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Remembering the Fifties: Salt Lake City and Virginia Sorenson's
*Miracle on Maple Hill*

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Young adult author Louise Plummer revisits the 1950's and the 1957 Newbery Medal Winner The Miracle on Maple Hill.

I first learned to take the bus the summer I was ten and took swimming lessons at the Deseret Gym in Salt Lake, which in the early fifties was just east of the Hotel Utah. Bus fare was a dime. I caught the number 1-15 bus with Marva Johnson on Ninth South and Tenth East. I like the independence of riding the bus, of going downtown without my mother. I loved the Deseret Gym with its chlorine smell, its wire baskets for storing our clothes, and its mandatory faded blue cotton tank suits. I loved the tension of lining up against the tile wall of the pool room to have our feet checked for athlete's foot, a condition that seemed to rival leprosy. If you had it, you were unclean and couldn't swim. Finally, I loved the tension of ogling the entrance to the boys' dressing room hoping to catch a glimpse of a male body. We all knew the truth: at the Deseret Gym, boys swam "bare naked."

After swimming lessons, the ritual was to cross the street and walk into the north entrance of ZCMI past the dusty, green and gold Tiffin Room on the left, where old ladies sat, legs comfortably spread, eating lunches of chicken a la king or stuffed peppers. On the right at the long candy counter we bought jelly beans, or, if we had enough money, non-pareils that we ate as we walked past the magazine racks and the interior glass flower shop with its pots of hydrangeas flanking the doorway. In notions, we watched the clerk make false pony tails from real looking strands of hair. Even then I knew that the only way I would ever have long hair was to buy it. Marva and I lingered over gaudy cosmetic jewelry, touching everything and rested our elbows on the glass case housing the lace handkerchiefs. I hoped to own one when I became a bride. We tried on hats with veils in millinery and made faces in the mirror until a clerk asked us if we intended to buy. Our excursion downtown was finished only after a visit to the beauty salon upstairs. We went to watch Mrs. Matthews, a neighbor, who had her nails painted a light mauve each week. I want to say that she wore fox furs, the fox heads still intact with black beads for eyes, around her neck. Could that be true? Fox furs in mid-summer? I think, perhaps, I saw her at church with the fox furs and can now not imagine her without them.

Later, in my teens, I took the bus alone downtown wearing a fitted princess-line sheath, patent-leather heels with a purse to match, and white gloves. Women dressed up to go downtown, and I wanted to be a woman—a white-glove sort of woman. I took the Ninth East bus, which turned at Third South and stopped across the street from Auerbach's, my favorite department store. There, on the second floor, I would try on dresses I couldn't afford, standing in front of the large dressing room mirrors admiring myself. I tried on hats, this time without giggling. From Auerbach's I moved down the street through Keith O'Brien's, the Paris company, The Yardstick, and then Pembroke's to look at art materials. I'd cross the street, cut through Kress's, where I ate my first piece of pumpkin pie at the food counter, try on reading glasses, and exit at Main Street. I'd make my way up the street and across to Adrian and Emily's, a dress shop whose newspaper ads I admired. The original drawings were displayed in the store, and I would study these up close and then go home and try drawing them. This was in the middle of a long period where I wanted to be a fashion illustrator.

In ZCMI I bought more non-pareils, still my favorite candy, and repeated the same things I did when I was ten, except for watching Mrs.
Matthews in the beauty salon, which by then I would have considered childish. I waited for the bus home sitting on a black metal railing next to the sidewalk across from the public library on State Street.

Remembering myself in downtown Salt Lake City in the fifties parallels my experience of rereading Virginia Sorenson’s Newbery-Award winning Miracles on Maple Hill. The novel seems as old fashioned as the Deseret Gym insisting that girls wear swimming suits, while the boys swim naked. As old fashioned as my wearing white gloves. On the first page of her book, Sorenson reminds us we are in a world without seat belts: Marly “slid forward in the car seat, talking right against her mother’s neck, over her coat collar.” We are in a world where Mother says, “don’t breathe down my neck, dear!” Words like “dear” and “cross,” meaning angry, “dismay,” “worrisome,” “goodness,” as in “goodness knows” or “my goodness” or “goodness, it was a relief,” sound as archaic to modern ears as the sound track of “Father Knows Best.”

Miracles on Maple Hill is buried in the ideology of the fifties. Marly’s family is a traditional one: two parents and a brother, Joe. They are moving to the mother’s family home in the country on Maple Hill in hope of a miracle. Marly’s father has been in the war as a soldier and a prisoner of war and has come back despondent: “Daddy didn’t even come from his room Christmas morning to see the presents.” Marly’s mother sees Maple Hill as “the place where all the miracles had happened.” Marly’s father is skeptical: “I’m afraid miracles don’t happen anymore—even at Maple Hill.” The mother has been working because the father has been away, but one of the reasons for staying at Maple Hill is so that they “could live ... without Mother working.”

The family enjoys a surrogate extended family in the older neighbors, the Chrises. Mrs. Chris, like a grandmother, feeds them huge meals: “Anything I love to do is fatten a man,” she tells Marly’s father. And Mr. Chris teaches the family about sugaring time and how to make maple syrup. Mr. Chris, like a true grandfather, takes Marly’s side in the issue of setting traps for mice. He says his best friend is a deer mouse that comes every day. “My wife doesn’t know all about my funny friends,” he tells Marly. And like a grandfather, he takes the whole family on a sleigh ride with horses when it snows.

