



Frances A. Miller

More Than Story

Having been a reader for fifty of the last fifty-three years, I discovered long ago the truth about fiction — that at its best it is more than story.

I used to gnash my teeth when children came home from school with their reading homework, which was always “read the next chapter and answer these question.” Like miners they would chip laboriously away at the story until it lay around them in little pieces, some of which they slotted into the blanks on their mimeos. The rest of it, as far as I could tell, was discarded.

The last thing I ever expected to find myself doing as a middle school English teacher was taking a book apart in class — asking my eighth graders to think about and answer questions as we read it aloud. But there was no other way to share my all-time favorite with them. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is filled with four and five syllable words, universal ideas and themes, subtle

relationships that shift and grow, discoveries and events that demand response from readers. It is a feast for mind and soul, and I refused to have the class nibbling resentfully at crumbs.

We read the book together, dealing with the vocabulary as a homework exercise the night before, and the questions in discussions during class each day. I wanted these 13-year-olds alert and watching for clues, preparing to draw their own inferences because they knew there would be inferences to draw. I wanted them to stop now and then instead of racing to finish the chapter; to savor the language; to look back at what had happened and why; to speculate on what lay ahead; to explore their own relationships to the people and events in this extraordinary book. Like my children’s teachers, I

wanted them *reading* in every sense of the word.

Having been a reader for fifty of the last fifty-three years, I discovered long ago the truth about fiction — that at its best it is more than story. I did not realize how much more than story there can be, and how important it is that we share this truth with our

and their friends? Where were the books about the struggling, never-say-die teens in the Reading Lab? Where were the books about the parents, teachers, and concerned adults who cared about, enjoyed, admired, and fought for them?

I want to write a book about a teenager who wins for a change! reads

he is. Unable to reunite with former friends and family, Matt earns himself a coveted and respected place among new ones.

That is the story — the two-line description that becomes the core of annotations and reviews. It's what readers will tell you if you ask them what the book is about. But there is more to *The Truth Trap* than story. Beneath the dramatic, attention-grabbing plot lie the themes — those central ideas that serve as the skeleton and framework on which the story is built, and for which my children so often went searching with pick and shovel. *Truth Trap* was written to dramatize the loneliness and uncertainty of adolescence and to celebrate the toughness and resilience of the human spirit so clearly evident in the lives of real young people like Anne Frank, Met Peuw (*The Stones Cry Out*), and Sheila R. (*One Child*). I wanted to tell readers that belief in yourself and support from someone who cares about you will see you through the worst of times; to shout from the rooftops about the basic, non-negotiable need for mutual respect and trust between adults and adolescents, and the devastating effects of their absence on the developing self-image of the young. The story could have been told another way, but the reasons for writing it would have remained the same. Without those themes there would be no story.

Truth Trap ends with Matt winning, but it is not a happy-ever-after situation. For Matt it is only the beginning of a lifetime that will have to be spent dealing with the consequences of his decision to run away with his sister Katie after losing their parents — a decision that resulted in her death. He has proved himself to the adults closest to him, but what about the outside world — the world of schools and strangers? In that world, with the murder unsolved, Matt will still be labeled a monster. How will that knowledge affect his perception of himself? How can he find answers to that unanswerable question: "Aren't you the one who killed a little girl and get away with it?" Has he really earned himself a permanent place with the Ryders, or could something happen that will change the way they feel about him? And will he ever live a normal life, free from fear of strangers and the agony of his loss?

Beneath the story line is the idea that we know too little about each other — we rely too much on surface impressions, labels, and the opinion of others.

children and teach them how to mine stories for their deeper treasures, until I began writing fiction myself.

I'd been dabbling with writing for a wider audience for years, but the only efforts that made it into print were forceful letters to the editor of national magazines and local papers on issues that outraged my sense of justice. Throughout the sixties and early seventies I was also reading books for and about teenagers which cataloged, like the children's books of the 1800's, every possible mistake a teenager could make and the awful consequences. By the mid-seventies I had teenagers of my own, a year's experience in a high school reading lab, and was working my way toward becoming a teacher of reading and English at the middle school/high school level. The more I discovered about real-life teens, the more angered I was by the unfairness of the one-sided, collective portrait being painted of them and of us — the adults in their lives — in many YA novels.

Book after book featured weak, irresponsible, self-absorbed teens and adults, some of whom were cruel and stupid as well. If you read too many of these books, you were overwhelmed by the cumulative message which was that adolescence is the pits, that adults are the enemy, that life is one major mistake after another and if you make it through your insensitive, messed-up adolescence, your reward is to become an insensitive, messed-up adult.

