Lucie and the Beanstalk: The Transformational Power of Fantasy in Sylvia Cassedy's *Lucie Babbidge's House*

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In *Lucie Babbidge's House*, Sylvia Cassedy tells the story of a lonely, isolated girl whose life alternates between her schoolroom, where she is bullied by her teacher and her classmates, and her seemingly ideal home life, where everyone praises and encourages her. Slowly, however, the reader discovers that the school is actually an orphanage and that the ideal home is a dollhouse, which Lucie uses to recreate the family she has lost. The fantasy life Lucie leads through the dollhouse becomes eerily enmeshed with the real life of an English girl who is corresponding with Lucie. By interacting with the dolls and the English correspondent, Lucie eventually begins to deal with the trauma of losing her parents. Cassedy uses fantasy, built on the well-known tale of Jack and the Beanstalk, to help Lucie come to terms with her traumatic grief and begin the healing process.

An alert reader can follow the clues Cassedy has scattered throughout the novel to determine that Lucie has been orphaned for about six years. We are told that Lucie's last memory of her parents occurred before she was of school age. At one point she draws a picture of a gray sky at dusk that is clearly linked to this memory, and she tells her teacher that this is a sky from six years ago. Since she is now eleven, she has spent all her school years at Norwood Hall.

Despite living with most of the same girls all this time, she has no friends at all; she is, in fact, the class scapegoat. Miss Pimm, the teacher, picks on Lucie regularly and allows the other children to bully her in class. Lucie is withdrawn, isolated, uninvolved. She is haunted by memories of her final day with her parents, a beach holiday. A modern psychologist might conclude that Lucie is suffering from childhood traumatic grief, a new label for a condition that combines complex grief and elements of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to Elissa J. Brown, one of the primary researchers in this area, "*Childhood traumatic grief* (CTG), an emerging term in the literature, is intended to capture the experience of children following the death of a loved one in circumstances that are considered to be objectively or subjectively traumatic" (Brown, Pearlman, and Goodman 187). Brown and others have been studying children who lost parents in 9/11 in order to further define the condition and determine proper treatment for it.

Children suffering from CTG are so overwhelmed by the trauma of a loved one's death that they are unable to accomplish the normal grieving tasks: accepting the death, coping with painful emotions, adjusting to changes in their lives, developing other relationships to help them cope with the loss, joining in life-affirming activities, remembering the dead person appropriately, coming to an understanding of the person's death, and continuing through normal developmental stages (Brown and Goodman 249). Instead of going through these grieving tasks, a child with CTG is frozen by the trauma, thus postponing and prolonging the grief process. Although Lucie lost her parents six years ago, she has not yet processed the grief.

Lucie meets most of the criteria for CTG. These include the posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms of reexperiencing, avoidance, and arousal, as well as a yearning for the deceased, severe depression, behavioral problems, and deficits in social skills (Brown, Pearlman, and Goodman 187). Lucie's intrusive memories of her last day with her parents constitute reexperiencing, as do her recreations of family life through the dolls: she names the girl doll "Lucie" and gives the doll family her own surname, "Babbidge." Ever since Lucie discovered the dollhouse two years earlier, her imaginative play has been built on her reading—most of the dolls speak and act like the characters in the current book Miss Pimm is reading to the class. By the end of the novel, however, Lucie has begun to base her play on her real memories of her parents, thus combining her two modes of reexperiencing. Lucie's complete physical collapse when the other girls steal the dolls (in effect, causing her to lose her family again) is another indication of reexperiencing the original trauma.

The second PTSD symptom, avoidance, is her primary coping mechanism in class, where she shows no interest in any activities and feels detached from the other girls and emotionally numb. She does not cry or fight back when they poke her with a stick, call her names, or make fun of her but remains passive and emotionally unaffected. She avoids interactions with other people; indeed, when forced to write a letter to a "personage," she chooses to write to the original owner of the dollhouse because she knows that a girl who scratched "1885" on the back of the house must be dead by now and, therefore, unable to write back. When that owner's descendant does write back—multiple times—Lucie has no desire or intention to respond.

Lucie exhibits other symptoms of CTG as well. Arousal includes difficulty concentrating and hypervigilance: Lucie is incapable of concentrating in class and hypervigilant about the safety of her dolls. Some psychologists include anger, aggression, irritability, guilt, and phobias as criteria for CTG (none of which are noticeably present in Lucie), but no consensus has yet been reached about a complete description of this condition. One element that distinguishes CTG from other kinds of grief is that children have no control over their lives. They experience what David Crenshaw calls "disenfranchised grief": "Not only does the child not receive recognition, support, or facilitation of his grief, but also there is no social sanction for feeling a loss in the first place" (241).

