Secret gardens

Jean Little

Résumé: *Ici, Jean Little se remémore les récits de son enfance. Des récits oraux, d'abord, que ses parents lui faisaient sur commande. Puis, des premières lectures, des romans de Kingsley, de Mary O'Hara, de Lucy Maud Montgomery. Et évidemment,* Le jardin secret *de Frances Hodgson Burnett, livre qui a marqué toute sa vie.*

Although most children master basic reading skills, many do not turn into dedicated readers. There is no need to explain to the subscribers to *Canadian Children's Literature* what wealth is denied to those who do not read widely, joyfully and constantly. We have each found in books, perspective, understanding, laughter, refuge, healing, thought and matchless entertainment. But how do you pass on to children, faced by the problems inherent in decoding printed language, the sure knowledge that the treasure they are seeking is worth any effort? What made me, for instance, an avid bookworm by the age of nine?

For me and my brothers and sister, delight in language was something we caught from our assorted relatives long before we learned so much as the alphabet. I cannot recall a time when I did not know dozens of Nursery Rhymes, proverbs, scripture verses, poems and songs. We were seldom taught these in a formal way. They were just part of everyday interchange. On foggy mornings, Mother was sure to quote, "On a misty, moisty morning/ When foggy was the weather..." When she was giving my sister a bath, she would always say, while drying her toes, "This little piggy goes to market..." We always had a bedtime story and usually a lullaby as well. I can remember lying half-asleep, listening to Mother singing

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea.
Low, low, breathe and blow,
...Blow him again to me.

I never inquired where the "Western Sea" was but I loved the words, especially the magical finish of the second verse.

Silver sails all out of the west
Under the silver moon.
Sleep, my little one. Sleep my pretty one.
Sleep.

None of my relations needed a book to tell the stories of the Three Little Pigs or Red Riding Hood or the Three Bears. Whenever we had to sit still and be good, on journeys or waiting for someone or something to happen, each of them could fill in the time beautifully with stories on demand.

They also had countless sayings we came to know. "Save your breath to cool your porridge." "Your tongue must be hinged in the middle and wag at both ends." When Aunt Gretta thought we were stretching the truth, she would say, "I hear ducks on York Street." What it meant I have never discovered. It still tantalizes me. If one of us started falling asleep at the table, Mother would rhyme off,

"To bed, to bed!" said Sleepy Ned.
Let's tarry awhile," said Slow.
"Let's lick the pan," said Greedy Nan.
"Let's eat before we go."

None of this was deliberately "taught." We were seldom required to memorize anything. Word play was simply part and parcel of our daily life: amusing, delighting and enriching adults and children alike. It is convenient too. It keeps children entertained without requiring special equipment or unusual skill. It can be indulged in at any time and can fill an hour or be fitted handily into a few spare seconds.

Children are entranced with the silliest words, especially words that rhyme, particularly if the person reciting them is having fun too. My grandmother told us that the longest word in the English language was "transmagnificanbandanshiality." I can't remember when I discovered that it was not, in fact, a legitimate word; but we made her repeat it till we, too, could say it--loud and fast.

When I made fun of my younger sister for being a slow-poke, I heard about the hare and the tortoise. Over and over again, for obvious reasons, I was told the story of The Boy who Cried "Wolf!" We also knew, long before we could read them to ourselves, Bible stories: Moses in the bulrushes, Samuel called from sleep, David facing Goliath and the boy giving his loaves and fishes to Andrew.

We lived in Taiwan and, later, in Hong Kong, not returning to Canada until I was seven. Perhaps that is why I do not remember picture books as such until we were taken to Boys and Girls House in Toronto. There we discovered Beatrix Potter's wonderful little books and *Babar*. I also remember loving Jessie Wilcox Smith's illustrations in our copy of Stevenson's *A Child's garden of verses*. But always, perhaps in part because my vision was limited, the words meant more to me than the pictures.

The first longer books I remember loving were *The adventures of Robin Hood*, the *Just so stories* and A. A. Milne's stories and poems. Although I do not remember ever consciously memorizing Milne's poetry, my niece and I re-

cently spent hours reciting to each other "King John's Christmas" and "James James Morrison Morrison" and all our other favourites. As we did so, I could picture each page clearly with Ernest Shepherd's perfect illustrations.

