

History Flows Beneath the Fiction:

Two Roads Chosen in *Redemption* and *A Northern Light*

History is a version of events, a story that features a cast of characters much like you and me. In any age, people laugh, hurt, stumble, and endure, emerging sometimes unaffected, sometimes scathed, always representative of a human condition that the alteration of time and place can never erase. Julie Chibbaro and Jennifer Donnelly, two new voices in the world of adolescent fiction, have crafted tales that allow readers to serve as witnesses to events of the past, to see themselves in the people who lived lives far removed from their own. Through the creation of well-developed characters situated in a given time and place, a refusal to water down historical facts, and the skilled use of literary techniques, both authors provide a glimpse into the past that few, if any, history textbooks can provide.

When Fact and Fiction Meet

Redemption

Julie Chibbaro's novel, *Redemption* (2004), is set in early sixteenth-century England and the New World. At the novel's outset, readers are introduced to twelve-year-old Lily and learn that she lost her father when the baron's men took him during the night. His disappearance is surrounded by accusations regarding his involvement with Frere Lanther, a man excommunicated from the Church due to his questioning of the practice of indulgences. Unable to defend rights to their land, Lily and her mother flee England with fellow religious protesters and voyage to the New World. During the trip, Lily goes without adequate food and supplies, suffers when the baron demands

sexual favors from her mother, and is befriended by the baron's son, Ethan. Upon landing, Lily and Ethan are separated from their shipmates. Together, the two young people set out to find Lily's mother and are saved when members of an Indian tribe find them hungry and in enemy territory. Lily is overjoyed to find that her father is among the natives but wonders how he could have taken up with another woman when he remains married to her mother. Members of the tribe volunteer to continue the search for Lily's mother, only to find her dead. There is hope, however, as Lily undergoes a process of mourning and reflection and begins to find her place among the tribe.

Chibbaro's story is based upon the often unwilling journey to the New World of English colonists aligned with Martin Luther. In her research, Chibbaro came upon the story of a group of nobles who had an idea to colonize a part of America and claim it for England. After a disastrous first try that resulted in the death of the colonists, they sent another group to give it a try. When the nobles returned to check the progress of this batch of colonists, they found no trace of them and returned home to Europe. Around the time when Jamestown and the other colonies were being settled, the new colonists encountered a group of white-skinned Indians. As a result of uncovering this intriguing tidbit, Chibbaro says, "My curiosity about these White Indians was set aflame. I began to create a story around them, to place myself in their skin and imagine who they were, where they came from, and how their fate could have occurred" (Author's Note 258). Chibbaro based her research upon old ledgers,

badly kept account books, and unreliable, boasting journals of nobles, as well as myths, art, and written memories and oral histories created by native peoples (Author's Note 257-59).

A Northern Light

Jennifer Donnelly's *A Northern Light* (2003) is set in the Adirondack Mountains in the year 1906. The protagonist, sixteen-year-old Mattie Gokey, feels trapped. Her mother has died, her elder brother has fled, her father is emotionally distant, and she is now responsible for the domestic work on the farm, including taking care of her younger sisters. These responsibilities interfere with Mattie's desire to write. Her liberal-minded teacher, Miss Wilcox, encourages her to apply to Barnard College. Mattie fears, however, that even if she is admitted on scholarship, she will not have the money to go and, more importantly, will not have the courage to leave her father and sisters when she thinks they need her most. Mattie's dilemma is further complicated by Royal Loomis' romantic interest in her. She appreciates his charms but fears losing sight of her goals. When money gets tight, Mattie convinces her father to allow her to spend the summer working at Glenmore, a resort a few miles up the road from her rural community in the Adirondacks. While there, Mattie and her coworkers learn of the death of one of the patrons, a young woman who drowned while in a boat with her male companion, Carl. Just prior to her death, the woman, Grace, gives Mattie a bundle of letters and begs her to dispose of them. Overtaken by curiosity, Mattie reads the letters and learns the truth behind Grace's relationship with Carl and the murder that ended Grace's life. This truth drives her to make a difficult decision regarding her own future.

