

The Tiny Key:

Unlocking the Father/Child Relationship in Young Adult Fiction

My young adult novel *The Lucky Place* (Front Street Press) was inspired by a childhood memory about a white horse. Freshly remarried, my mom would see this white horse in the field near our home and lick her thumb and stamp it on her palm for luck. Being little, I was sure this would work, and that our new family would stay charmed forever. But like Cassie in *The Lucky Place*, early childhood belief soon met reality.

My new father died and our family crumbled.

I started a diary the year he died, and I found it years later when I was cleaning out for a move. It's a little book, firm as a miniature suitcase, with gilt edged pages and a blue vinyl cover, a strap that hooks into a gold clasp so you can lock the diary with a tiny key. Only the key is missing and the clasp is fused shut. "One Year Diary," it says on the cover. I wrote in it for six months.

I call it the blue diary.

I open the blue diary at its back. The strap, sewn flimsily, breaks away in my hands and the diary falls open to the last entry, August 19th, where I stapled a small square of newsprint. My stepfather's obituary.

What strikes me now is that the first diary I ever kept was written around the love and loss of the man I considered my father, as if the young writer in me already knew

this theme would later inform my work. And so it has. *The Lucky Place* is built around a family with an absent father. But this story is a new direction for me in another way: exploring this theme in fiction for young people and—gift or accident—finding the blue diary provided an uncanny metaphor for this shift.

Suddenly, my perspective as a writer has changed. Instead of the adult entering the diary from its broken back, I'm the girl holding that tiny key. I fit the key into its lock; give it a wiggly turn, and open up to the father/child relationship from a young reader's point of view. What's in my line of sight?

Not only the absent father, but the abandoned child.

And what makes people human is the way they connect to others, whether it's through love, hatred or even indifference. There aren't many successful novels with only a single character carrying on for hundreds of pages.

Joan Aiken tells us in *The Way to Write for Children* that "the world is *not* a simple place," not even for children. "Far from it," she adds. "The world is an infinitely rich, strange, confusing, wonderful, cruel, mysterious, beautiful, inexplicable riddle" (16). Serious novels for young readers help introduce and solve these riddles for children, maybe for the first time in their lives.

And, just as in adult fiction, human relationships—especially those with family—are one of our biggest riddles. We might talk about plot, characterization, dialogue and voice, but *how* and *why* a character relates a certain

way to others, how she acts and is acted upon, is the lifeblood of story. Think about it. Long after we've forgotten the ins and outs of Huck and Jim going down river, we remember rascally Huck and noble Jim because we remember who they were as people. And what makes people human is the way they connect to others, whether it's through love, hatred or even indifference. There aren't many successful novels with only a single character carrying on for hundreds of pages.

Characters elicit our empathy through their relationships with those they love or long to love because we too need to understand and be understood by our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, lovers and friends. And when we can't untangle the skein in real life, we search for solace in story.

The absent father/abandoned child is one aspect of these tangled relationships of ours, and helping young readers discover and follow this thread in a novel can lead them deeper into story. My own search took me not only into contemporary novels, but back into the abandoned child in history. It turns out that many a literary child hero began as an abandoned child—abandoned by a physically or emotionally absent father.

First, there was the orphan story. Literary history is rife with orphan stories that have captured young reader's hearts, and these stories have paved the way for what in today's literature is known as "psychic, emotional or spiritual orphans"—children whose parents have in one way or another ignored or been unable to meet their emotional needs. A novel about a child who's been emotionally or physically abandoned by his father taps into this long, rich history.

In her book *Orphans: Real and Imaginary*, author Eileen Simpson speaks eloquently to the notion of today's psychic, emotional and spiritual orphans. Simpson herself experienced true orphanhood growing up and notes that orphans share common traits with today's children from dysfunctional or one-parent homes. Vast numbers of children have been adversely affected by "divorce, the remarriage of one or both parents, or the unsuitability of either for the role," says Simpson (221). And many of these children are so emotionally neglected that the loss of the family "shield" has given rise to the concept of growing up "feeling like an orphan." Exactly what being orphaned feels like is inherent in Simpson's own childhood saga.

