From LITTLE HOUSES to LITTLE WOMEN

REVISITING A LITERARY CHILDHOOD

Nancy McCabe

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to
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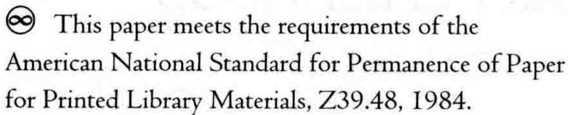
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For Sara King

and Sophie McCabe

and in memory of Lucille McCabe, Shirley Carlson,
and Gena Shipley

all champion readers

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From Little Houses to Little Women

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Prologue

WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS STILL A TODDLER and I was overwhelmed by the chores and errands and tasks of a single parent with a full-time job, I found myself reminiscing fondly about the books I'd read when I was young. Having a child made me miss my own childhood—not the miseries of forgotten homework or lost retainers or shifting friendships, but the joys of the uninterrupted hours that I spent reading.

Back then I'd floated across seamless surfaces of prose, absorbed in books without an eye on the clock or an ever-present guilt about neglected duties. Now, my job required heavy reading, but that was work, more like swimming: I had to be aware of each stroke, of the tricky rhythms of breath. I was tired of being tightly scheduled and hyper-organized. I was tired of being too busy to while away at least an occasional afternoon with a book. I just wanted to plop down and read for hours and hours. But there was so little time. So, I checked out a book from the library called *How to Be Less Busy.* It made brief sense to me that maybe I'd find ways to carve out more time for reading by reading a book about it.

Ultimately, though, I was just too busy to read it, although I did skim a chapter or two. Its premise was that being busy makes us feel important; therefore, we have trouble letting go of it. Since I couldn't blow off grading papers, attending meetings, paying bills, calling the plumber, or taking my daughter for her allergy shot, though, I thought, I should at least get to feel self-important about it.

My friend Sara, also a single mom, got nostalgic, too, and we enthusiastically exchanged e-mails containing lists, memories, and adult impressions of books we'd read and plans for rereading piles of old favorites. "Remember Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's upside-down house with a chandelier in the middle of the floor that all the kids pretended was a campfire?" I wrote to Sara, who was rereading *Little Women.* "I found myself getting emotional about the last chapter," she replied. "I identified with that feeling that work can be put on hold but life can't. It's funny that at the same time I'm rereading and reflecting on Louisa May Alcott, Isaac is enjoying an earlier-reader form of smarminess, a Scholastic series called 'The Best Me I Can Be,' which includes titles like 'I Am Responsible!' 'I Can Cooperate!' and 'I Am Generous!'"[1]

Sara and I had been discussing books since we met as new graduate teaching assistants in the English department at the University of Arkansas in the fall of 1985. It felt magical to be around so many people who loved books and writing, but I felt boring by comparison: I had a degree from a state university no one had heard of and I'd been in an unhappy marriage for two years. I felt washed up at age twenty-two, if grateful to have escaped nine miserable months as a housewife in Pratt, Kansas, where I'd plowed through *Portrait of a Lady* after hearing that it was a prerequisite for anyone going to graduate school. During a brief stint as a receptionist, I'd also secretly read the entire Danielle Steele oeuvre on my lunch breaks, which somehow made me feel as if I'd given up on life.

From the beginning, Sara and I talked about books with a mutual feverish passion, and so our friendship eventually outlasted my disastrous marriage and the crazy boyfriend she acquired during that first year. I remember hanging out by the pool at my Hill Street apartment complex, talking about writing and books and discovering that we'd read many of the same ones as children. We bought bags of hefty trashy novels at the Dickson Street Bookshop and passed them back and forth. We propped copies of *Ulysses* in front of us by a lake on a cold day, and then, instead of reading, we talked about all of the books we'd rather be reading. We continued that conversation throughout the next two decades, most recently as exhausted mothers of babies and then toddlers. Like most of my best friendships, this one was built on books, inspired and cemented by a mutual love of reading.