Donnelly's novel is based upon the sensationalistic murder of a young woman named Grace Brown whose body was discovered in the waters of Big Moose, a lake on the edge of the Adirondacks (interestingly enough, also the inspiration for Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and the film, *A Place in the Sun*). The boat in which Grace Brown had been

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found was capsized and floating amongst water lilies in a secluded bay. Her companion, a young man who rented the boat under the name of Carl Graham, was nowhere to be found and believed dead by drowning. It was learned that Grace Brown was single and pregnant and that the man who had taken her boating was the father of her child. Chester Gillette, the real name of her companion, was ultimately tried, convicted, and executed for Grace's murder. Grace's letters begging Gillette to rescue her before it became obvious that she was with child served as key pieces

of evidence in the case. Donnelly casts her judgment in the claim, "Chester Gillette hoped to improve his social standing by courting a wealthy girl and marrying her. To do so, he first needed to rid himself of the factory girl he had once seduced, a girl he once loved but later came to regard as an obstacle" (Author's Note 381-82). In her research, Donnelly utilized transcripts of the Gillette murder trial; diaries of Lucilla Arvilla Mills Clark; exhibits from the Adirondack Museum library and the Farmer's Museum (Cooperstown, NY); photos, oral histories, census and tax records, and information on early Inlet businesses and the Inlet Common School via the Town of Webb Historical Association; out-of-print Adirondack titles from the Port Leyden Community Library; and visits to the Waldheim and Glenmore hotel sites (Acknowledgments 383-84).

A Young Person's Perspective

In these two novels, Chibbaro and Donnelly have created engaging characters through whose lives we can see a side of history that research documents alone cannot convey. Although the adult characters in these novels are well-developed and complex, both authors share a young person's perspective not often included in history books. Upon reading these stories, as told through the eyes of teenage protagonists, young readers are afforded both distance and connection. They can imagine an existence that does not include, for example, the search for a prom date, the

quest for a car of one's own, or the pressure to succeed on Friday's math quiz. But they can also participate in an exploration of themes inherent in the human condition—love, friendship, the conflict between both needing and needing to reject one's parents—that comprise a part of life for teenagers in all times and places.

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In writing about the process of developing the protagonist in the novel, Chibbaro says, "For years I tried to look beyond the basic American history dates we all memorized in school, such as 1492 and 1776, to dig deeper and ascertain what really went into the formation of America. . . . I wanted to feel and understand America from its inception, through characters who might have been there" (Author's Note 257). Chibbaro's portrayal of Lily reflects an honesty that encourages readers to empathize with her situation, to work through her confusions just as she does as a character. Lily does not have all the answers. She is confused by the words of Frere

Lanther, wanting to believe in the message of faith he advocates, but knowing that this message resulted in the disappearance of her father. Her first words read, "I saw a bird dead once. It looked perfect, just lying on the ground on its side, its little claws curled up, one eye slightly ajar, the inside white. I ran my finger over its fat, puffed wing and tried not to disturb it. It seemed the bird might wake at any time. I picture my father this way" (1). She is jaded, feeling hurt and alone in her struggles to make sense of her loss. It is Lily's "spiritual battle with her own guilt and with God that draws readers along" (Rochman). Lily wishes to confide in her mother but finds her unable to offer the guidance she craves. At

one moment, the mother is protective and defensive, telling Lily to remain by her side, that Lily is her sole confidant (82). At other times, she frightens Lily with her talk of suicide and disbelief in the Bible and words of Frere Lanther (76-77). At all times, she is dependent upon her child to help her endure. As a child, Lily needs her mother's nurturing care; as a young adult, Lily is forced to nurture and care for her mother.