Where, I kept asking, were the books about my silly, courageous, warm-hearted, exasperating, questioning, capable, growing, changing children

an angry scrawl in my '74 writing notebook, and the seeds for *The Truth Trap* were sown. Matt McKendrick, a boy who has spent the first fifteen and a half years of his life as a responsible, trusted member of a hard-working cattle-ranching family gradually came to life. I learned a lot about him and his hot-tempered reaction to injustice, his love for his parents and small deaf sister and theirs for him, before I wrenched him violently out of his supportive world and isolated him among strangers.

The story concerns a boy accused of a murder he didn't commit, and his struggle to prove his innocence to the two police detectives assigned to the case. One of them trusts Matt, risking much to offer him the support he needs; the other hates him, thinks he's guilty, wants to make him confess and pay.

In the tradition of Donelson's and Nilsen's adventure/accomplishment romance, in which the hero "is separated both physically and spiritually from the nurturing love of friends and family...undergoes a test of courage and stamina that may be either mental, psychological, or physical...and is reunited with former friends and family in a new role of increased status" (Donelson and Nilsen, p. 127), Matt (who I realized early on was a direct descendant of Lloyd Alexander's Taran and Eilonwy) sets out on a desperate quest, doing battle with the dragons of suspicion, hatred, and his own unbearable remorse and self doubt before he proves to himself and to the man who despises him that he is who he says

Wanting answers to these questions, I took Matt to visit the home town he had run away from. There he finds acceptance and rejection in unexpected places, and his still-fragile self-confidence is dealt another blow. After introducing him to my four children — thinly disguised as the Schuylers who are trying to cope with the death of their mother — I sent him back to school to deal with a hostile running coach and a world in which he no longer feels accepted or acceptable. Underlying the story this time are the ideas that standing up for yourself is the best and only answer when other people, including adults, are wrong about you; that helping a friend in pain goes a long way toward

other...the readers too. Along with Matt, readers begin the book seeing the Duke as the enemy and wanting Matt to win the award. Like Matt, as they gradually learn more about his rival, they no longer know which one they want to see victorious.

The fourth book, *Cutting Loose*, takes place during the summer following Matt's high school graduation, and takes him and the other older Schuylers, Meg and Will, to Craigie, Idaho — Matt's home town — to work with three teenaged friends of Matt's as hired hands for the owners of a guest ranch. Beneath the surface plot are several themes: choosing, and dealing with the consequences of those choices; coming to terms with the loss

Matt sets out on a desperate quest, doing battle with the dragons of suspicion, hatred, and his own unbearable remorse and self-doubt.

easing your own; that everyone — adults and adolescents both — can make mistakes, admit them, and try to make amends.

Inevitably, *Aren't You the One Who...?*, while answering some questions, left others open, including a big one. Who really had killed Matt's sister Katie when he left her alone in the abandoned movie theater while he tried to find a job to support the two of them? *Losers and Winners* answers that question within the events of a plot based on Matt's fierce senior year competition for Runner of the Year with Duke Grieve, a black senior from another high school — a competition which only one of them can win — and on the Schuylers' continuing struggle to fill for each other the gap left by their mother's death and their good-natured but self-centered father's inability to understand how much they need him.

Beneath the story line is the idea that we know too little about each other — we rely too much on surface impressions, labels, and the opinions of others — and its corollary, that we need to offer others all the things we most want ourselves: respect, understanding, a listening ear, the benefit of the doubt. The characters make many discoveries about themselves and each

of people you love and moving on; the maturing and changing of relationships with friends and the adults in your life; and the rights and responsibilities of parents to their growing children and of children to their parents and families and themselves.

Wanting to find out what happened next had driven me to finish first drafts of the first three books in twelve straight months. (That it was sixteen years before all of them were published is another story.) Struggles to identify the "point," the central idea of the fourth book, sent me back to the first three and into my writing journals. That was when I began to see how much more than story and theme had been woven into the fabric of the books. Incorporated into them, on a deeper subconscious level, were ideas I had grown into over a lifetime.

My journal entry for August 3, 1979, reads:

What do I want to say? That my grandfather was right when he demonstrated by his love and interest in me — a small, vociferous child — that any age and every age is worth being. That one age should not be scorned or despised by another because of its limitations and faults....That

adults love and care and agonize over their young in ways which the young may not be aware of or able to recognize. That the young are worth every moment of loving and caring and agonizing we do over them....That we need each other if we are to do more than survive....That life is a bewildering and sometimes painful mixture of the dark and the light, but it is liveable, enjoyable, and worth having....That it is never too late to change, to grow, to apologize, to try again, to cope with the impossible, to manage in spite of setbacks and failures....That one discovery, one trauma, one wrong decision, one bad mistake does not a lifetime make....That being a teen-ager is a good thing to be. That being adult is a good thing to be....That being a parent is a tough but rewarding career and worth including in your life plans....That being young is an important time and needs adult support and caring....That caring about, and sharing with other people is the vital core of your life. Everything else is affected by your ability — or inability — to do these things....That there is more to living than being alive....

