Eyes Filled with Starlight: The Story Girl

DOI
http://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2024.0016
Published on
Fri, 10/04/2024 - 12:00

I was always told in college creative writing classes that the writer should be invisible, the reader should not be aware of the writer, the story should be the laser-like focus. I had not yet read L.M. Montgomery's *The Story Girl* at that point in my life. Otherwise, I could've asked my teachers, "So how do you explain *The Story Girl* ?" That book proves their point perfectly and negates it entirely. Nowhere else do a story and storyteller become so front and centre, and the writer of this powerful, haunting, shape-shifting novel can't help but be part of it all, too.

What kind of book is this? Is it memoir or fiction? It feels like both, which is unexpected. Of course, L.M. Montgomery is an adult woman, but her narrator is a grown man remembering a long-ago summer and fall in Prince Edward Island with a group of children, one of whom called herself the Story Girl. Her tales, some of which may have been real, captivated the others. As the narrator looks back, we examine her through their eyes while she tells them story after story.

"I do like a road, because you can be always wondering what is at the end of it" (1). These are the first words of the novel, and they're the Story Girl's own words, but they come a whole chapter before we even meet her. Her given name is Sara Stanley, and she's a cousin of the narrator, Beverley King.

When it comes right down to it, this book is the story of someone who *really* knows how to tell a story.

Bev talks of the Story Girl's love of "expressive words"—she "treasured them as some girls might have treasured jewels. To her, they were as lustrous pearls ….

When she met with a new one she uttered it over and over to herself in solitude, weighing it, caressing it, infusing it with the radiance of her voice, making it her own in all its possibilities for ever" (196).

Much is made of the Story Girl's appearance. She's described as not pretty: "But you'll think she is while she's talking to you," says Dan, another cousin (9).

"No, she was not pretty," Bev says.

She was tall for her fourteen years, slim and straight; around her long, white face—rather too long and too white—fell sleek, dark-brown curls, tied above either ear with rosettes of scarlet ribbon. Her large curving mouth was as red as a poppy, and she had brilliant, almond-shaped, hazel eyes; but we did not think her pretty. (13)

Then the Story Girl says, simply, "Good morning," and Bev goes on: "Never had we heard a voice like hers. Never, in all my life since, have I heard such a voice." He continues, "If voices had colour, hers would have been like a rainbow" (13).

And the *things* she says!

"I always feel so sorry for the poor weeds[.] … It must be very hard to be rooted up. … When weeds go to heaven I suppose they will be flowers."

Bev tells of a rich man in Toronto who has a floral clock in his garden: "It looks just like the face of a clock, and there are flowers in it that open at every hour, so that you can always tell the time." Just as you're thinking how wonderful that might be, the Story Girl makes it clear she strongly disapproves: "What would be the use of it? … Nobody ever wants to know the time in a garden" (53).

As for her abilities, Bev says: "no matter how often the Story Girl told a story it always seemed as new and exciting as if you had just heard it for the first time" (23).

One neighbour is so enchanted, he wants to hear her recite the multiplication tables, and, Bev recalls, "the fact that three times three was nine was exquisitely ridiculous, five times six almost brought tears to our eyes, eight times seven was the most tragic and frightful thing ever heard of, and twelve times twelve rang like a trumpet call to victory" (71).

And, when someone asks for a story “with a creep in it,” the Story Girl manages to elicit “fascinated, horror-strickened” gazes: “All looked as if they were held prisoners in the bonds of a fearsome spell which they would gladly break but could not. It was not our Story Girl who sat there, telling that weird tale in a sibilant, curling voice. She had put on a new personality like a garment, and that personality was a venomous, evil, loathly thing. … I felt frightened of this unholy creature who had suddenly come in our dear Story Girl’s place.”

How does the Story Girl explain what had just happened?

“I felt exactly like a snake,” she says (220–21).

Which sums up, for me, what it is to be a storyteller—become the snake.

***

But Bev, our narrator, can tell a story, too. He recalls bittersweet, life-changing moments the cousins experienced on the Island, as when they all thought their friend, Peter, was going to die of measles, but he then miraculously recovered. Despite the happy news, Bev says, in perfect, spare, precise language, “we were very quiet now. We had been too near something dark and terrible and menacing” (287).