My own mother and aunts—my first models for adult female friendships—had also shared a bond over books. Gathered around the kitchen table, they used to talk rapidly, intensely, urgently, sometimes all at the same time. Sometimes, forgetting that anyone else was watching, they fell back into old roles: my mom the responsible, stern older sister; Aunt Gena the alternately playful and resentful middle sibling whose allegiances kept shifting; Aunt Shirley the sickly youngest child who wheedled and whined and demanded attention. Even when they were apart, my mother carried on long conversations with her sisters, standing at the kitchen phone mounted on the wall, spinning the spiraling cord round and round her finger while they exchanged information and opinions and stories about their kids and books and sewing and, later, their teaching jobs. My mom and aunts, I realize, looking back, were the reason I loved so many books, especially *Little Women* and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series.

Aunt Shirley, who taught fifth grade, made a special point to read those books nominated for the William Allen White award, given annually based on a vote by Kansas schoolchildren. I read many of the same books she did and listened with awe to the strength of her opinions. Aunt Shirley impressed on me that I had a civic

duty to vote, and so I did, every year. As an adult, as I began to reread books from my childhood, revisiting books she had loved felt like a way of bringing back to life the aunt who had died when I was seventeen.

I imagined that I would pass on books to my own daughter someday, but in the meantime, rereading old favorites, I would recover a joy and pleasure in reading it had sometimes seemed I'd lost, even if I could never get back the leisure of childhood. And that's what I wanted—the leisure without the loneliness and boredom that led me, when I was young, to pile up books and page through them. My despair used to gradually vanish, as did the hours and daylight when I finally surfaced from stories, full of the deep sense of well-being they left behind.

My entire adult life, I had hauled many childhood books from state to state, house to house, but never rereading them, as their mere presence was gratifying. Each packed shelf was like a neighborhood full of houses in which I'd once lived. Now, searching for a place to start rereading, I pulled down a couple of books, volumes that exuded an enigmatic aura of vaguely recalled mystery and excitement. Those happened to be 1960s British novels by Ruth Arthur.

The jacket blurb of *Requiem for a Princess* said the book was about a girl named Willow who dreams the whole life of a seventeenth-century occupant of the estate Penliss. It had all of my favorite childhood ingredients: heroines who want to be pianists or dancers or painters, gothic mansions by the sea, the turmoil wrought by an uncovered secret, the healing powers of nature. Eagerly I set forth, gradually deflating. The only thing I was discovering about my past self was that I'd had really, really bad taste. I found myself skimming, faster and faster, hoping for one sentence that would hoist me out of the quicksand of disappointment rapidly sucking me under. Things had to get better, I assured myself.

But the story was flat and rushed and summarized. Where were the crusty bread and goat cheese, the rice pudding and sweet milk, the snowdrops and crocuses and jonquils, the fresh air and sunshine, all of the lush detail of children's books in the nature-heals-all tradition? Where were the ingredients of books like *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden* and *Understood Betsy*, populated by pale weak children transformed to strapping, healthy ones, described in a complimentary, joyful way as fat, with brown skin and red cheeks? And what's the point of setting a book by the sea without crashing waves, misty spray, and sand that pulls each step down so deep that you have to yank your feet free?

Maybe I simply could no longer experience these books in the same way. Maybe it hadn't been my younger self who'd had bad taste. Maybe instead I'd become too much of a perfectionist, too nitpicky. But still, I wondered what I'd been think-

ing, straining my back and then paying movers to haul these books around for so many years.

Setting out to recapture a former mindset, I just found myself appalled by that earlier self, who seemed like a distant, somewhat embarrassing relative with whom I hesitated to be associated.

I became even more doubtful that I wanted to hang out with my former self when, rereading *Mrs. Dalloway* for my book club, I realized how regularly I'd missed the point. I mean, I was only eleven when I read Ruth Arthur. But at seventeen, when I first encountered Virginia Woolf, I wrote a paper describing Clarissa Dalloway as "superficial," "shallow," and "snobbish." "She spends her day in a useless way, as she has spent her whole life, preparing for a party," I wrote. I condemned her as a "fake" person, lacking humanity and shying away "from any emotional or intellectual contact with others." Somehow I viewed Peter Walsh, Clarissa's rejected former suitor, as an unimpeachable center of authority, responding to her with what I now see as a highly suspect mixture of yearning, admiration, venom, and self-justifying disdain.

