Tragic Innocence

JEAN LITTLE

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> "You even believe in the things that we make up."
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> It was true that once, when they had been looking for the North Pole in a snowstorm, ahead of Annesley the whiteness had suddenly thickened for a thousand miles and she had cried out, "We're really explorers!" Another time, stalking like an Indian in the long grass (it had harebells in it that day), she had felt something shift inside her, and the horizon had fallen below the whips of the grass, and the city was gone as if it had never been there.

In these few words, Cicely Louise Evans, author of *The Saint Game,* has told exactly how a powerful imagination can change the very consciousness of a child. Which is in control, the child or the game? If it is the game, would the imaginative child choose to regain the whiphand or would she, like Annesley, rather take a chance and see where play may carry her? She may end up amused, humiliated, challenged, confused or exalted. Annesley faces all of these outcomes. She may be given insight, joy or deep sorrow. These, too, wait for Annesley. Looking back from a later vantage point, would Annesley, if she could, have decided not to play the saint game? Were the penalties too great? One feels that, in spite of the way it ended, winter and spring would remain special for Annesley Brown because of the adventures she and Esther, her sister, shared, because of the growing up she did and because of the mysterious other-world moments given her for which she would never find the explanation and through which she felt graced.

The Saint Game is a many layered book, difficult to review because it needs to be looked at from so many aspects. It is as complex as Annesley is herself with her several levels of perception all operating within moments of each other. Yet it is Esther's book too. Without Esther as her ally (perhaps "accomplice" would be a better word), Annesley would never have invented the saint game, let alone have continued in it for months. Their interdependence, coupled with their independence, gives their sisterhood such actuality that anyone who has had a close relationship with a brother or sister or has watched such siblings in action will delight in this author's unerring portrait of what is involved if you are the leader, like Annesley, or the sorely-tried-but-mostly-true follower, like Esther.

The Saint Game is the story of a family living in Victoria early in the 1920s. Mother and Father are capable but rather distant parents. (Annesley and Esther are able to carry on their saintly activities in secrecy with only

occasional close calls.) Mother's brother, Uncle Walker, who lives with the family, is pictured at first as a benevolent tease with a sometimes acid tongue. He is the grey sheep of the family but everyone is fond of him and he seems to pose no threat to the comfortable lives led by all who make up the Brown household. The girls have an older sister called Doff, short for Dorothea, who lives her adolescent life outside the sphere in which Esther, ten, and Annesley, nine, dwell. In addition to the Brown family, including Uncle Walker, two hired girls live in the house. Other people are unimportant in this story except in a couple of small, significant scenes.

It all starts when Annesley, while "rummaging", comes upon a dusty, thick, old book, hidden away behind a respectable collection of Dickens. This book, called *A Calendar of Saints,* has the fascination of the forbidden from the start. In no time flat, the girls discover within it all sorts of hair-raising, spellbinding, mysterious things. Staunch Protestants, they are taken aback by the grisly fates of the martyrs which are set forth graphically in their "saint book". They find many of the words and phrases used baffling but they realize, almost at once, that if they can learn the answers to their questions, the secrets which adults now are keeping from them will become clear at last.

Their first action, however, is to manufacture a saint of their own, since Esther maintains that you must have a statue before you can pray to a saint. It is fitting that this "saint" is created out of potatoes which Annesley "snitches" when the maid's back is turned. Ms. Evans often manages to invest the natural actions of the children with underlying significance, but she does this so deftly that never does the meaning beneath separate itself from the story, nor do the children act out of character. Their perception is limited by their age and their experience. The author is so honest in this regard that both girls remain confused about much that has happened even at the end of the book. At first, I thought that this state of being left with only half-truths would be disconcerting to a child reader but, on further thought, I decided that this is indeed the situation in which most children find themselves, even in this enlightened age.

Once the saint is assembled, Annesley makes a heartfelt prayer to it to cure Esther's swollen glands. Her prayer is so fervent that Esther cries out she feels "fingers going around my neck" and begs Annesley to stop. Esther *is* cured by suppertime, however, and the saint game is off to a good start.

