



The Author: The Creative Wellspring

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My grandmother was extremely well read. Deaf from age 12 as a result of a bout of scarlet fever, she could read lips and speak perfectly but she heard almost nothing. She considered her disability a gift. In the silent, serene world she inhabited she loved two things: reading, and watching baseball on television.

Of course, baseball is seasonal and television limited (even more so back in the day) and she was a voracious reader. When she was with us I would accompany my mother to the library each week to collect a new stack of books, as many as twenty at a time. The subject matter was not important, though she favored mysteries; what was important - except in rare circumstances when a story particularly touched her - was that she hadn't already read the books. My mother adopted a tactic for choosing. In light pencil, she wrote my grandmother's initials, KS, in the back corner of the book on the endpaper once my grandmother had read it. While my mother ran errands it was my job to search the library shelves for books without my grandmother's initials.

Those library visits when I searched for literature across genres were windows into worlds of discovery.

I was drawn to the mysteries, with their shadowy cover art, that Grandma loved. I started with tamer fare, graduating from the Bobbsey Twins to Nancy Drew. I had a little book called *Minute Mysteries* that I adored - tiny logic puzzles that I parsed over and over. I discovered Agatha Christie; then I found Sherlock Holmes. In my mid-teens I uncovered a stash of Ian Fleming's Bond books hidden in my father's study and read them in wide-eyed secret.

And then there were the myths and legends and fairy tales. Big, fat books that I read again and again and again: D'Aulaire's of course, and Bulfinch's, and two collections of Greek, Roman, and Norse tales with striking illustrations. And Lang's *Fairy* books: Red, Blue, and Green. Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales - especially Andersen's terrifying horrors (what little Karen suffered in *The Red Shoes!*).

My mother, a first generation American from an English mother and Irish father, introduced me early to British literature, especially fantasy. For several years beginning with my eighth birthday, she gave me one *Narnia* book for my birthday and one for Christmas. She brought me Tolkien when I was home with the flu, and I devoured the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy for the first - and not the last - time. She also gave me odd, lyrical books: *Green Mansions*, by W. H. Hudson; *The City Lies Four-Square*, by Edith Pargeter; *The Dean's Watch*, by Elizabeth Goudge.

She also loved poetry and took me to visit the home of Robert Frost, and gave me a collection of the poems of Emily Dickinson. She gave me a recording of Dylan Thomas reading his own work.

She was persuaded that I would become a writer. I loved writing, truthfully, but I did other things first. Some were exciting things: living on my own in New York City; diving to the sea floor in a submersible; living on a small boat in southern Patagonia for two months; living in France for a year; lobbying for a nonprofit. I married, became a mother, moved from New England to Texas and lived in a primitive Montana mountain cabin in the summers. I wrote off and on, without much success. I wrote for adults - short fiction, novels, poetry - but without much conviction. One poem won a regional contest. One short story was a contest finalist and another short story was accepted by a literary magazine that folded before publication - and the same happened to an essay, though at least I was paid for that one.

It felt in those years that the universe was not encouraging my creativity, and that I couldn't nurture my writing despite my mother's belief.

Then my mother died unexpectedly in her mid-seventies and, since I was a late child, she seemed far too young. Going through her things I discovered a foot-tall stack of stories she'd written, stories for children. Finding them made my loss feel less sharp. Reading through them I considered for the first time that there were stories for children, and that they were different from adult literature, that they were a "thing" (this was before *Harry Potter* changed the landscape, and children's books really did become a mainstream thing). Reading my mother's stories took me back to my early reading experiences: to those fantasies, mysteries, myths, fairy tales, and lyrical volumes my mother and grandmother had given me.

Reading my mother's stories allowed me to peer into my creative well once more.

When I teach creative writing, especially to children's writers, one of the exercises I use is to ask writers to list the books that they loved when they were in their early tween/teen years. Not the books they were made to read in school, but the books they curled up with on a rainy Saturday, or under the bed covers. What were they? I ask. What feelings did they evoke when you read them? What feelings do they evoke now?

Then I tell them, those are the kinds of stories you should write. Those are the stories that will tap the deep emotions that formed the person you are today. The best stories are those written from the heart, and your heart was being nurtured by the books you read when you were young. Even if you write for adults, tap that emotional well in order to write truthfully.

My first three novels are young adult historical fiction. They've been widely praised and I'm very proud of them, especially *Faithful*, about a girl's unexpected loss of her mother. My most recent novel draws even more deeply from my emotional well. *The Charmed Children of Rookskill Castle* is a mystery and fantasy novel set in Scotland during World War II, with a fairy tale at its core. My main character, Kat, is a logical girl with a gift for puzzles who must come to believe in and use magic. Her best friend is Peter (a nod to C.S. Lewis), she has a knack for fixing clocks (thank you, Nancy Drew), an antagonist she can't discover (Miss Christie)... and there are ghosts (*The City Lies Foursquare*) and children suffering terrors (Andersen) and Plato (oh, those Greeks!) and the harsh winds of war (Bond in dark moments.)

I write every book with the same acknowledgement to my creative wellspring, and through those deep emotional memories.

And what of the universe and what I thought were its fickle turns? I've come to believe that when I'm open to listening, the universe is ready and waiting to say yes. My winding life's path led me not to writing for adults, but to writing for children, and this was the right outcome, after all. My varied experiences have allowed me time to build my craft and gather

enough material to provide me a platform for storytelling. My mother's passing was both tragic and a gift, and gave me the push I needed in a direction I hadn't looked.

I tell beginning writers - and my young readers when I speak to kids - that we each have a unique story to tell and that no one else can ever tell our story. It's simply a matter of finding the well's source, the wellspring, and relating the truth of it.

I like to think that my grandmother, reading any of my novels, would say, No, don't put my initials in that one. I want to read it again.

