



## Exploring the 'Academic Side' of Cynthia Voigt

Over the past twenty-four years, author Cynthia Voigt has published twenty-seven books for readers ranging in age from pre-school (*The Rosie Stories*) through college (*Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers*) to adult (*Glass Mountain*). She has experimented with different genres, including the fantasy-adventure "Kingdom" series, the Tillerman family saga, historical fiction (*David and Jonathan* and *Tree by Leaf*), and two mysteries (the gothic *The Callender Papers* and the contemporary *The Vandemark Mummy*). She has addressed issues running the gamut from elementary and middle school friendship/peer relationships (the "Bad Girls" series) to racial and ethnic stereotyping (*Come a Stranger* and *David and Jonathan*) to learning to cope with a physical disability (*Izzy Willy-Nilly*) and surviving sexual abuse (*When She Hollers*). Finally, she has successfully broken some common "rules" for young adult (YA) books; for example, although the average YA novel contains from 125 to 250 pages, *Seventeen Against the Dealer* and *The Wings of a Falcon* run well over 300 and 400 pages, respectively.

After nearly a quarter of a century, every book that Voigt has published is still in print. To what can the endurance of her work be attributed? Certainly, her novels are peopled with realistic teen protagonists, and their themes are among those that interest adolescent and YA readers: relationships with parents, siblings, and friends; loneliness, self-isolation, and



popularity; meeting obligations and keeping promises; understanding and being understood; self-respect and respect for others, particularly valuing individual differences; the insidious nature of rumor; masking one's thoughts and feelings to stay "safe"; and discovering one's rightful place in the world. Voigt also tackles important life issues in ways such that young adults can learn about and understand them: slavery (*Come a Stranger*) and the underground railway (*Building Blocks*); the Holocaust (*David and*

*Jonathan*); conscientious objection (*The Callender Papers*) and the pain and grief precipitated by war (*Tree by Leaf*, *The Runner*); fate and free will (*On Fortune's Wheel*, *Building Blocks*); coping with the death of a friend (*Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers*) or family member (*Dacey's Song* and *The Runner*); and divorce (*Bad, Badder, Baddest*). There is a richness to her work that transcends topical stories with teen-oriented, identity-focused themes. I believe that her stories have maintained their appeal because they are skillfully crafted and highly literate. By this I mean that they are suffused with allegory, literary allusion, classical mythology, and traditional folk and fairy tales.

Surprisingly, although Voigt's novels have been positively reviewed and well received by readers, and despite the fact that she has won a Newbery Medal, an Edgar, and the Margaret A. Edwards Award, there is very little critical analysis of her work. This is

unexpected, given that it withstands literary analysis well, whether the criticism be “new,” historical, archetypal, historical, psychoanalytical, or even feminist. (Although Voigt has disavowed being a feminist in several interviews, there is no denying the independent natures of the majority of her female characters, most notably Dicey [*Homecoming*, *Dicey’s Song*, *Seventeen Against the Dealer*], Mina [*Dicey’s Song* and *Come a Stranger*], Gwyn [*Jackaroo*], Berial [*Elske*], and, of course, the self-proclaimed feminist, Althea [*The Vandemark Mummy*].)

Because the theme of this issue of *The ALAN Review* lends itself so readily to an overview, I will not be dealing in great detail with any single Voigt novel. Neither will I exhaust the topic of Voigt’s use of archetypal patterns by cataloguing every instance in each of her twenty-four adolescent/YA novels. My purpose here, rather, is to lead the reader back to Cynthia Voigt’s work with a new eye by providing several well-chosen examples to serve as evidence of the broad scope of Voigt’s “academic side” (Reid 111).

## Allegorical Aspects

Parable is the allegorical method of choice in *David and Jonathan*. In an ongoing game of intellectual one-upmanship over his friend Henry, to make his points, Jon will recite Biblical and Talmudic parables and, when it suits him, create parables of his own.

However, allegory most often takes the form of metaphor in Voigt’s novels. One method with which she is very effective is in the creation of landscapes that echo story development. In *The Callender Papers*, for example, when Enoch Callender is seemingly confiding in Jean in order to enlighten her about the Callender family history, Jean says, “The river ran beside us, going in the opposite direction. As we went uphill, great boulders began to appear, as if they had forced their way up through concealing earth, like the earth’s secrets forcing their way into daylight” (55). Of course, Jean’s confidence in Enoch at this point in the story is misplaced, as she later learns when the truth of the family’s secrets is revealed. *Tree by Leaf* is particularly atmospheric. The peninsula bequeathed to Clothilde by her great aunt is more than her “future” (7)—it is her literal present. Being of an independent nature, she does not follow the dirt road that runs beside the fields; rather, she “prefer[s] her own path” (3). When she is confused, we find her walking

through dense fog (106), and when she is angry, a dark wind blows at her back (175). When James and Sammy are searching for their father in *Sons from Afar*, James’s disappointment is complemented by a gray and heavy sky (120) and, later, Sammy’s contentment by a rocking boat and a “blanket” of warm air (241).