The first complete novel I remember listening to was Kingsley's *The water babies*. I have read it recently and I believe there are now far better books which one can share with young children. Yet, at age six, I loved it. Although it now seems blatantly racist in spots, those pages are not what I remember. What impressed me was Tom's suffering as a chimney sweep and his encounters with Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid. Learning to rhyme off these wonderful names and then learning that, somehow, though the two ladies seemed utterly unlike, they were in fact one, delighted and mystified me. I think the Narnia Chronicles of C.S. Lewis offer the same challenge and wonder but without the shortcomings I now perceive in *The water babies*.

Another book we had at home and enjoyed mightily, in spite of its didacticism, was Munro Leaf's *Manners can be fun*. I remember clearly laughing at his "Watch Bird" which was always looking at rude, messy, deplorable children.

By the time I was seven, I was reading to myself but still listening avidly to bedtime stories too. That is one of the advantages that comes with having younger siblings. The story reading goes on and you can listen in even when you are twelve or thirteen. My family also read aloud on holidays, during car trips, all ages and sexes experiencing the story together. There are so many fine books which can be enjoyed on several levels and can give pleasure to all ages. My all-time favourite, *The secret garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, was such a book.

A long time ago, I spoke with a woman who told me she had no books as a child. She had possessed a few, but, after she had scarlet fever, the doctor insisted all her books be burned. They were never replaced and she lived out of reach of a public library.

I was appalled. I could not imagine such a bleak childhood. Yet, as I started to commiserate with her, she went on, "I did have one book. A man from the Insurance Company came to our place one day and brought me one. It was all I had and I read it over and over."

"What was it?" I asked.

"It was called *The secret garden,*" she said.

She still had my sympathy but no longer my heartfelt pity. If you were only to be allowed one children's book, how wonderful that Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic should be that one. What a perceptive man that insurance company representative must have been!

I had a childhood filled with books and yet that story was still my favourite. Nor am I alone in feeling deep love for this book. In Janet Lunn's novel *The root cellar,* Rose Larkin has only two precious possessions, a silver rose and a battered copy of *The secret garden*. In Elizabeth Goudge's *The rosemary tree,*

when the children are deeply hurt and frightened, they ask their teacher to read to them "the part where Mary finds the garden." In *Gates of excellence,* Katherine Paterson writes thus about this same book:

> Then there was *The secret garden*, which was more a mystical experience than a book. For years I wanted to read it aloud to my own children and was terrified to. Suppose it would be Victorian mishmash, and they would hate it, and I would be forced to hate it too. But the age of miracles is not past. Despite all the gingerbread, it lives. The magic endures. And whenever I think that children don't like descriptive passages, I remember the smell and feel of the spring earth in the garden as Colin and Mary dug about the bulbs.

How did I discover this special story? in my autobiographical book *Little by Little*, I tell of my introduction to it. It happened one afternoon when I, at age seven, was unable to recognize my streetcar stop and had ridden all the way to the end of the line before anybody realized my predicament. When I finally got home, my mother brought me my supper in bed. When I asked her to read to me while I ate it, she fetched both my brothers and a new book she said she had been waiting to read to us.

> Mother opened the book and began.
>
> "When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live
> with her uncle, everybody said she was the most
> disagreeable looking child ever seen. It was true too."
>
> I laid down my spoon. From the first sentence, *The secret garden* seemed especially mine. I did not wonder what Mary Lennox looked like. She looked exactly like me.
>
> She, too, was selfish and bad-tempered and lazy.
>
> Yet, little by little, she grew into somebody quite different. And the way it happened made perfect sense. I knew that I, too, would be different if I could find a hidden garden and friends like Dickon and Colin and the robin.

In the next few years, my friends *were* Dickon and Colin and the robin--and dozens of other beloved characters in children's fiction. Although some of them lived on our bookshelves at home, most of them I met first in the Guelph Public Library. I was eight when I got my first library card and began choosing books for myself. Perhaps I valued this privilege more because I spent my first six years in the Orient, hearing about Canadian libraries filled with books which children could take home, without quite believing in such places. In any case, the day I first visited the library unaccompanied by a parent was a magical day. I recount that experience also in *Little by Little.*