When Simpson was fifty, her husband's death threw her into a black grief. Depressed and full of separation anxiety, she realized that losing her husband had brought her early childhood losses reeling back. Simpson's mother died before Simpson turned one and her father when she was seven. Simpson adored her father. Prior to his death, he boarded Simpson and her sister Marie in what she thought was a convent school (only years later did she learn this was an orphanage), where he visited them on vacations. The young Simpson was thrilled by his infrequent appearances, and torn by his goodbyes. Already emotionally abandoned by her father, his death sealed Simpson into true orphanhood. As she writes:

To be what Mother Superior had called 'a poor little orphan' meant not to have a father to take one home from the Convent at Christmastime. Later it had meant to have fantasies that he was alive. Later still, when I accepted that he was not, it meant to look for substitutes for him. After Marie married, it meant to stand shakily on my own and to crave sisterly closeness with friends. Always it meant to be excessively affected by separations from those I loved. (9)

Never really having a chance to grieve for her missing parents in childhood, Simpson wrote her book as a way to catch up emotionally as an adult. Part memoir, part history, part literary journey, *Orphans* moves from Simpson's own experience into a discussion of literary orphans down through the ages. And what makes the book sing is her exploration of how it felt to be orphaned *through her innocence as a child*, the same viewpoint writers of literature for young people must establish. In addition, following the evolution of orphan literature Simpson puts forth reads like a blueprint for the emergence of the child hero himself.

For centuries, writes Simpson, unwanted children have been killed, cast out, farmed out as labor, or sent to almshouses to be raised by the insane. Certainly there was little room for the younger hero's voice in literature during these bleak years, when life expectancy was thirty years, and infanticide was the norm for countless children who lost their parents (136). The early Christian Church first concerned itself with housing these abandoned children in institutions, setting a precedent for orphanages down through the ages, where there was little room for a sense of individuality that would later birth the child hero.

Children “lived in the institution until they were seven or eight,” notes Simpson, “at which time they were either adopted or bound out as apprentices or servants” (138). During these times, “neglect and ill treatment of the young were so commonplace that the child without parents was little worse off than the one with them” (140).

The idea of orphans as a separate class, says Simpson, and the concept of the child as individual, surfaced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By then childhood had, “been carved out as a stage of life between infancy and maturity, and the family unit had been consolidated” (140). Once the notion of “childhood” existed, this notion opened the door to the child as individual, and eventually as the hero of her own tale.

What’s interesting is how the concept of the child as a separate being came to light when literary

sympathy finally cast its eye on the plight of orphans; now it was the neglected orphan who stood in contrast to a child protected by her parents (today’s “emotional and spiritual orphans” stand out in a similar fashion). As Simpson puts it, “not until the bourgeois family reached its sentimental peak and middle-and upper-class children were

cosseted as never before, did the orphan’s lot become sufficiently poignant to make it a subject of novelistic interest [. . .]” (140).

We read many of these novels as children and teens, novels which had orphans as their main characters and (although not always considered novels for young adults) nonetheless signaled the emergence of the child as hero of his tale. Consider Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Even books such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* centered on characters that were, if not full orphans, in some way emotionally abandoned by a parent, and showed neglected children through the child’s eyes.

Why did these nineteenth century authors turn to the neglected and orphaned as their main characters? No doubt it had much to do with the autobiographical link to the childhoods of the writers themselves. Novels are not necessarily autobiographies in disguise, but as Mario Vargas Llosa writes in his *Letters to a Young Novelist*, “All stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them [. . .]. In every fiction, even the most freely imagined, it is possible to uncover a starting point, a secret node viscerally linked to the experiences of the writer” (16).

Dickens’ father went bankrupt when Charles was twelve, and the family sent their eldest boy to work in a blacking factory. Raised in middle-class comfort, Dickens never forgot his time living as an impoverished orphan, and his child orphans such as David in *David Copperfield*, reflect his history. “The book might have had for subtitle, *Orphans All*,” writes Simpson, “for it contains a veritable anthology of degrees of the parentless state” (185).