Voigt is particularly skillful with extended metaphor. As metaphors for life, she uses sailing in *Homecoming*, the juxtaposition of land and ocean in *Dicey’s Song*, and cross-country track in *The Runner*. However, in no novel is she more successful with this technique than in *A Solitary Blue*, from the point early in the novel when Jeff—who is feeling alienated from his father—catches a glimpse of the solitary blue heron “half-hidden in the pale marsh grass” (73) to the end of the novel when he realizes that, although he does not always understand his mother’s or father’s actions, both are a part of who he is, and “even the blue herons nested together in colonies, all of them together” (306).

## Literary Allusions

References to specific poems, plays, and books flow through all of Voigt’s YA novels, and always with purpose. For example, when Gram is recovering from pneumonia in *Seventeen Against the Dealer*, the final book of the Tillerman series, she asks Dicey for a copy of *David Copperfield* to read. For *David Copperfield*, the two most important developmental constants of childhood—home and family—have been subject to repeated change. So, too, have they been for Dicey. Like David when he becomes an adult, Dicey (now 21 years old) is making choices for herself which frequently are not wise ones. Just as David leaves Agnes in order to pursue his ambition to become a writer, Dicey distances herself from Jeff and focuses all of her energies on becoming a boat builder. There are multiple references to literature throughout the Tillerman saga, primarily due to Dicey’s brother James, who is the studious one of the four Tillerman children. In *Sons from Afar*, the novel in which James plays the largest role, he struggles to discover/establish his own identity, in large part through his attempt to learn about his father, who left the family when James was a young child. In this novel, we find allusions to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet*; Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*;

Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*; and Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*—all woven carefully into the plot. However, *Sons from Afar* does not meet *David and Jonathan* when it comes to erudition. In the latter, the reader encounters lines of poetry by Emily Dickinson (although not quoted precisely, as is occasionally, and deliberately, Jon's wont) Keats, Noyes, Emerson, T.S. Eliot, and MacLeish; Latin and Italian quotations; references to the *Talmud*; oblique references to Shakespearean characters; and direct references to works by Jane Austen, Camus, Kafka, Kipling, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Plutarch, Chekhov, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Thurber, and Hemingway.

Sometimes, a specific piece will serve as a controlling metaphor for an entire novel. This is the case in *Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers*, a line taken directly from the poem "Cool Tombs." In that poem, Sandburg writes of Lincoln, Grant, and Pocahontas and notes that they will remember nothing of their lives "in the dust, in the cool tombs." In Voigt's novel, Niki and Ann's roommate, Hildy, is killed, and Niki says, "Why bother? It all comes to the same thing at the end. We all die" (176). Ann rejects this view. In his last stanza, Sandburg proposes love as, perhaps, the one meaningful thing we have to sustain us in life; Ann opts for living well and striving for excellence. In either case, the key is that, as Miss Dennis sums up near the end of the novel, "We go on in the hope that [what we do in life] does matter" (185).

I should note here that Voigt does not confine her literary references only to the "Great Books written by dead white men." Although her later novels are more liberally populated with the names of television programs, movies, and pop icons than with literary references, the last are still to be found. In addition to Dickens and Shakespeare in *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, the reader also encounters Emily Dickinson and Judy Blume. In *Bad Girls*, Mikey has just finished the latest book by Virginia Hamilton, and Althea, from *The Vandemark Mummy*, is a self-taught expert on Sappho.

## Classical Mythology

Egyptian mythology undergirds *The Vandemark Mummy*, but generally Voigt employs classical Greek and Roman myths as touchstones. On its surface, the

most obvious use of such a mythological model among Voigt's novels is *Orfe*, based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In this novel, the genders have been reversed, i.e., Orfe is the singer who attempts to save Yuri, the man she loves—in this case from his dependence on drugs. Directly after their wedding, Yuri is given a piece of cake laced with drugs and follows some old "friends" back to their house. Although Orfe goes to the house in an attempt to save him, he does not follow her out. Like Orpheus, she dies, broken-hearted. This myth is used more subtly in other Voigt novels, as music frequently is a character's way of attracting, comforting, and even retaining strangers. In *A Solitary Blue*, for example, Jeff is unable to gain Dicey's attention until he begins playing a song on his guitar. She turns in his direction, seeming to see him for the first time, "as if the music were some kind of string winding around the long legs" (221).