In the development of the character of Mattie, Donnelly has created a narrator whose love of language and literature and contemplative nature reveal a talented young girl who feels she is a victim of social convention. Mattie is bright and witty, surely capable of attaining her dream to become a writer. Yet, she finds herself wondering if this dream is worth pursuing given the expected norms for women of her day. She wonders if, perhaps, she is foolish for going after what so many women before her have deemed less important than the traditional choice to marry and have children. Mattie describes her admiration for Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Bronte, who refused to marry and give up their writing. Emily Dickinson, she argues, was "a damned sneaky genius" who "fought by not fighting Maybe she was lonely at times, and cowed by her pa, but I bet at midnight, when the lights were out and her father was asleep, she went sliding down the banister and swinging from the chandelier. I bet she was just dizzy with freedom" (274). Yet, despite this realization, Mattie feels safe and secure when she finds herself in Royal's arms. Mattie wants to be loved and fears the loneliness that will accompany her freedom, but she longs for the freedom gained in the pursuit of her real love—writing. Ultimately, she must learn "that she cannot live her life for others" (Prolman).

Nitty, Gritty History

Despite the differing inspirations and origins for their novels, both Chibbaro and Donnelly refuse to make history easy or simplistic as they craft their fictional stories around events of the past. They do more than rely on history to tell a compelling story; they reveal historical truths in the presentation of their fiction. In both novels, the authors address issues of power and equity among participants in a community, portray life as lived reality rather than perceived fantasy, and choose to compose endings that may be

hopeful but remain true to the time and place in which the story is set.

Power and Manipulation

Chibbaro and Donnelly understand the power differential that exists in the societies they describe and the subsequent victimization of those who do not hold this power. In *Redemption*, Chibbaro is true to the setting about which she writes. Power resides with those who possess religious ties to the Catholic Church or large holdings of land. In the middle of the night, men in dark capes invade Lily's home and take her father away as a result of his refusal, on recommendation of Frere Lanther, to participate in the drunken festivals held by the church and designed to pacify the locals. Her father is denied the right to express his views freely in a society run by those who wish to suppress free thinking. Although he is a good citizen, a choir leader in the local church, in fact, he is punished for questioning the beliefs of those in control. Several leaders in this community abuse their power in their relationships with Lily's mother, as well. After the disappearance of the father, the prefect, beadle, and others of the baron's men visit Lily's mother on several occasions. They not only demand that she give up her land now that her husband no longer resides there; they use oppressive tactics to persuade her to give in, at times hitting and sexually abusing her to get their way. Once the mother and Lily are aboard the ship headed to the New World, the baron himself takes advantage of Lily's mother and rapes her repeatedly, using her as a sexual toy and manipulating her faith in Frere Lanther in hopes of financial gain.

In *A Northern Light*, Donnelly explores issues in the complex world in which Mattie lives. "In an intelligent, colloquial voice that speaks with a writer's love of language and an observant eye, Mattie details the physical particulars of people's loves as well as deeper issues of race, class, and gender as she strains against family and societal limitations" (Engberg). Power in this novel resides in the hands of white men with money, at least a few dollars more than their victims. Members of the fatherless Hubbard family, for example, serve as representatives of the lowest class. As a result of their status (or lack thereof), even the farmers who earn just pennies more feel entitled to

hurl insults their way. One such farmer, Royal's father, forces the mother, Emmie, to have sex with him in return for the generosity he shows the family. These class issues are compounded by the summer arrival of the wealthy resort-goers whose free-flowing cash serves to support the working class community for just a few months before they head off after Labor Day, leaving the workers to scrimp and save until the next travel season arrives. There is a hierarchy of power aligned with the possession of wealth.

In terms of gender, Donnelly explores the choices provided to men and women in a world in which gender roles are securely intact. Mattie feels held to gender expectations that she is certain will result in the denial of her dream to become a writer. Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and John Milton did not have to make a choice between family and career. Why should she? she wonders. Mattie's teacher, Miss Wilcox, pushes Mattie to pursue her writing. When she reveals that she is not only "Miss Wilcox, teacher" but "Emily Baxter, author of a controversial book of poems regarding women and freedom," Mattie is inspired. This inspiration is called into question, however, when Mattie learns that Miss Wilcox's husband has the power to cut her off financially and have her placed in a mental institution. Even Grace Brown, the young woman whose death inspired the story, is victim, literally and figuratively, to gender discrimination. As a young girl who finds herself pregnant and unwed in this time and place, her choices are limited. She does all in her power to convince the father to take respon-

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sibility for her actions, knowing, if he doesn't and likely won't, that she will be the one to suffer recrimination and abuse while he continues life as an eligible bachelor.