Rereading *Mrs. Dalloway* in my forties, I connected far more to the compromises and satisfactions of age than to the idealism of youth. Now, through the lens of middle age and the declining health and deaths of my parents, I was taken with the novel's revelations about the loss of privacy and autonomy inherent in growing old and frail, its underlying persistent awareness of mortality, Clarissa Dalloway's free-floating anxiety and dread and her equally meaningful moments of deep contentment. I found myself underlining words: "No pleasure could equal . . . straightening the chairs, pushing in one book on the shelf, this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank."[2]

I wondered: what had happened between the ages of eleven and seventeen? Why, at eleven, was I so willing to identify wholeheartedly with even a poorly drawn heroine, whereas by the age of seventeen, I was eager to take sides against a female protagonist, giving far more credit to the perspective of a more minor male character? Maybe that eleven-year-old could remind me of important things that I'd forgotten.

So I tackled Ruth Arthur's *A Candle in Her Room*, which had to be a reasonably decent book, right? After all, a used copy went for a minimum of $98.00 on Amazon. According to the cover, the story featured an evil doll who casts a spell over three generations of girls at Pembrokeshire. I remember once, against my better

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judgment, reading *A Candle in Her Room* late at night. After that, I couldn't sleep. All the glittering little eyes of the collectible dolls given to me by my Aunt Shirley stared down, their plastic smiles suddenly full of malice.

Now, as an adult, I started rereading, chuckling in a detached, highly intellectual and professorial way at allusions to the *Aeneid,* especially when Dido the doll is finally ruined in a fire, much the way Virgil's Dido immolates herself on a funeral pyre. I read on with half a brain, the other half pondering what I should fix for dinner. And then suddenly, whoosh! A detail jolted my memory. It unfurled like a tightly wound ribbon suddenly released.

A little girl orphaned in World War II keeps imagining herself in the house where her mother grew up. An old woman who lives in the house repeatedly envisions a little girl standing in the room with her. Eventually the old woman embarks on a journey, determined to find the child from her vision. The little girl, it turns out, is the old woman's great-niece, and when the two are finally united, they recognize each other from their mutual visions even though they've never met in the flesh. Those mutual visions had retained a powerful hold on me my whole life.

In my early twenties, when my then-husband was hired as a photographer at a small-town newspaper, I left an apartment I loved on Kellogg Street in Wichita to move with him to a crumbling duplex in Pratt, Kansas. But every night, I dreamed that I was in the Kellogg Street apartment again, wandering through the back hall that connected the kitchen to the bedroom and bathroom. I never figured out why I saw myself there as opposed to a more emotionally loaded location—the bedroom or living room or kitchen, perhaps—but the dream persisted.

A college friend had taken over my lease, and when I was visiting Wichita, he invited me over. At my request, he gave me a tour. "We have a friend who says he's psychic," he said as we passed through the back hall I'd dreamed about. "He says there's a ghost in this hall."

Cold pine needles brushed against my spine. *That's me,* I thought. *I'm that ghost.* With that thought, my unhappiness started to clarify itself, my recognition that the marriage I'd left this hall to save might not be worth saving.

Many years later, I dreamed about a baby. I went searching for her, eventually adopting my daughter. If I'd never read *A Candle in Her Room,* I'd probably still believe that love and longing could hold mysterious power. But would I have half-believed that it was possible, through dreams energized by the intensity of these emotions, to project a self somewhere else? How much did a novel I read as a child plant the seeds for the unfolding of these profound events—leaving my marriage, becoming a parent?

I felt as if I had spent some time with my silly younger self and discovered that

she wasn't so silly after all. That she had the capacity to look at the world from a distinctly female point of view, that she hadn't learned yet to diminish or downplay that vision. That that willingness to bury herself in characters had shaped her imagination in influential ways.

I was hooked. I wanted to know more about this, more about how my values, particularly my belief in creativity and imagination, had come from the books I read.

I read and read: the first chapter book I remembered checking out of the Wichita Public Library, the first chapter book I had checked out of the Seltzer School library, the classics I'd regularly received in the mail from the Children's Book of the Month Club, books about big noisy families and stories about the performing arts and series books, those glorious series that let me live with favorite characters through installment after installment: Nancy Bruce, Jennifer Hill, Betsy Ray, Randy Melendy, Beany Malone, Donna Parker, Nancy Drew, Jo March, Anne Shirley. And Laura Ingalls! Laura Ingalls was more than a character to me; I'd reread the *Little House* books every year, until they were a part of me on a cellular level, focused on the same Great Plains that were the landscape of my own childhood and intimately interwoven with my own family heritage.