Those ideas had found their way into everything I'd written without my being conscious of them. So I discovered — now that I was looking for them — had these:

Hope: We all need it. With it we can accomplish enormous tasks. Without it, we die.

Purpose: We all need this too. It gives us direction and a destination; makes us feel that we matter. It also focuses our attention on something larger than ourselves.

Choices: They have to be made. Once made, the consequences have to be dealt with. Sometimes choices turn out badly, but mistakes are not the end of life. Mistakes can be — have to be — faced up to, lived through, made up for. (My children once gave me a birthday poster that read, *People who never make mistakes are people who never do anything*. I didn't ask whether it was something they thought I already believed, or something they thought I needed to know, but it still hangs on my wall as a reminder.)

Point of View: Everyone has one. This is the reason I don't write in the first person. Like Cynthia Voigt in *The Runner* and Ellen Emerson White in

Long Live the Queen, I use what I think of as the Third Person Subjective, in which everything is perceived and related through one or more of the characters rather than by an omniscient author as Lynne Reid Banks does, for example, in *The Indian in the Cupboard*.

stupid, or *troublemakers* — hoping, and more rarely *knowing* that they are okay — come back day after day to try to prove the world is wrong about them. One of my deepest pleasures has been to have so many non-readers and reluctant readers unexpectedly claim these complex books as their own.

Books wield an extraordinary power to take us beyond our surface differences and expose us to our commonality.

The Truth Trap and *Aren't You the One Who...?* are mostly from Matt's point of view because in them he is trying to survive; there is not much room for stepping away from himself and seeing other people's point of view. In these books the point of view becomes a metaphor for adolescent self-centeredness. *Losers and Winners* opens up, as Matt is now able to do, to other characters' interior lives and needs. Will becomes almost as familiar to the reader as Matt, and as Matt gradually comes to know his running rival as someone more than just the enemy, so does the reader. *Cutting Loose* focuses almost equally on Matt, Meg, and Will, while introducing three other teens and exploring several of the adult characters as well.

Change and Growth: I loved Louise Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family is Going to Change*, even though I disagree profoundly with the premise that change is impossible. Change is not only possible, it's inevitable. We are constantly enticed, invited, challenged, and forced to change our perceptions, our assumptions, our attitudes and beliefs. As long as we are capable of growth, we are capable of change.

Labelling: We all do it. Labelling someone and treating him/her accordingly is a constant throughout all four books. I can look back to my elementary school days as champion of the underdogs, and especially of a girl whose last name was Coward; or perhaps to my year in the Panama Canal Zone where, labelled *gringa*, I learned how to fight; or even farther back, when I was the baby of the family — to see where my hatred of labels comes from. Or more recently to the Reading Lab, where students with a lifetime of being put down and labelled *slow*, *lazy*,

Time: In the adolescent world, time is now, with tomorrow and next week being as much of the future as they can anticipate and plan for. The rush to experiment with everything from designer shoes and dating to beer, cigarettes, drugs and sex is given its urgency by this distorted view of time. *The Truth Trap* was followed by the other three books in part because I wanted to find out what happened to Matt myself, but more because I did not want to leave readers with the impression that everything they needed to know about Matt, everything important, had happened in *The Truth Trap*. I did not want to reinforce the idea that life consists of one Main Event, and everything else is anti-climactic.

Had I been writing for a general audience, I could have combined the four books into a single fat volume and taken Matt into his dotage. As it is, the growth and change occurring in Matt's and the Schuylers' lives over a two-and-a-half-year period have been divided into four books. While any of them can be read without knowledge of the others, reading all of them adds the important elements of change and growth occurring over time, an experience rarely tackled successfully within the page limitations of a single YA novel. Think what would have been lost if Cynthia Voigt had tried to compress the Tillerman family's saga into 200 pages!

Discovering how much of me had gone into my books made me more sensitive to the books of other writers. I realized why some books I read once, often with pleasure, while others I bought to read again and again. (Several shelves of books are going with me to the Old Folks Home so I can read them one more time and pass them on to someone else before

I die, among them most of the titles mentioned here.) The books that give me pleasure once are the books that are simply story; the ones that have earned a place on my shelves are the ones that give me much, much more.

Books that exist only to tell a story can be as much fun as a casual acquaintance. Stories can give our spirits a lift, hold us in suspense, make us shiver or laugh, present problems and possible solutions, take us to places and times we could not otherwise visit. The books that resonate in our minds, that stay with us long after they are read and become lifetime friends are the ones that exist on many levels below and beyond the story itself. These many-layered books give us insight into ourselves, into other people, into the whole human experience.