At first, the incidents connected with the game are almost pure comedy although there is often evidence of some power, outside herself, that Annesley taps into, much to Esther's mystification. Their attempt to mortify the flesh during Lent by the donning of homemade hairshirts is alone worth reading the whole book, though it is only one episode in a well-plotted story. It is typical of the two girls that Esther ends up sensibly removing hers when it becomes unendurable while Annesley goes into a "transport" and is lifted outside her suffering. Their comments, afterwards, show that while both wore sackcloth (literally), the experience was radically different for each girl. Annesley, telling about her transport, sums up:

". . .a lot of stuff the saints did doesn't make any sense till you try it."
"Funny," said Esther, yawning, "I thought just the other way."

Sex figures largely in the saint book since, for one thing, most of the saints go to extreme lengths to preserve their virginity. The exact meaning of the word "virgin" eludes the girls and, the more they read, the more puzzling it becomes. They do not even consider going to their mother for information, quite rightly concluding that this would merely result in the confiscation of the book. Esther approaches her art teacher. The woman appears to be a mere stereotype of a skittish spinster but, in one heroic burst of speech, she becomes very much a real person. This small, taut scene is written with great skill. Annesley goes to one of the household maids and comes back with a mass of jumbled misinformation.

But their almost total innocence only partially shields them from the final tragic drama in the story. Uncle Walker has slowly, almost imperceptibly, moved into centre stage. The girls love him although, aping their parents, they half-pity him too. He drinks a bit too much. He visits a lady friend. He makes snide remarks. But he does not tell when he spots Annesley parading through the upstairs hall, stark naked. He gives the children gifts. He is clearly lonely. Then he meets Doff on her way home from choir practice and ends by raping her.

When Doff's father finds her and brings her home in a state of shock, she refuses to speak or to give any indication of who has molested her. Since Uncle Walker, upon recovering his senses, has threatened to kill her if she tells, she is afraid to say anything lest she reveal everything. Annesley, going in to visit her silent sister several days later, realizes, through a kind of telepathy, whom it is Doff fears. Doff, seeing that her younger sister has guessed (although Annesley still is unaware of what it is that Uncle Walker has actually done) spills out the whole story. Annesley, without meaning to, shows Uncle Walker that she is aware of his guilt. That she forgives it does not help him. He feels beyond forgiveness. Annesley, trying to be kind, takes the potato saint and leaves it on Uncle Walker's bed. The saint has, by this time, sprouted a penis-like shoot. Uncle Walker, on reaching his room, attempts to kill himself but suffers a stroke instead. He loses his memory, is partially paralyzed, and has to be put in a Home.

Doff's primary emotion is relief. Annesley is deeply saddened by the old man's helplessness and loss of selfhood. Earlier, when urged by Esther to pray that "the bugger will be caught", Annesley prayed instead that the saints would "bless the raper". Perhaps, when the inevitable alternative of exposure and disgrace is considered, her prayer is, in fact, answered but in a terrible way. The saint game is over.

Is this book essentially a cautionary tale? It is much more than that but it is that, as well. It shows that children cannot understand adult sex drives, that not everyone a child knows and likes is therefore trustworthy, that even well-intentioned people cannot always control their actions. It could conceivably put a child on guard if it were read with an understanding adult and discussed. However, as the book itself makes very clear, each child

draws his or her own conclusions from information presented, conversations overheard, incidents witnessed and experiences entered into.

The question which intrigued me was: for whom was this book written? Any adult would, I think, enjoy it for its nostalgia, wit, compassion and its true sense of what childhood was like. To nine and ten-year-olds, it will read like a piece of ancient history, presenting to them a world as different from their own as one in Elizabethan England, for instance. But children enjoy different worlds. I think they will miss much of what underlies this story, the price Annesley must pay for living within her imagination, the price Uncle Walker must pay for being human and weak. They will not understand the ending and will perhaps be haunted by it. Yet the saint game itself will enchant many children and the final sadness will not be unfamiliar to them. It is a book which invites a child to grow and consequently, a book to treasure.

Jean Little is the internationally translated author of many children's novels–Mine for Keeps, Look Through My Window, One to Grow On, From Anna, Kate, *and others–and winner of the Little, Brown Canadian Children's Book Award. Her next book,* Listen for the Singing, *will be published in June 1977.*