Books in Their Hands: Why Elizabeth George Speare Wrote

When I was growing up “The Witch of Blackbird Pond” by Elizabeth George Speare was my favorite book. The heroine, Kit Tylor from Barbados, resonated with me. She was a refugee from financial ruin and the unwelcome marital advances of an older man at a time when women had little or no voice. As the daughter of a political refugee from communism and a foreign service officer, I was also raised overseas. But it was the 1980’s, a time when women like Margaret Thatcher, were confidently navigating the world stage. She said things like; “If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.” and “Any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country.”

I was delighted to discover that my favorite book was written by a woman who like Thatcher said, “understood the problems of running a home”. Speare was a stay at home Mom who only started writing seriously in her forties once her children were in middle school. While this 1950’s housewife turned writer only produced a handful of books, they raked in the awards. She is one of only six Newberry Medal winners, male or female, to ever receive the Newberry twice; once in 1958 for “The Witch of Blackbird Pond”, and once in 1961 for “The Bronze Bow”.

Shockingly, the internet is almost completely bare of anything substantial about Speare, each site recounting the same generic facts. So, to understand anything about Speare, you need to crack open some books. It was her award acceptance speeches that revealed clues to who she really was, and what was important to her. And it turns out that adolescent identity formation was one thing Speare found important.

In his English 420 class, Dr. Chris Crowe taught that one of the most critical things a teenager does during adolescence is to define how they see themselves and how they see the world. The ultimate goal for parents and teachers is to help teens to form strong and stable sense of self-identity that they will use for their entire life. Speare's speeches coupled with Dr. Chris Crowe's comments on adolescent identity formation, helped me to articulate a question about Speare's books: How do Elizabeth George Speare's books teach the modern YA reader to form a strong and resilient sense of self-identity?

To answer this question we will contemplate three of her books: First, The Witch of Blackbird Pond, next The Bronze Bow, and finally The Sign of the Beaver.

The Witch of Blackbird Pond is set in New England in 1687. It is the story of 16-year-old Kit Tylor who flees to New England from Barbados, after her Grandfather's death leaves her penniless. Almost immediately, Kit feels like an outsider in her Uncle Matthew's home in Wethersfield, Connecticut. His family's cheerless Puritan lifestyle, the daily hard labor, and the long, boring church sermons are torture for Kit. She is used to an aristocratic life of ease and freedom. After repeatedly failing at seemingly simple tasks such as carding wool and making soap, Kit runs out to the meadow. There she makes friends with an outcast Quaker woman, Hannah Tucker, who the town residents ultimately hunt down as a witch when sickness inflicts the town. Kit helps Hannah escape, but is then tried for being a witch herself.

In the book, Kit's self-identity transforms as she struggles with loss and change. She begins the book as the headstrong granddaughter of a nobleman, but by the end of the book she has changed into a hardworking, independent woman, with the skills to take care of herself. This is radical for both the time period in which the book is placed, as well as the 1950s world Speare

herself grappled with while writing it—where state law required her to stop working once she got married, and the witch hunt of McCarthyism was in full swing.

Kit develops a clearer sense of who she is despite and possibly because of being ostracized and put on trial by her community. In the end, her strength and resilience no longer come from money and social standing, but from her good name and her unselfish service to her family. She realizes that although she may never fit in with the Puritans at Wethersfield, she is comfortable with who she is. These powerful messages teach young adult readers that success in life is not just about fitting in, but about facing loss and change head on, and equipping ourselves with tools to be self-sufficient. Young readers can glean ideals such as these from good books that will guide how they see themselves for the rest of their lives.

Speare herself said, "I believe that all of us who are concerned with children are committed to the salvaging of Love and Honor and Duty. Not only our own faith, but the children themselves compel us. Young people do not want to accept meaninglessness. They look urgently to the adult world for evidence that we have proved our values to be enduring (Speare, pg. 3)."

The very values that positively influence identity formation are what Speare places in the center of her books. In the Bronze Bow, Speare helps another character grapple with his identity. Set in first century Palestine, the character of Daniel bar Jamin witnesses his father's brutal crucifixion by the Romans. He is consumed by revenge, while his sister Leah reacts by becoming too panic-stricken to leave the house or care for herself. As Daniel helps her, he hears a rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, teaching radical doctrine on forgiving one's enemies. Daniel's anger and need for revenge climaxes when he finds out that his sister has befriended a Roman—the very nationality that murdered their father. His outburst prompts Leah to retreat further into fear and

silence. Ultimately, Jesus physically heals Leah and emotionally challenges Daniel to look beyond his discrimination.