As I read, I existed in a relentless state of déjà vu, as if every word had been stored in my memory, etched forever in some place I could no longer readily access, long-forgotten details appearing like retrieved memories. Used copies of books arrived in padded envelopes, and as I cracked limp spines, pages sizzled with familiarity, my synapses firing off like crazy firecrackers of memory exploding. With each book, I took up the threads of a lost world. I discovered how these books imparted the values of previous generations and had made me a somewhat peculiar child out of step with my times, how they had offered me models for living that remain with me today, how I'd both internalized and resisted messages about family bonds, female sacrifice and other gender expectations, piousness, conformity, originality, and independence. How this tied in with lives centered on art and imagination, themes that I had seemed to seek out regularly. Or maybe I hadn't sought them out. Maybe every children's book in existence was actually some version of a *Kunstlerroman,* I wrote to Sara, a novel documenting the coming of age of the artist, a template for how to move forward into a creative life.

As I came of age, the specter of death had been ever-present. My Aunt Shirley had lupus, a disease that we knew would kill her. Lupus, I learned, meant "wolf." In books like the *Little House* series, wolves were dangerous predators. Their howls had chilled the blood of pioneers, who, I'd learn later, had driven them from the prai-

ries, almost driven them to extinction. I thought of wolves as deceptive and menacing creatures from fables and fairy tales, animals that appeared in sheep's clothing and grandmothers' bonnets, stealing the innocence of little girls.

My aunt was the first person I ever knew who wore her unfulfilled dreams right out where everyone could see them. She'd always wanted a daughter, but she couldn't have children. So she married a widower with two pre-teen daughters and later adopted a son, and she loved those children ferociously, but she never lost her desire for that baby girl she would never have. Her nieces also stepped in as substitute daughters, two cousins and me. And our role in her life obligated us to love the same books she did.

And I tried, but sometimes I mixed up the wolf who was stalking my aunt with my aunt herself. I didn't want to be afraid of her, but often, I was, mixing up being afraid of her with being afraid of the death she represented.

The summer I was thirteen, Aunt Shirley invited my cousin Jody and me along on a trip to visit the places that Laura Ingalls Wilder had lived and written about in Minnesota and South Dakota. This journey, both exciting and disappointing for reasons I couldn't quite remember years later, was one of many that instilled in me a fascination with tourist spots related to books and writers. Every year as I was growing up, my family took a two-week vacation, each trip carefully planned to include at least one amusement park, museum, zoo, and presidential or author home. These ranged from Andrew Jackson's Hermitage near Nashville to Mark Twain sites in Missouri, Herbert Hoover's birthplace in Iowa, the Eisenhower museum complex in Kansas, and Laura Ingalls Wilder's farmhouse in Missouri. In 1977, my parents decided to take an eight-hour detour on the way to Disney World so that we could drive through Plains, Georgia, home of newly elected president Jimmy Carter. We had also, a few years before, stood in line for five hours to file past Harry S. Truman's casket in Independence, Missouri. Much to my disappointment, the casket was closed, and I missed out on viewing a presidential corpse.

We took a train all the way to California to go to Disneyland—and to spend a day visiting the ruins of Jack London's Wolf House in Sonoma County. Once or twice when I was in my twenties, my mother and I stopped at the birthplace of Harold Bell Wright, author of a book that had influenced her childhood, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, near Branson, Missouri. My mother winced as I hooted at the placards on the furniture, like the one that said something like, "This desk is where Wright's wife kept track of all the little details dear to a housewife's heart."