In terms of race, Donnelly traces the discrimination of blacks even in the free lands of the North decades after the Civil War. Mattie's best friend, Weaver, is a young black man whose father is attacked and killed by white men when he refuses to move off of the sidewalk when they pass by. Like Mattie, Weaver is an intelligent, word-loving student who plans to attend Columbia and become a lawyer. The faulty perceptions of others, however, deny Weaver the place in society he has earned and that he rightfully demands even when it brings trouble upon him.

When, for example, a group of racist white men call Weaver a nigger, he refuses to back down and takes them on, three to one. When these men are fined for their inappropriate behavior, Weaver feels as though all is right with the world. In his unfair world, however, these men use this punishment as inspiration to burn down his mother's house and steal Weaver's college fund. The men head for the border, free and satisfied that their form of justice has been served.

The Language of Reality

In these novels, Chibbaro and Donnelly also succeed in teaching readers about history by portraying an existence that is neither glamorized nor glorified. Although readers might appreciate the slower pace and easier lives associated with these perceived happier days of yore, these authors remind us of the

realities of the described times and places to temper our fantasy-based imaginings. Their use of language draws us into settings that are messy and mired in complexity, much like our own. We experience life alongside the characters, entering their world and mindset through the crafting of vivid images representative of the places in which the characters inhabit.

In *Redemption*, Chibbaro "vivifies the book with inspired descriptions" (*Booklist*). She takes us to the port with its masses of people; honking and snorting pigeons, pheasants, and rabbits; baskets of herbs and wild fruits and vegetables; men shouting and spitting; and Lily clutching her mother's hand (15-16). Among the lowly passengers on board the ship sailing to the New World, we experience the "smell of piss and dung in the room, of people rotting in their stew" (74), providing a stark contrast to the baron's quarters decorated with gilt-framed paintings and a red velvet couch that "feels like rabbit fur, so soft" (91). As the boat sets sail, we are privy to the passengers' fears that their lives will soon end as they sail over the end of the earth into a pit of fire (20-21). Arrival in the New World offers no reprieve. There, Lily and the remaining passengers encounter hunger, fatigue, and violence committed by rival bands of natives. Chibbaro's tale is "harsh, violent, gruesome—not for anyone wanting to view history through a rosy haze. Yet the book is also vibrant, riveting and beautifully written" (*Shannon*).

In *A Northern Light*, Mattie's frank voice gives readers "a taste of how bitter—and how sweet—ordinary life in the early 1900s could be" (*Lindsay*). She describes the fleas that infest the house, the cornmeal mush that serves as dinner for weeks on end, the endless chores necessary in the maintenance of the farm, and the power of illness to potentially decimate a family. She talks of madness being nothing like that which is portrayed in books. When Emmie Hubbard experiences one of her difficult days, Mattie describes her illness:

It isn't Miss Havisham sitting in the ruins of her mansion, all vicious and majestic. And it isn't like in *Jane Eyre*, either, with Rochester's wife banging around in the attic, shrieking and carrying on and frightening the help. When your mind goes, it's not castles and cobwebs and silver candelabra. It's dirty sheets and sour milk and dog shit on the floor. It's Emmie cowering under her bed, crying and singing while her kids try to make soup from seed potatoes. (17)

Mattie tells, too, of labor and childbirth undergone without the safety of hospital facilities and trained doctors, again railing against authors like Dickens and Bronte who fail to tell the truth and write instead of “no blood, no sweat, no pain, no fear, no heat, no stink” (94). Life here can be good, too, however, as when Mattie witnesses an interaction between her best friend (who has just given birth) and her shocked husband. She relates, “Minnie tried to say something but couldn’t. She just lifted one of the babies up for him to take. The emotion on his face, and then between him and Minnie, was so strong, so naked, that I had to look away” (97).