Charlotte Brontë was a maternal orphan. By the time she was nine, she’d lost her mother and her mother surrogate, her sister, Maria. No wonder the boarding school she attended became the fictional model for Lowood Institution in *Jane Eyre*, the orphanage where young Jane spends eight years (189). One can easily imagine that, like her character Jane, Charlotte Brontë must have felt like a full orphan when her father sent her away.

“The secret source of humor,” Mark Twain once said, “is not joy, but sorrow.” Born Samuel Clemens, Twain lost his father when he was twelve. Although he’d never gotten along with Tucker Clemens, when his father died, the young Twain was filled with remorse and guilt. And it was during this painful period in his life that he was apprenticed to a printer. He later wrote of this difficult time that while living with the printer he got “more board than clothes, and not much of either,” saying jokingly that dressed in the printer’s oversized clothes he looked like “Huckleberry Finn” (199).

And what of Louisa May Alcott, whose first novel about the March family had no true orphans?

In Clinton Cox’s biography of Twain, *Mark Twain*, he quotes Louisa May Alcott as saying prissily of Twain’s “boy’s books” that “If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lassies, he had better stop writing for them”

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(158). Yet Alcott herself never enjoyed writing about those good little girls in *Little Women* and in fact wrote more torrid stories under another name.

Alcott grew up “afraid and ashamed,” says Mary E. Lyons in her book of women writers’ diaries, *Keeping Secrets*, because of her father, Bronson Alcott. Bronson, a self-proclaimed Transcendentalist, decided when Louisa was young that it was unseemly for him to work for wages. Instead, his family moved often, living on the charity of relatives and on audience donations when Bronson gave his “spiritual” lectures.

Enamored of the idea of self-exploration, Bronson spent his life writing thirty thousand pages of diary and ignoring, according to many accounts, his family’s needs and wants. “Unable to express deep emotion,” says Lyons, “he sometimes substituted them [the diaries] for himself” (15). He insisted his girls each keep a diary, too, and inspected them regularly for “moral growth.” Louisa, who longed to be the “good girl” her father wanted her to be, was instead often disobedient in his eyes. By the time she was fourteen, Bronson was so displeased with Louisa that he mentioned her only once in his diary for the entire year: “I had a Possessed One sitting by my side all winter,” he wrote of Louisa, adding that her “will was bound in chains by the devil” (20).

Not until Louisa wrote her sweet “girl story” *Little Women*, which became an instant success and supported her family, did she finally find a way to be the obedient daughter. “Superior gifts as a writer,” Bronson now wrote in his diary of Louisa. “I am introduced as the father of *Little Women*” (30) he preens. No wonder he was so pleased, since it was Bronson, himself a frustrated writer, who’d urged Louisa to write *Little Women*. Yet, as Louisa confided in her now private diary, “[I] never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters.” And she complained that writing the four-hundred-page manuscript was a chore she found “dull” (29): a complaint she never stopped making throughout her series about the March family. Still, she managed to add a subtext to *Little Women* that reached into the hearts of readers for over a century—how the four girls survive Papa March as the absent father. In *Little Women* and its sequels, Papa is either away at war, or shut up among his books, and is hardly seen at all. It’s Jo March and her sisters who find a way to keep the household together.

“Although Bronson was physically present when she was growing up,” Lyons says of the parallels between Bronson and Papa March, “Louisa could not depend on him. She loved the ‘dear man,’ but he let her down, year after year. Since she never criticized him aloud, the fictional father’s absence disclosed the real father’s distance from his family’s distress” (30).

Louisa May Alcott was searching for the truth in her writing, whether or not she was able to admit it to herself, and her story leaves clues for readers today. If a writer is authentic, she doesn’t so much choose the relationships her characters will have, and who they will have them with, as they choose her. You could even say these relationships have already been chosen by the questions about life that pursue a writer, the stories that began looking for her when she was a child. For many writers that often leads back to the father/child relationship. And allowing for this remembered experience puts the tiny key back in a writer’s hands, and turns the diary lock.

According to author Wallace Stegner, self-examination is essential for writers. “What we write and what we read,” says Stegner in *On Teaching and Writing Fiction*, “is likely to be as frivolous or as serious as our lives are. If we never examine our lives, we are not likely to get much out of fiction that makes such examination its function” (97). Stegner himself was a product of a difficult father/child relationship, and his youth was spent “resenting [his] father’s impatience and violence” (114)—a resentment that did not fade even when he was a grown man and his father long dead. Stegner’s odyssey to heal old wounds was launched with “Goin’ to Town,” a short story he wrote in 1940.