The upshot of all of my parents' matter-of-fact literary tourism was that I learned to view writers as people who were as important as presidents. As an adult

I lost interest in amusement parks and zoos but love to look at places through the vision of those who have visited or lived there. I explored Barcelona by lying on the couch in my Barcelona apartment, reading Carlos Ruiz Zafón novels. Every now and then, I looked up and smiled, pretending to be a typical Spanish citizen for the benefit of the tour bus that routinely stopped outside my window, which was on the level with the upper deck. Then I walked around the city, seeing its twisting alley-sized back streets and gorgeous, garish architecture through Zafón's gothic vision. One of my favorite memories of traveling in China was taking a sleeper train through the countryside, reading Polly Evans's account of taking a sleeper train through the Chinese countryside.

I'm drawn to places, as well, that represent artistic inspiration and achievement. I get excited knowing I'm standing on Coronado Island near San Diego, where Frank Baum did some of his writing right there at the Hotel de Coronado. Or that he was born in Chittenango, New York, according to Mapquest only four hours and one minute from my house, a town with yellow brick sidewalks. When I lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, how could I resist driving a mere three hours to Red Cloud to visit Willa Cather's stomping grounds? Or, while visiting a friend in Illinois, spending a morning at the Carl Sandburg house in Galesburg, a town that was also a favorite setting for science fiction writer Jack Finney? Once years ago, Sara and I biked around the Hemingway house in Key West, trying to spot the famous six-toed cats, though we didn't pay to enter the gates to see the urinal Hemingway had turned into a water fountain or the boxing ring he'd set up in his front yard. More recently, I arranged a lunch stop in Putnam, Connecticut, just so I could see the tiny museum dedicated to Gertrude Chandler Warner of *Boxcar Children* fame housed in—what else?—a boxcar. If I'm driving from Pennsylvania to Kansas, I've been known to route myself through Hannibal, Missouri, to visit Mark Twain sites, including a white picket fence that visitors can sign after making a donation.

I loved some of these writers and books. I merely liked some of them. There are a few that I actively hated. But there's something that gets my brain revved and pulse pounding and blood pumping when I view even the most pathetic, most ridiculous museum full of dioramas and paintings and film clips and clothing related to the life and work of writers, hearing stories about their childhoods and philosophies and work habits, discovering the events and places that shaped them.

So when I started rereading children's books, when I re-entered the lives in particular of favorite heroines, I found myself yearning to travel to the settings of those books. It was as if the tourist sites that had sprung up might be living manifestations of stories that I once loved, of stories that had once themselves seemed like

physical locations, places to which I could escape. They were, for me, as real as real life. As with my original impulse to reread books, maybe my initial motivation for embarking on these travels had something to do with nostalgia. Maybe I was seeking to make literal the metaphorical experience of being lost in stories, of meeting again characters who had seemed three-dimensional, flesh and blood, like old, good friends, like a part of me.

Sometimes I found myself troubled at the ways that author-related tourist attractions promoted interpretations antithetical to my own. Still, these visits became another way to rediscover the self I was when I first read the books and to understand and interrogate their messages more deeply. So I took an Anne-tastic tour of Prince Edward Island, home of *Anne of Green Gables* author Lucy Maud Montgomery. I spent a morning in Mankato, Minnesota, on which Betsy-Tacy series author Maud Hart Lovelace based her fictional town of Deep Valley. I drove to Louisa May Alcott's childhood home in Concord, Massachusetts. And, most significantly, I undertook a long pilgrimage through the Midwest, retracing my disillusioning journey when I was thirteen, to Laura Ingalls Wilder homes and museums that carve a path from Wisconsin to Kansas to Minnesota to South Dakota to Missouri.

What started out as a dialogue with a friend turned into multiple journeys, and this book is the story of those: my returns to hundreds of books I once loved, my trip to Laura Ingalls Wilder sites in search of a younger self, my travels to other writers' home and museums. All of these journeys intersected, became inextricably intertwined. Initially motivated by a desire to return to a pre-ironic state, an unconfined part of childhood, where the whole world felt spread out before me and I had all the time I could ever want, I discovered far more. These books and characters had shaped me in a thousand surprising small ways but in larger ones, too: in them, I'd figured out who I wanted to be, found sources of creativity, templates for transcending limitations, and models for leading a creative life, one in which small pleasures and profound insights could go hand in hand. I related even more to the passage I'd underlined from *Mrs. Dalloway* as these books reminded me how to be, at least in my mind, less busy, to lose myself in the process of living, and then, to find it: "with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank."[3]

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