Honest (But Not Always Happy) Endings

To remain true to history, neither Chibbaro nor Donnelly composes an ending that is unrealistic or unlikely given the setting of the novel. Each author respects historical context and creates a conclusion that is hopeful but not hokey. In *Redemption*, Lily does indeed find her father alive in the New World. Her search is successful, but it is not as fruitful as she has hoped in that her father has taken up with another woman, a member of the indigenous Nooh tribe whose members willingly adopt whites into their culture. Lily also manages to find her mother after being separated from her upon arrival to the New World. When she locates her, however, she is in a pit of corpses left to decompose after being killed by a group of sea dogs, or pirates. As a result of these findings and losses, Lily is disillusioned. With no immediate opportunities to return to England, she must succumb to her plight and become accustomed to life among the natives, a life that ultimately brings her a sense of belonging and well-being. In *A Northern Light*, Mattie does eventually decide to jump the train to New York to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. We have great faith that she will make it. She has left much behind, however. Weaver remains disillusioned and penniless, his mother without her own home and the men who burned it down roaming free. Miss Wilcox remains in hiding, having fled from her vengeful husband. Mattie’s mother remains dead, unable to see her daughter off on her grand adventure. And Grace Brown remains “stiff and cold in a room in the Glenmore with a tiny life that will never be, inside her” (379).

Form and Function and the Author’s Craft

Both Chibbaro and Donnelly are, plainly put, good writers whose stories reflect their understandings of historical fiction. Chibbaro knows her history, but “historical detail informs her storytelling without overwhelming it” (Krawitz). She utilizes flashbacks, memories, dreams, and visions in the construction of her tale, drawing readers backward and forward in time to learn key details necessary for understanding the history that flows beneath the fiction. Specific facts about Frere Lanther’s beliefs and behaviors are interspersed throughout the narrative. His opposition to indulgences and drunken feasts honoring the saints, use of a secret printing press to spread his ideas, and dependence upon personal reading of Biblical text, for example, become key in understanding the role of Lily’s father as religious protester and the underlying reasons behind his exile. Likewise, Donnelly uses an historical event to spark and shape an intricate story that is large in scope and powerful in design. The organizational structure of the novel is innovative and effective, as two mutually dependent plot lines work together to create a seamless story. Mattie’s account of the one night she spends by the laid-out body of Grace, reading her words and learning about life and love, is intertwined with first-person flashbacks of Mattie’s life on the farm and at the hotel prior to Grace’s death. The two plot lines eventually come together in time, with the murder mystery serving as “a cautionary tale for Mattie” (*Publisher’s Weekly*). Through Grace’s story, as contained within her letters, Mattie learns that her own story must not become mired in the wishes of others. She must give voice to Grace’s lost life in order to live her own.

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A Discussion of Lenses

Thought-provoking and mind-numbing, beautiful and disturbing, these novels conjure up images and ideas that are sure to spark controversy, providing rich evidence to support the claim that historical fiction can serve as political statement. These authors have looked upon events of the past and retold them through a lens shaped not only by the years that have passed but by their own experiences as women, as white women, as educated white women, etc. With this gift of hindsight, Chibbaro and Donnelly impose a critical eye on worlds that, then, seemed perhaps more just than they do now. From a 21st-century perspective, Lily's mother and Grace are, without question, victimized as a result of their gender. Lily is a pawn in a larger conflict of religion. Weaver is punished as a result of the color of his skin. Mattie is denied opportunity just for being a girl. The choices these authors make in their treatment of history reveal much about their own prejudices. Therein lies the power of historical fiction. These stories are both real and unreal. They are drawn from events of the past and shaped by writers living in present history that will soon pass; interpretations remain forever in flux. Yet, these stories transcend setting in their persistent reminder that the human experience is timeless. That these writers write (and we readers read) these novels attests to the human spirit to question, to explore, to understand the connections that bind us—regardless of the time and place in which we live.

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