Another myth that appears in more than one of her novels is the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Orfe writes and performs a song named "Icarus," in which her back-up singers echo "Up, High, . . . like birds flying up into the crown of the sky . . ." (112). In *Sons from Afar*, when James is trying to convince his brother to accompany him in his search for their father, he tells Sammy the story of Daedalus, Icarus, and the feathers held together with wax. The point he tries to make to Sammy is that, if Icarus had listened to his father, he would not have tumbled from the sky. James is feeling the lack of having grown up with a father, and the narrator tells us, "Sometimes, what really scared James was the sense that he was being blown along on some wind, and he couldn't do anything about it" (14).

Quite probably, Voigt's quintessential use of a model from Greek mythology is the myth of Odysseus in *Homecoming*. On this subject, some critical writing has been done. Carol Hurst's commentary on the book is typical of that of most reviewers when she writes that the novel is an odyssey the main theme of which is family ties (1). James Henke goes into greater depth, actually pinpointing parallels between books IX, X, and XIX of *The Odyssey* and specific pages/chapters of *Homecoming*. Interestingly, once again Voigt has given the male role in the myth to a female protagonist. As Henke and Jameson point out, Dicey is a modern Odysseus.

One of the activities that I have done with students in my adolescent and young adult literature class is to follow the course of a particular protagonist through a novel comparing events as we go to the characteristics of the classic hero's quest. (Joseph Campbell writes most eloquently about the journey of the hero in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and Peter Stillman distills this information handily for teaching purposes in *Introduction to Myth*.) *Homecoming* is a natural choice for this exercise, of course, but it is also fun and instructive with less obvious selections like *The Callender Papers* or *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*. Then, of course, there is Voigt's deliberate rendering of the quest, *The Wings of a Falcon*—part three of her Kingdom series, itself a real departure from the rest of her work. Classified on most booklists as “fantasy,” “adventure,” and even “science fiction,” the four-part series is a stunning work of political and social commentary in which the question of the relative power of cultural tradition versus law predominates.

### Traditional Folk and Fairy Tales

In addition to the heroic aspects in the Kingdom books, there are two primary folk tales underlying the series—the legend of Robin Hood (presented in most detail in *Jackaroo* but reappearing throughout) and the legend of King Arthur (appearing most clearly in *The Wings of a Falcon*). Some have taken exception to Voigt's reenvisioning of these legends, but I think they have missed an important point: one of the overarching themes of the series is how much stories change in the telling over time.

Although the Kingdom series is a good place to start when looking for folk and fairy tale influences in Voigt's writing, they appear, like the literary and the mythological, throughout her work. In *Building Blocks*, for example, Brann conjures up the tale of King Arthur and Excalibur to give him the courage to “grab onto his fate” (74). Later in the novel, when he awakens from a long sleep, his father says to him, “I thought you'd sleep forever . . . like King Arthur under the hill. To be awakened in time of need” (112-13).

Fairy tale references, too, abound. Even the grim *When She Hollers* includes a reference to “Rumpelstiltskin,” as Tish struggles to put a name to what her stepfather has been doing to her. In *Orfe*, in an early exchange between Orfe and her elementary school

classmate (and, in adult life, close friend), Enny, “The Princess and the Frog” foreshadows coming events. Enny insists that if one makes a promise (as the Princess does to the frog), she is obliged to keep it. (Keeping promises is a fundamental theme in Voigt's work, from the early Tillerman saga to the most recent Bad Girls series.) Orfe argues that if *she* had a chance at “the perfect thing,” she would “promise anything to get it back” (10), and so she does when she finds a perfect love with Yuri. In her wedding vows, she promises herself, her heart and her work, to him; when she feels that he must be retrieved from the drug users' house, others try to dissuade her, but Enny understands: “If there is someone like Yuri in your life, the only sensible line of action is to do everything you can to keep him or get him back. Anything else is . . . cowardice or a failure of love” (101). Voigt uses “Hansel and Gretel” in a similar way in *Homecoming*. In the first few pages, while the Tillerman children wait in the car for their mother to return, Dicey asks James to tell a story to Sammy and Maybeth. When he cannot think of one, she suggests “Hansel and Gretel.” Soon thereafter, the reader realizes that Momma is not coming back for them, and their journey to find a home begins. (See Henke's article, mentioned earlier, for some very specific parallels, including the suggestion that Gram is the fairy tale's Wicked Witch.) Two recurring fairy tales for Voigt are “Snow White” and “Beauty and the Beast.” Mina (a “colored” character in the Tillerman books) is cast as the wicked witch in “Snow White.” In *Tree by Leaf*, Clothilde recalls the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” as she ponders a way to help her father, who has returned from World War I frighteningly disfigured, rejoin the family in the main house.