As I began to read novels on my own, one book that I read and reread with a sense of recognition and affirmation was *My friend Flicka* by Mary O'Hara. I first discovered it when my fifth grade teacher read it aloud to the class. Any teacher who wants to be remembered fondly by the children she or he teaches need only follow Miss Marr's example. I first got it out of the library and, later,

asked for a copy of my own as a birthday present. I don't think it was Flicka who drew me. My experiences with horses had not led me to dote on horse stories. It was Ken's loneliness. He was different like me. He did not measure up to his brother. He was a daydreamer. How often I had been called that. And then his love for Flicka and hers for him helped him grow into a stronger, more responsible person. Also one small detail enchanted me. Ken used to stand on the landing dreaming his way into a picture that hung there. We had such a picture on our landing. In a sense, our landing was in Mary O'Hara's book. That lent our house a touch of magic.

I have already written of my love for L. M. Montgomery's books. I share this love with every right-thinking Canadian child. Yet I seem to be the only person who, as a child, loved *Jane of Lantern Hill* with a special love. I can understand why the book is less popular than those about Anne Shirley and Emily Starr. Jane's father is a romantic impossibility and her mother is a sap. But I liked Jane herself. She actually lived, most of the year, in Toronto! Montgomery's beloved "Island" seemed, to me, too good to be true. But I myself had lived in Toronto and Jane, like Mary Lennox, was one of my special friends.

Rosemary Sutcliff, in her autobiographical book *Blue remembered hills*, tells of discovering *Emily of New Moon* one summer during her childhood and remembering its magic for years even though she did not own the book or know the name of its author. I, too, enjoyed Emily's story but found her "flashes" a little too rarefied. It seems strange, in light of this, that I felt Diamond's encounters with North Wind, in George Macdonald's *At the back of the north wind*, deeply satisfying. Although I skipped great chunks of the book each time, I returned again and again to each of Diamond's conversations with his mystifying, powerful friend. I was not at all put off by the hero's physical death at the end of the book. I think, perhaps, that I liked North Wind's taking Diamond's questions seriously and answering them with further puzzles. I did not understand what Macdonald was telling me but I loved his sharing with me some of the greatest questions we face. When inclusive language became an issue in the church, it was easy for me to think of God as a woman because I had known North Wind so intimately.

I soon realized that, if you wanted adventures, it was a distinct advantage to be an orphan. Almost without exception, my best loved heroes and heroines were devoid of parents. How I wept over *Nobody's boy* and *Nobody's girl* by Hector Malot! Pollyanna, Rebecca, Heidi, Mary Lennox, Sara Crewe, Jerusha Abbott in Jean Webster's *Daddy-long-legs*, Noel Streatfeild's three Fossil sisters, the little lame Prince all had no mothers or fathers to get in the way of the plot. Children with only one parent were nearly as blessed. Cedric Errol's mother was effectively gotten out of the way early in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. The Melendy children in Elizabeth Enright's books, the Moffats in Eleanor Estes's, the March girls with Father away at the War, the Bastables all had

only one, mostly absent, parent. Authors today cannot so blithely dispatch interfering grown-ups and set their characters free to go on guests. Writers today are severely handicapped by the miracles of modern medicine. I've heard people wonder why so many of us are turning to "time shift" novels or other types of fantasy. I think it is largely because that is a sure way to circumvent antibiotics and chemotherapy.

Didn't I read the Nancy Drew books? Of course I did. But never all of them. They left me unsatisfied. I could not really care about Nancy or any of her ilk. The stories had no heart, no mirth, no reality, no vision. All they had was action. It was not enough. I only got through one book about Elsie Dinsmore. I could weep copiously over *The Birds' Christmas carol* but I could not stomach Elsie's pious asininity. I read my share of facile romances, boarding school stories, horse and dog books and so on. Only by gobbling down every book she can find does a reading child learn to distinguish treasures from trash.

I was never forbidden to read any book or limited to those appropriate for my age group. My parents not only let us browse through their bookshelves at will, they read those we recommended. I cannot remember either of them ever suggesting that they were too grown for mere "kiddylit." A good book was a good book. We also saw our relations totally absorbed in what they were reading and heard them plead to be left alone till they finished the chapter. Such enthusiasm is contagious.

What is this article about? What does it matter that the books I loved in childhood have enriched my life and my writing? It matters because every child, whether or not he or she is interested in writing, needs to find the one book that will first lead through the door to the garden. Nothing else we language enthusiasts hold out to a child is as important, not good grammar or spelling or research skills or knowing how to prepare a detailed bibliography.