“Goin’ to Town” begins with a boy’s excitement

By the time she was fourteen, Bronson was so displeased with Louisa that he mentioned her only once in his diary for the entire year: “I had a Possessed One sitting by my side all winter,” he wrote of Louisa, adding that her “will was bound in chains by the devil” (20). [May Alcott]

over the prospect of leaving his family's isolated homestead for a day in town. But the boy's happiness dwindles to despair when the car won't start, and each attempt his father makes to fix it fails. In the end, the boy's keen disappointment is matched by his father's anger, and instead of gaining his father's sympathy, the boy feels his sudden blows.

"[. . .] One of the reasons people write fiction is to heal themselves by making an improved model of some aspect of their lives" notes Stegner about this highly autobiographical tale, but "as it turned out, this story didn't do the job." He had to write similar situations into his novels *Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation* "before the past seemed to me healed" (115).

Stories such as Stegner's "Goin' to Town" (and novels like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which featured the angst-ridden adolescent Holden Caulfield), bring us to today's child and give us a look at the new orphan story, centered on the "psychic, emotional or spiritually" abandoned young. Who are these modern children who "feel like orphans" in Simpson's words and now haunt our fiction for young readers?

In these later instances, even though the father is present, he's *too* present. He demands his child be of his own making, rather than an independent human being.

In their book *The Father-Daughter Dance*, Barbara Goulter and Joan Minninger speak to the modern era of family crisis and abandonment that now shows up so frequently in both adult and children's literature, noting that often times these children are fatherless. In the sixties, the authors say, with the break-up of families came soaring divorce rates and "births to

unmarried mothers, and great numbers of children growing up fatherless." By the nineties, our literature had begun to reflect this fatherless state as never before (18). "One after another, important women authors like Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, and Gloria Steinem published books which revealed their childhood abandonment by their fathers," Goulter and Minninger write (19).

In addition, male writers such as Robert Bly, Sam

Keen and Tucker Bradshaw "popularized the concept of 'father hunger,' arguing that boys who grow up without fathers never get over the loss" (19).

But there are more ways than one to be abandoned. *Father-Daughter Dance* cites six recurring patterns that range from physical abuse, abandonment through death, desertion or emotional detachment, to fathers who over-spoil their daughters or raise them to be their companion or caretaker. In these later instances, even though the father is present, he's *too* present. He demands his child be of his own making, rather than an independent human being. (Consider Anna Freud, who even though brilliant in her own right, spent much of her adult life caring for her mentor/father during his protracted illness. Anna Freud canceled important lectures and stayed at Freud's side performing duties any hired nurse could easily do, because her father insisted she alone should take care of him.)

While *Father-Daughter Dance* notes that these patterns are prevalent in father and daughter relationships, variations on the theme are recognizable in father and son relationships as well. In the collection *Fathers and Children in Literature and Art*, editor Charles Sullivan has put together poems, essays and artwork centered on fathers and children through the ages. Here modern essays such as Carl Jung's "The Significance of the Father in the Destiny of the Individual" and Pablo Neruda's poem "Father" speak to the plight of neglected boys.

Jung notes that fathers are passing a curse on to their children when they "criticize every sign of emotional independence," including those who "keep their sons on a leash or force them into a profession" (62). And in Neruda's poem a railroad man and "brusque" father returns to his family like a gusty wind so that the "The house/staggered, /a panic of doorways/exploded with a dry/sound of pistols" (73).

In a reflective tone, Neruda calls the man in his poem "Poor, durable father, /there on the axle of life" (74), and we feel the narrator looking back with some perspective on a man who ruled his life. But what of our protagonists in novels for young adult readers who don't have the luxury of hindsight?