When the news about Peter is at its worst, the Story Girl does not cry, much to her cousin Felicity’s disapproval: “I don’t see how you can be so unfeeling, Sara Stanley,” Felicity says (281). The Story Girl only cries when she hears Peter will get well—and Bev describes how she “slipped down to the ground in a huddled fashion and broke into a very passion of weeping. I had never heard any one cry so, with dreadful, rending sobs” (287). She doesn’t underscore it, but Montgomery brought the two girls so sharply into focus here, telling us, with words and without, how superficial Felicity is, while also revealing the depth of the Story Girl’s feelings for Peter—when she cries, and, especially, when she doesn’t.

Another time, Bev, as he thinks about dreams, beautifully captures the pang of forgetting a dream: “But if a dream escape you, in what market-place the wide world over can you hope to regain it? What coin of earthly minting will ever buy back for you that lost and lovely vision?” (211).

***

I’ve never liked writing descriptions—much prefer dialogue—and this LM is a bit in awe of LMM’s ability here, especially when it comes to the sky, which she gives *character*: “The dusk crept into the orchard like a dim, bewitching personality. You could see her—feel her—hear her. She tiptoed softly from tree to tree, ever drawing nearer. Presently her filmy wings hovered over us and through them gleamed the early stars of the autumn night” (240). And, on a picnic, when “November dreamed that it was May,” the wind “made a sweet, drowsy murmur in the boughs, as of bees among apple blossoms” (303).

“It’s just like spring, isn’t it?” said Felicity.

The Story Girl shook her head.

“No, not quite. It looks like spring, but it isn’t spring. It’s as if everything was resting—getting ready to sleep. In spring they’re getting ready to grow. Can’t you *feel* the difference?”

“*I* think it’s just like spring,” insisted Felicity. (303–04)

And, on a “cool, dewy evening, … a sunset afterglow—creamy yellow and a hue that was not so much red as the dream of red” (96).

The dream of red!

***

My favourite story in the book, the kind you can read as a kid and as an adult and somehow it affects you the same way, timelessly, is an origin tale. When relating a story like this, Bev says the Story Girl’s voice takes “on a clear, remote, starry sound … When she ceased we came back to earth, feeling as if we had been millions of miles away in the blue ether, and that all our old familiar surroundings were momentarily forgotten and strange” (273).

Her storytelling is one kind of travel along that road in the book’s first line, and here she reaches its farthest end.

Two archangels, Zerah and Zulamith, love each other like mortals, which is forbidden, and the Almighty punishes them—“Zerah was exiled to a star on one side of the universe, and Zulamith was sent to a star on the other side of the universe;

and between them was a fathomless abyss which thought itself could not cross. Only one thing could cross it—and that was love. … Zulamith … began to build up a bridge of light from his star; and Zerah, not knowing this, but loving and longing for him, began to build a similar bridge of light from her star. For a thousand thousand years they both built the bridge of light, and at last they met and sprang into each other's arms."

The other archangels became enraged by this and demanded that God destroy the bridge.

> "Nay," He said, "whatsoever in my universe true love hath builded not even the Almighty can destroy. The bridge must stand forever."
>
> "And," concluded the Story Girl, her face upturned to the sky and her big eyes filled with starlight, "it stands still. That bridge is the Milky Way." (99–100)

To say I found the book unforgettable, as a reader and writer, is an understatement. Will I ever look at the Milky Way the same way again? Will I ever want to know what time it is in a garden? Will I ever catch sight of that perfect shade, a dream of red?

About the Author: Lois Metzger is the author of five novels for young adults, including the award-winning *A Trick of the Light*. She has also written two non-fiction books about the Holocaust and edited five anthologies of original short stories. She lives near Washington Square Park in New York City with her husband, environmental writer Tony Hiss.

Article Info

Creative Commons License
Copyright: Lois Metzger, 2024. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (Creative Commons BY 4.0), which allows the user to share, copy, and redistribute the material in any medium or format and adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, PROVIDED the Licensor is given attribution in accordance with the terms and conditions of the CC BY 4.0.

Peer reviewed
No

Work Cited

Montgomery, L.M. *The Story Girl*. 1911. Tundra Books, 2018.