Speare expertly crafts a character who's only motivation is revenge. Daniel's change of heart comes from being humbled, coming face to face with his own mistakes, and letting go of what he cannot control. As Daniel deals with his sister Leah's debilitating anxiety (that he caused to flare up, mind you), he begins to understand the pain his festering feelings can inflict on others. Speare uses Daniel's character as a primer for YA readers, to move from being self-absorbed to extending forgiveness and the benefit of the doubt to others. Where his identity was based solely on vengeance, Daniel realizes that only love can "bend a bow of bronze". A powerful lesson to the modern YA reader who is seeing an influx of refugees in their social circle, or who may even be a refugee themselves. Speare highlights the importance of not labeling a culture, nationality, or a race as evil because of fear or the radical actions of a few.

Speare herself said of writing the book, "I knew what I wanted to do. I was teaching a Sunday School class at the time, and I longed to lift the personality of Jesus off the flat and lifeless pages of our textbook. I wanted to give my pupils, and others like them, a glimpse of the divided and turbulent society of Palestine, an occupied country with many parallels in our own day…I longed to have them see that the preacher who walked the hills of Galilee was not a mythical figure, but a compelling and dynamic leader, a hero to whom a boy in any age would gladly offer all his loyalty…If Love and Honor and Duty can be salvaged, then someone must write about them in a fashion which carries conviction (Speare, pg. 2)."

Lastly, I will discuss Elizabeth George Speare's book: The Sign of the Beaver. Set in 18th century Maine, it is the story of 12-year-old Matt Hallowell, who stays behind to guard his family's cabin, while his father goes back to Connecticut to fetch the rest of the family. Left to

himself, Matt's rifle is stolen by a convict, and he is terribly injured by bee stings. Luckily, he is nursed to health by two Penobscot Indians who act as good Samaritans when a man of his own nationality abuses and abandons him. In return for saving his life, Matt agrees to teach an Indian his age, Attean, English. They work through their prejudices for one another and ultimately work together to survive a bear attack.

In The Sign of the Beaver, Matt's identity changes as he learns respect for Attean's hunting and survival skills in the forest. He learns a reverence for the earth and all creations. Matt not only learns from his friend but realizes that the prejudices and assumptions he has been taught about Indians are wrong. He learns to step back from fearing what he cannot understand. Matt sees through the eyes of another culture and begins to respect their traditions and wisdom. He realizes that he does not know everything he needs to know to survive, and that by accepting help and friendship, Matt is able to learn skills and create more on the land than he would have been able to alone.

And those ideals are exactly what Speare wanted to teach. She describes what motivated her writing in the following quote; "For we are all dedicated to preparing children for life. There are many needful ways of equipping young people for the future. We have chosen to place books in their hands, books that will serve not only as companions and teachers but as guardians. For the world into which our children are about to step is filled with peril. And perhaps of all the dangers that lie in wait, the most terrifying is that they may settle for a world without meaning (Speare, pg. 3)."

In all three novels Spear creates a template to create a world filled with meaning for her YA readers. She creates well rounded characters that make their own choices, fail at their tasks, but then ultimately learn from their mistakes, which redefines how they see the world and

themselves as they face hardships. They develop resilience by dealing with the unexpected cruelties of life with strength, fortitude, and sound judgment. I love the fact that Speare does not solve all of her characters' problems. Kit never truly fits in at Wethersfield, Daniel is *still* under Roman rule at the end of the Bronze Bow, and Matt is powerless to stop his countrymen from stripping the Indian tribes of their lands.

Through these difficult dichotomies, Speare teaches her reader that we all have our own list of "unsolvable" problems. We are the heroes and heroines of our own stories. We may not be in control of the conflicts that arise, but we do have a choice in how we will respond to them, and in how we can change and adapt. Her novels teach us that sometimes it isn't about solving the problem, but in gaining a new perspective in order to have the courage to face things—especially when they can't be solved.

That is why Speare's stories matter, perhaps even more today than when they were written. Her books give YA readers a template for change, growth, identity formation and the creation of ideals from courageous heroes. Because in the end, aren't we all refugees; hiding from something, afraid of exposing our most secret, vulnerable selves to the shame and judgement of others? And isn't it easier to be brave when we know that someone else has dealt with the same thing and triumphed? The truth is that all of us, no matter what our age, will have to redefine who we are multiple times over the course of our lives, and what better way to do learn how to do it than from the pages of a good book.

Works Cited

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