But the element that most characterizes the ideology of the fifties is Sorenson’s sharply defined gender roles. When the family first enters the old homestead, Marly’s dad and Joe leave the kitchen “to look at the old barn.” Marly wants to see the rest of the house and her mother says she can with this reminder: “But Marly—this [the kitchen] is the first place we women have to start to dig.” In the dining room mother wonders where Grandma’s old sewing machine is. “Uncle John,” she says, “seems to have kept out just the things a man uses.” When Marly makes pancakes for her family, her brother is surprised: “Did you make these?” he asks. “Gee!” and gulps down nine pancakes. Marly is pleased with his reaction: “Now [she] understood why Mother looked so pleased when they liked the things she made.” A woman’s satisfaction is found in the kitchen.

A man’s satisfaction is found outside the house. Marly’s father rejuvenates the old garden and when Mr. Chris comes over, the two of them “stood outside or sat on the grass. They never seemed to run out of talk about seeds and weeds and bugs and sprays and fruit, as Mother and Chrissie seemed never to run out of talk about flowers and jelly and jam.” Occasionally, Mr. Chris’s hired hand, Fritz, takes Marly’s dad and Joe fishing. Marly and her mother stay at home to have “a fine female time,” when they don’t have to “cook perfect pots of things every meal” but can eat leftovers.

Marly’s brother, Joe, like the older men, lives outside. He is “going to be an explore.” He is allowed to explore Pittsburgh by himself but Marly is not: “it made her feel cross that a girl couldn’t explore by herself, too, but Mother and Daddy would never let her.” In Pittsburgh she once got off the streetcar at the wrong stop and needed the help of a policeman to get home. When Marly tries to explore alone at Maple Hill, she panics. She wanders off down a lumber road searching for yellow cowslips and gets caught between a fence and a herd of cows. In her panic, she vows to herself, ‘I’ll never go anywhere without Joe again...or without Mother, or Daddy, or Mr. Chris.” Finally, she is able to
climb the fence, having lost her shoes in the marsh.

It is all right for girls to be fearful but not for boys. When Marly and Joe are confronted by the old hermit while snooping in his house, they run away in fright. Joe is embarrassed about his fear and Marly reflects:

"...she was glad she wasn’t a boy. It was all right for girls to be scared or silly or even ask dumb questions. Everybody just laughed and thought it was funny. But if anybody caught Joe asking a dumb question or even thought he was the littlest bit scared, he went red and purple and white. Girls can be afraid, but boys can’t. Boys can explore, but girls can’t. Girls fix the food and boys eat it."

Miracles on Maple Hill was first published in 1956. I figure the character of Marly would be three years younger than I am. If she were a real person, or even a serialized character allowing readers to grow up with her as they do with Anne of Green Gables, then Marly would have been in college during the sexual revolution of the late sixties and would probably have been asking the same questions about gender distinctions as the rest of her generation.

There is evidence of this when the family pulls together to help with Mr. Chris’s sugar crop while he is in the hospital after a heart attack. Joe’s teacher at school suggests that “some of the strongest boys” be sent out to help collect the sap. Marly asks her mother “why the girls can’t come?” She says, “I can carry as many buckets as Joe can!” Joe disagrees. Mother finds it hard to believe that any girls would want to come, because she sees Marly as “different. She’s rather a tomboy—” implying that she lacks traditional femininity in her desire to help with masculine work. But because of Marly’s question, the girls are invited to help along with the boys and the work gets done faster. Marly shows this non-traditional spunk beginning in the first chapter, when she wants to get out of the snowbound car and find help along with Joe, to the end of the novel, when she rambunctiously greets the bedridden Mr. Chris by dropping a pot of earth and leaves over his sheets. Mother’s response is “Marly, you would do a thing like that!"

I am old enough to be tempted to think that times were better in the fifties, that I really did like Ike, that I liked driving my father’s old ‘51 blue Ford, watching Ozzie and Harriet on TV, and eating large meals of pork roast, potatoes and gravy, and Boston cream pie for dessert. I am charmed by those memories as I am charmed by Sorenson’s miracles of renewal: Father does get better, the sap rises again and spring returns along with the pokeberries, hepatica, trillium, meadow boots, and elderberries. But when I read in and between the lines of Miracles, I hear my own mother’s voice determining for me what is appropriate for a girl, a young woman, a wife and mother, just as Marly’s mother does for her. And I get a grip, as the kids say. Years ago, just after publishing my first young adult novel, I met Virginia Sorenson when she came to speak at the university where I teach. We sat on a sofa together waiting for lunch. She asked me what the title of my novel was. I told her: The Romantic Obsessions and Humiliations of Annie Sehlmeier. Immediately she told this anecdote: Recently, she said, a friend of hers, who was also a children’s book writer, had attended a conference and had heard a lecture on the kinds of subjects popular with children now. Her friend was appalled and sat at the back of the hall, crying, because she realized she could no longer write children’s books if that’s what they wanted.

She told me this story in the same non-specific way that I have just repeated it. It was left up to me to decide what exactly the appalling subject matter was. I decided it must be the romantic obsessions and humiliations of young girls given the context of the conversation. Rereading her novel has reinforced this perception. Virginia Sorenson is Marly’s mother, is my mother, is Harriet Nelson. They would find obsessions inappropriate.

Some day, maybe in the year 2015, I will sit next to some eager new author, awaiting my lunch, and she will tell me the title of her book, Bambi Does It in Chains, and my mouth will drop and I’ll say something that places me smack in the middle of those prim eighties and nineties. And it will be all right.