One of the great charms of YA literature is seeing life through young eyes, holding that tiny key as it were, with a sense of *immediacy*. Young heroes are not reflecting on their lives as adults, but discovering the

world, as Joan Aiken puts it, for the first time. “[. . .] The child reads quite *uncritically*,” says Aiken, “he has never encountered anything of this kind before; or, we cannot assume that he has” (9). And while Aiken’s statement might seem to apply only to very young readers, it can also apply to young adult readers discovering for the first time, novels with sophisticated subjects such as the father/child relationship.

This is an exciting moment, when readers experience the personal, human connection to themselves in a novel. And we can help deepen their insight in the classroom when we help them uncover the relationships that both create—and drive—plot.

Look at a contemporary novel such as *Many Stones* by Carolyn Coman. In *Many Stones* the main character, Berry, is both physically and emotionally abandoned by her father. Her anger and loss, and ultimately her need to reconnect with him, actively drive the plot from denial to a decision that reveals character growth until Berry has come of age.

We so often hear the term coming of age, we can forget the emotional impact behind it. But coming of age is a painful journey that connects our fictional characters to universal truths we all experience. As the authors of *The Father-Daughter Dance* put it: “As children, we lived in worlds of fantasy. The people close to us loomed enormous and seemed to have wondrous powers. Our mothers were queens and fairy godmothers when they satisfied our wishes, wicked witches when they didn’t. Our fathers were kings or giants” (169).

Thus, when a very young child is abandoned or betrayed by her father, she’s in effect being betrayed by life itself. “Her father can’t be ‘just a man,’” say Goulter and Minninger, because “she has no idea of what ‘just a man’ is. Instead, he’s a god, a king, a giant [. . .]. If she can’t trust him, how can she trust God or life or any man?” (169).

In this magical world, a father makes a child feel safe, but if that safety is threatened, the child believes she can influence and change events, setting them right again. “We thought we could make things happen by wishing,” say Goulter and Minninger about childhood (169). (Recall how

Simpson fantasized, after her father’s death, that he was still alive). And although this magical world is soon enough dashed by reality when we’ve been disappointed in childhood, we cling unconsciously to that old magical thinking as we grow.

We want to change it back; we want our fathers to be gods and giants so we can be safe once more. But our fathers are often much too human. In fiction, our child characters too, are learning this painful lesson (or not). They’re embroiled in a conflict with their fathers and their humanness. They’re learning the gods in their lives are mere mortals, and not magic at all. Or they hold on to the magic, and sacrifice their own character growth.

Watching a child character respond to such dilemmas touches on the experience of us all. Sometimes, say the authors of *Father-Daughter Dance*, the child finds her father, only to be rejected again; sometimes she tries to compensate for his loss with substitutes; and sometimes she discovers him just when he needs her, to their mutual delight. Berry in *Many Stones*, is about to “discover” her father.

As the novel opens, Berry is literally buried in grief. It’s been a year since her sister Laura was murdered in South Africa, and Berry’s guilt and sorrow keep her as mute as the stones she piles on her chest at night to weight her down. “So I know there’s something there to be weighted [. . .]” she says. “I’m like the stones: dumb. As in, can’t speak” (9). Immediately, we’re in Berry’s story, feeling her loss, and the stones are a metaphor for her denial. Cut off emotionally, she covers her heart and creates an image of burial that haunts the novel, just as her unresolved feelings haunt her life. From these opening scenes, we understand that Berry is repressing her grief, and that it can literally “kill” her.

But Berry’s repression goes beyond her sister’s death. Like Simpson, whose husband’s death brought back her buried childhood grief, Laura’s death has caused Berry’s other loss to surface: the emotional abandonment by her distant father, Myles. Long since divorced from Berry’s mother and never very attentive, Myles seems bent on reentering Berry’s life, but only as a way to refashion Berry as

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Laura, the daughter he preferred.

We know Berry has grown up feeling Laura was the daughter who could talk to Myles, the one he felt followed in his footsteps, because Berry herself feels Myles is disappointed and ashamed of her. As she puts it, “The sliding. That. My grades, my attitude, my appearance. Dad hates what is left of my hair” (25). Yet ironically, when Myles talks Berry into a trip to Africa (to attend a memorial service for Laura), he becomes the catalyst for Berry’s emotional journey back to a place where she can cast the stones from her heart for good.