We don't need to be aware of every level to have a rewarding relationship with a book, nor will we all respond to a book in the same way, any more than we will all love and hate the same people. When the reader's perceptions are based on a different cultural background, a different set of experiences, a book may not work for them on its story level. Years ago, reading Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*, I found the father's cruelty totally unbelievable. In a review I would probably have said something to that effect. Reviewing it from a 1990's perspective, I would feel and say something different. A review of *Aren't You the One Who...?* dismissed it with the comment that Matt was a wimp who should have taken his problem with his coach straight to the ACLU and let them handle it. To me, that approach would have been the wimpy one. Determined to make the coach recognize and respect his abilities as a runner regardless of the man's personal feelings about him, Matt found and won the battle for himself.

If it were only story — the particular set of circumstances — that speaks to readers, how could we explain the response from such a diverse group to the story of an Idaho ranch kid transplanted to Los Angeles, accused of murder, coming to terms with his mistakes and himself, and getting on with his life? What do a nine-year-old Asian-American, a thirty-year-old teacher from the Mid-West, a South-African-born Australian girl, an eighty-four-year-old woman in a retirement

home, a boy in a juvenile court school, a twenty-two-year-old engineering student, a brilliant fifteen-year old from Wisconsin, a lonely eleven-year old from a tiny country school in Iowa, a retired Australian Air Marshall, a sixteen-year old who had fled Afghanistan with her family twelve months earlier, seventh and eighth graders from Mexico, Southeast Asia, and the Phillipines, and thousands of teenagers who hate to read have in common?

Only their human nature.

Books wield an extraordinary power to take us beyond our surface differences and expose us to our commonality. Books sing the songs and tell the stories of human history — of good and evil, of love and hate, of triumph and tragedy, of friendship and betrayal. They celebrate what is best in all of us — compassion, energy, laughter, courage, the ability to risk, to survive, to go the distance, to dream, to win in spite of losing. They tell us not only of what is and who we are, but of what might yet be and who we can become.

For this reason adolescents need books as much as children do — perhaps more. Vulnerable in their personal relationships, frustrated in their efforts to move beyond dependence and become adult, teenagers are looking for reassurance, for support, for affirmation, for definition, for place. Like most of us, adolescents long to feel part of something bigger than they are. Who am I, and who is the enemy? Where do I belong, and where am I going? These are questions that in another time and place would have been answered by their tribal elders — the singers of songs and tellers of stories that set each member of the tribe in his/her niche along the continuum of tribal history.

In our multi-cultural, on-the-move, 1990's society we have lost our tribal elders, but we have not lost our need for them. The questions are still there. Every human being spends a lifetime looking for answers. And if there is not single definitive answer, we can at least share with our young the truth that they are not alone, that all of us are asking the questions, that the search itself is what living is about.

One book won't do it, of course, although *Charlotte's Web* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* come close. We must shower our children with books,

resisting the urge to share only those titles on our personal Lifetime Best list and asking — no, insisting — that they develop a list of their own. And when a friend asks if we are ever going to write a "real" book, an administrator wonders why we are spending precious class time reading aloud, or a supervisor asks us to explain why so much of our limited book budget is being spent on "stories," we who write books and we who read and share and teach them know the answer.

If we deprive our young of books and the ability to read them — to mine that rich, inexhaustible vein of human thought, experience, and emotion — we are depriving them of far more than story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Lloyd. *The Prydain Chronicles*. Dell, 1980.
- Banks, Lynne Reid. *The Indian in the Cupboard*. Avon, 1982.
- Donelson, Kenneth L. and Alleen Pace Nilsen. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Scott, Foresman and Company, 3rd edition, 1989.
- Fitzhugh, Louise. *Nobody's Family is Going to Change*. Dell, 1975.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Washington Square Press, 1987.
- Greene, Bette. *The Summer of My German Soldier*. Bantam, 1984.
- Hayden, Torey. *One Child*. Avon, 1981.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Warner Books, 1982.
- Miller, Frances A. "Aren't You the One Who...?" Fawcett, 1985.
- . *Cutting Loose*. Fawcett, 1991.
- . *Losers and Winners*. Fawcett, 1986.
- . *The Truth Trap*. Fawcett, 1984.
- Szymusiak, Molyda. *The Stones Cry Out: a Cambodian Childhood*. Hill & Wang, 1986.
- Voigt, Cynthia. *The Runner*. Fawcett, 1986.
- White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. Harper, 1952.
- White, Ellen Emerson. *Long Live the Queen*. Scholastic, Inc, 1990.

Frances Miller is the author of the popular Matt McKendrick series. Her latest novel is Cutting Loose, which is reviewed in this issue.
