, take care of them.

Charles Pinning, of Providence, is the author of the Rhode Island-based novel "Irreplaceable." He will be signing the book Saturday from 7 p.m. to midnight at the Cranston Street Armory, as part of the 30th anniversary gala of the West Broadway Neighborhood Association.