As *Many Stones* unfolds, we come to see that as much as anything it is the distant, self-centered Myles who has been standing in the way of Berry’s healing, and the physical journey father and daughter take parallels the emotional one: Myles and Berry traverse the politically sensitive areas of South Africa at the same time that they travel the inner minefield of their relationship. And what Berry discovers (and accepts) about her father has a direct impact on her growth as a character.

In the beginning, Berry sees her father as a big man. He works as a lobbyist and is used to, both literally and figuratively, “getting people to see things his way” (24). Berry is sickened that her father thinks Laura was so much like him. She doesn’t want to go with Myles to Africa, and yet, when he asks her, she suddenly, surprisingly agrees to the trip. Why? Because Berry feels like an abandoned child. And, in *Many Stones*, Myles has the potential to finally become the father Berry needs, and the reader’s hope for a good outcome creates the emotional tension in the book. Despite the fact that throughout her childhood Berry remembers her father choosing to be with Laura, we do get glimpses of a possible reconciliation when she fondly remembers Myles once buying her the bike of her dreams.

This hope for reconciliation is rekindled when Myles invites Berry on the South African trip, and we root for father and daughter. Yet when Myles tells Berry he knows this year has been hard on her, without Laura, it sounds like a platitude to the grieving Berry. Through Berry’s memories, we’ve already seen that her feelings for Laura run much deeper than her father’s shallow words can reach.

Laura taught Berry to swim at age five, and in her gentle approach gave Berry a lifelong love of water.

“I’ve got you,” Berry remembers Laura saying as Berry floated on her back. “And I knew she did. I could feel her fingertips under my back, guiding me through the water, and every once in a while I’d open my eyes and look at her in her orange two-piece with her beautiful perfect teeth [. . .]” (13).

Thus Berry’s sensitive, inner world contrasts with her outward, hostile actions toward her father and shows us her struggle to mature. Consider her inner reflection after she has lashed out at her father during a tour of a squatter village in Soweto: “He probably thinks I want to be like this—how I’m acting,” she thinks, “the words that come slicing out of my mouth, the sound of my voice. Can he really not know that I hate it, too? That I hate everything? *No* one wants to be like this [. . .]” (57).

What young adult hasn’t felt this way? As Berry struggles, she begins to see (and the reader along with her) the human side of her father, and a confirmation of his faults. Myles barrels through his agenda in South Africa, asking all the right questions about poverty, apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings—public hearings in which human rights abusers admit their crimes as a way to “reconcile” with their victims—but when Myles merely mouths his answers, not actually *feeling* them, Berry is determined to find answers of her own.

During a discussion with her father, Berry turns the conversation from the unfairness of political amnesty for those who tortured their victims, to the unfairness of her sister’s murder, and she tries desperately to get her father to talk honestly about his daughter’s death. For a moment, it seems she might succeed, but Myles is soon reaching for his platitudes again, effectively becoming the distant father once more (68). Even so, Berry can’t let go. “Would you say what *you* did—” she presses her father about crimes and forgiveness, “was the worst and cruelest thing? And then ask to go free?” (71).

Myles acts confused by Berry’s onslaught, but Coman has put us smack in Berry’s shoes and we know she needs her anger and grief addressed when she cries: “People *have* to be sorry for hurting other people! They have to be!” her demands going deeper than Myles can know. She silently pleads, “*Be sorry* [. . .]. *You* be sorry, Dad” (73).

Is Myles sorry? Father and daughter have reached the heart of their emotional dilemma in *Many Stones*,

the abandoned child wanting her father back. And Berry's story turns on the fulcrum of this scene. Her father may be tongue-tied, but she's beginning to speak out and thus her character to change and grow. Later, she even begins searching for "some simple thing that would connect us" (97), as she spends more time with her father. But as Berry's understanding grows, Myles becomes more of a disappointment, and the true test of Berry's maturity is coming to terms with her father's weaknesses.

During their last days together, on a tour of the wine country, they meet Suzanne, a racist hotel hostess. Myles is blatantly attracted to Suzanne, and Berry, repulsed, is thrown into a final emotional crisis. Deserted by her father even when he's physically present, (and exhibiting what Simpson terms in abandoned children an acute loneliness and preoccupation with death), Berry feels she is "missing something—or something is missing inside me—that's how it feels. What? Home? If I were there right now, I'd reach for my pile of stones" (121).