### Recommendations for Using Voigt's Novels in the Classroom

Cynthia Voigt's literary skill in “weaving modern realism in [familiar] archetypal patterns” (Jameson 3) results in characters and stories that abide in readers' memories. Additionally, a bridge is created between YA and classic literature. Four years ago, Don Gallo wrote a thought-provoking article for the *English Journal* entitled “How Classics Create an Aliterate Society.” In that article, he argues that the teaching of classic literature to high school students actually may

discourage them from reading and that teachers ought to use young adult literature to engage their students. Most of us who have taught or are teaching English in the secondary schools will agree that it is neither realistic nor feasible to expect that we can or will jettison the classics from our classrooms. (Even Gallo admits this at the end of his article.) However, given that Voigt's novels deal with concerns and themes of interest to adolescent and young adult readers *coupled with classic elements*, we certainly can follow Herz's (with Gallo) and Kaywell et al.'s leads and pair them with classic literature to foster and enhance students' interest in and understanding of works we likely will continue to ask them to read. Gallo writes, "Everyone knows there are easy teen novels for younger and less able readers, but there are also some superb novels in this genre that are more complex—sophisticated enough for even AP readers" (36). He offers as examples books by Robert Cormier, M.E. Kerr, Chris Crutcher, and Chris Lynch. To that list, I am adding Cynthia Voigt.

Herz and Gallo make some recommendations for pairing Voigt novels with other works treating common themes. In Kaywell's series, there are specific titles suggested, including the pairing of *Dacey's Song* with *The Awakening* (Carroll) or *Oliver Twist* (Monseau); *Homecoming* with *The Odyssey* (Ericson) or *Oliver Twist* (Monseau); *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* with *The Miracle Worker* (Kelley); *The Runner* with *Death of a Salesman* (Cline); and *A Solitary Blue* with *Our Town* (Ericson). I would like to suggest an additional seven possible pairings: *Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers* with *King Lear*; *Seventeen Against the Dealer* with *The Prince*; *The Callender Papers* with *Jane Eyre*; *Come a Stranger* with *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *The Wings of a Falcon* with *Macbeth*; *Elske* with *Antigone*; and *Sons from Afar* with *Hamlet*.

## Conclusion

In *Presenting Cynthia Voigt*, Suzanne Reid merely scratches the surface when she proffers: "The aca-

### Jaime Hylton spoke with Cynthia Voigt by email on July 26, 2005

**JH:** You have made major contributions to the field of YA literature, including negotiating various genres, creating memorable characters, and dealing with serious life issues. You have received popular recognition and won critical awards. What are your writing goals at this point? Are there new/different things you still aspire to do?

**CV:** There are always new, different things I want to take a shot at. How much wisdom there is in that desire, I don't know. My job, as I see it, is to figure out how to get my best work out of myself . . . or, at least, something I think is my best work. For me, not doing the same things results in better thinking and writing. When I was working on the Tillerman books, for example, I alternated them with non-Tillerman efforts. To stay fresher.

**JH:** The theme of personal integrity—by which I mean knowing oneself, living up to one's responsibilities, and honoring one's word—runs through

your YA novels. When you are working on a book, which is more important to you—imparting values or telling a good story? Or is there something else that matters even more?

**CV:** Actually, while I hope for a good story (as Aristotle said, plot is the most difficult thing), what I am aiming for in writing is the same as in teaching. I want to raise questions. I used to tell my students, "We are in No Right Answer mode. There are educated guesses and defensible theories, i.e., there are ways to examine and prove one's ideas." I just wanted to ask the questions that got them thinking. I feel the same way about stories.

**JH:** What are you working on currently?

**CV:** I never talk about what I am currently working on (describing myself as a closet writer), but I am happy to report that the last bad girls book is due out next year. They are in 9th grade.

dem side of Voigt is evident not only in her favorable portrayal of characters with curious minds but also in her many literary allusions, ranging from Shakespeare's plays and *The Odyssey* to fairy tales like 'Hansel and Gretel,' 'Rumpelstiltskin,' and "The Frog Prince" (111). I have offered here multiple examples to show that, in her use of allegory, allusion, mythology, and tale, Voigt's academic side in fact pervades her adolescent and YA novels. It is this quality that makes Cynthia Voigt, as Ken Donelson told Jim Blasingame in a 2003 interview, one of a handful of writers who "have provided us with books, some year after year, that are always fresh and always significant" (605).

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