One novel will do it. One work in which, as Jane Austen says in the fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, "the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineations of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language."

For Kathy Lowinger, it was *The eagle of the ninth*. For one of my brothers it was *The Spartan*. For Claire MacKay, it was *Og, son of fire*. For my nephew Peter it was *The Lord of the rings*. For my mother and me and countless others, it was *The secret garden*.

About ten years ago, my not very good vision began to blur every so often. I had developed, in addition to my congenital poor vision, glaucoma resulting in marked corneal oedema. There was nothing that could be done to reverse the condition. This lacked reality until one clear summer night. "What a glorious evening!" a friend said to me. "Just look at those stars!"

I stared up at the heavens. The stars, about which I had written poems, to which I had looked for perspective and comfort ever since childhood, had utterly vanished.

Although I had never seen them in their thousands, I had loved studying the twenty or so I could see. This loss seemed to me to be a frightening foreknowledge of what blindness would be like. Black emptiness.

Then came the evening I lay on my bed listening to the CNIB Talking Book of *Watership Down*. I was lying, with my eyes closed, drinking in the last chapter of this marvellous fantasy. Then I heard the voice of Alexander Scourby read these words.

A few minutes later there was not a rabbit to be seen on the down. The red sun sank below Ladle Hill and the autumn stars began to shine in the darkening east--Perseus and the Pleiades, Cassiopeia, faint Pisces and the great square of Pegasus. The wind freshened, and soon myriads of dry beech leaves were filling the ditches and hollows and blowing in gusts across the dark miles of open grass.

Suddenly, I realized that I was seeing that sky as clearly as I had ever seen anything. There were the stars, shining as brightly as before. Richard Adams, with some help from a Talking Book reader, had taken me with him across an ocean into an English autumn evening and had given me back my lost stars.

I opened my eyes and lay very still, smiling. I think the look on my face must have been identical to that on Mary Lennox's as she beheld her secret garden.

Every child will have times when the stars go out. He will be hurt and alone. She will be friendless and desolate. They will see no door in the long wall confronting them.

They will need the help of a robin.

If I had not many years before been brought to find my own delight in reading, I would not have turned to Talking Books when I was so alone and angry and hurt. I would never have had that miraculous instant of discovering that the stars shone as brightly as ever.

Let's look once again at that robin. I think he is like a teacher of reading or a school librarian or an aunt. He does six essential things. Each is important.

First, he makes friends with Mary. He makes it clear that he really likes her, even though nobody else does.

Second, he sings to her from inside the garden, telling her through his song how joyous a place he has found.

Third, he shows her where to find the key.

Fourth, he encourages her as she searches for the door.

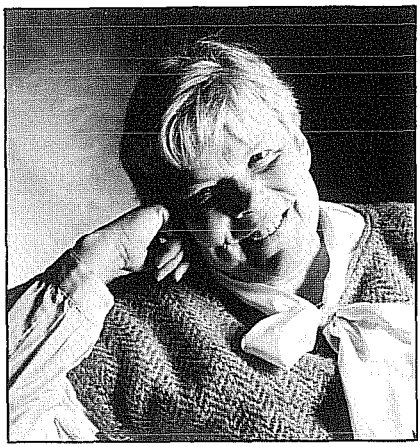
Fifth, he lets her enjoy the garden in her own way, not once criticizing her for not building his kind of a nest.

Sixth, he does not resent being left behind but, whenever she returns, needing to share something with him, he is happy to see her.

If the key is reading skill, if the garden is the world of books, if the door is the one book that will take a particular child through the mechanics into the joy of reading, then we may be the robin.

The robin had help, of course. Dickon and Martha, Ben Weatherstaff and Colin were all part of it. Nevertheless, Mary needed that bird to show her the way out of her aloneness into that place of refuge, healing and delight.

Mary never formally thanks the robin. Children don't. Let me, this once, speak for them. Thank you for showing so many of them the way into their secret garden.



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Jean Little *is currently team teaching children's literature at the University of Guelph with her niece, Maggie DeVries. Miss Little's most recent book is* Little by Little, *an autobiographical account of her life.* Little by Little *has recently won the Boston-Globe-Hornbook Award in the U.S.A. and it is currently a nominee for the Governor General's Award in Canada.*