She recalls the cruel moment at Laura's funeral when her father hung around Laura's attractive friend and "with so much sadness hanging over everything, he would still check out her ass" (123), and realizes that even Laura "being his favorite didn't count for all that much" (135). Finally, the stones Berry has collected over the months truly have entered her heart and "weigh[s] too much" (136).

When Myles takes off with Suzanne and leaves a frightened Berry alone in the motel, she's again the abandoned child, but this time she's come far enough emotionally to recognize her choice: she can be held down by her feelings of betrayal, or accept her father as he is and grow past that betrayal. Berry's fear sends her to the liquor cabinet, then into a rage. By the time Myles returns, she's ready to confront him.

Berry berates Myles for watching out for her only when it "fits into your schedule," and gains his admission that he does the best

he can, and it is "clearly, often [. . .] not enough" (145). With her father's admission Berry understands that Myles does love her, but that his love won't sustain her. And she's matured enough through the novel that she can now separate from him. She's come of age because she no longer believes in the magic of getting back what could have been. In acknowledging Myles' fall from grace, Berry takes the first steps toward healing.

In Shakespeare's day, King Lear could cast out his loving daughter Cordelia simply because she dared to give "half" her love to her mate, rather than save it all for Lear. In the end, though, noble Cordelia was still willing to sacrifice herself (all thought of her lover gone) to save her father. While at first glance such a solution seems incredible in modern times, *The Father-Daughter Dance* notes that abandoned or neglected daughters are still quick to sacrifice everything for the return of their derelict fathers (113). In other words, Berry could have chosen, like Louisa May Alcott, to be the good and dutiful daughter. She could have bought into her father's version of who he wanted her to be. Instead, the ending of *Many Stones* reflects a new solution for today's new literary orphan, and Berry comes of age despite her father's failures.

We seem to have no control as young adults, but we are looking for it. And what we learn from good stories is that through struggle we can control our thoughts and actions. Yet in stories about relationships such as the father/child dynamic, it goes beyond giving a sense of power to the main character.

Every child has a need, at some point, to separate from the parent; it's part of growing up, and every life has its version of the coming of age tale. But when you've been emotionally or spiritually "orphaned," letting go is a trial by fire. Gone is the emotional grounding which comes with a healthy family. In its place, the child hero must fight the ghosts left behind by poor parenting, and one of those ghosts is what could have been.

Deserted by her father even when he's physically present, (and exhibiting what Simpson terms in abandoned children an acute loneliness and preoccupation with death), Berry feels she is "missing something—or something is missing inside me—that's how it feels."

Child characters who fight these ghosts create their own answers from the ground up, without a firm foundation, and just how they navigate through the father/child dynamic drives the plot and creates a special coming of age story for today's young readers, as we've seen in *Many Stones*. And while such contemporary novels offer new directions, they speak to the past as well.

The search for the absent parent is one of the oldest stories in the world, and the evolution of the absent father story has its roots in the traditional orphan story, which made a long and arduous journey out of silence and onto the pages of such literary figures as Dickens, Twain and Alcott. "Children need to get from the stories they read a sense of their own inner existence," says Aiken, "and the archetypal links that connect them with the unexplored past: of the similarity in patterns between large and small, old and new [. . .]" (17).

The father/child dynamic holds these patterns and archetypal links within its dance, and stories fashioned from its patterns for today's young readers can both incorporate the past and create something new, until our fiction is, as Jane Yolen says, "*reality surprised*. It shakes us up and makes us see familiar things in new ways" (27). And part of surprising reality for those of us who write is allowing that kernel of real experience to leak from pen to page. The more deeply we examine experience, the more profound and meaningful our fiction, the more it will resonate with others.

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As Wallace Stegner says, "The best times I know are the times when some raw crystal of experience, my own or something I have observed, is being ground down and faceted and polished so that it reflects light and meaning" (121). You take that light and meaning where it's found, in the polish of raw crystal, or the glint of a tiny key.

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