Lucie's grief is clearly disenfranchised: she is only one of many girls in the orphanage, and none of them talk about the loss of their parents or are encouraged to do so by the adults in their lives. Lucie has also suffered a number of secondary losses, as psychiatrists call the collateral damage resulting from the loss of parents: the changes that follow, "such as loss of friends, a familiar neighborhood, bedroom, school, and perhaps routine" (Mahon 301). These secondary losses also need to be grieved, and the primary loss needs to be regrieved as a child attains new developmental levels (298). Although Lucie survived the train accident that killed her parents, she has not been able to accomplish the normal grieving tasks. However, Delia Hornsby Booth's letters, linked to Lucie's doll family by some kind of sympathetic magic, help Lucie reconnect with life.

Several critics who have written about *Lucie Babbidge's House* have stated that it is not really a fantasy. Christine McDonnell claims that none of Cassedy's books are fantasies; that the fantasy exists only in the child protagonists' imaginations (101). McDonnell attributes the

healing power in Cassedy's works to the child's imagination rather than to fantasy. Virginia Wolf apparently agrees, suggesting that Lucie's English pen pal is imaginary and that imaginative play is the source of healing (54). Cassedy's *Something about the Author* entry concludes that *Lucie Babbidge's House* "stands as Sylvia Cassedy's most eloquent meditation on the healing power of children's imaginative play" (28).

All of these writers comment on Cassedy's ability to blur the border between fantasy and reality but deny any actual fantasy elements in the novel. While acknowledging that play does have healing power—it is, in fact, an element in the therapeutic treatment of CTG—I propose that play is not the main source of healing in this novel, but rather that true fantasy brings Lucie back to life. Lucie's imagination provides an imitation of life for her dolls, but Delia Hornsby Booth cannot be a figment of her imagination unless her Norwood Hall classroom is also imaginary. Of course, from our perspective, the entire novel is imaginary, but within the imaginary world Cassedy has created, Norwood Hall represents Lucie's reality, while the dollhouse provides a refuge for imaginative play.

Since Lucie's initial letter to Delia is part of a class assignment, and Delia's letters are always delivered through Miss Pimm during class, Delia is associated with Lucie's real life. Her letters arrive in real envelopes with British stamps on them. When the activities of the dollhouse begin to be reflected in Delia's life, the novel becomes true fantasy. The dolls do not actually come to life, but everything that happens to them almost immediately happens to Delia's family in England. At one point, Lucie experiments by breaking her maid doll's arm, and, sure enough, Delia's next letter reports that Francy the maid has broken her arm. When Lucie gives her doll family a new baby, Delia's mother has a new baby.

Like play, fantasy has power to heal. As Margaret and Michael Rustin say, it provides "resonant symbolic equivalences for experiences of emotional transition" for children (65). One reason why I see fantasy as the healing process in this book (rather than imaginative play) is that Lucie has been indulging in imaginative play with the dollhouse for two years without any noticeable healing, but as soon as the magical link between the dolls and Delia's family begins, Lucie's healing process also begins.

The fantasy most familiar to children tends to be fairy tales. Donald Haase writes that fairy tales operate as interpretive devices for children, helping them to understand traumatic events in their lives. Fairy tales constitute part of the child's emotional survival strategy: "the ambiguous spaces of fairy tales are used by children to map their own geographical landscape under fire and to project onto that landscape a reconstituted home" (362). Not surprisingly then, Cassedy casts Lucie's story as a retelling of a fairy tale, "Jack and the Beanstalk." References to this fairy tale are scattered throughout the novel.

In a study of the structure of "Jack and the Beanstalk," Christine Goldberg states, "Since the beanstalk appears at the beginning and at the end of Jack's adventures, it makes a frame for the events in the center of the tale" (22). Similarly, the first and last chapters of *Lucie Babbidge's House* are about beans and beanstalks. The novel opens with a classroom botany lesson and Miss Pimm telling the girls the beans they are about to plant are magic beans. When she asks the class what makes the beans magic, one of the girls guesses that they will grow into a beanstalk with a

house and a giant on top. Even though Miss Pimm dismisses such fantasy, the reader is obviously supposed to make the connection to the fairy tale. Miss Pimm says the beans will result in two miracles: one will be the creation of a jungle in the classroom and the other will be a surprise.

The surprise, presented in the final chapter of the book, is the creation of new life when the beanstalks die and produce more beans. The beans are a recurring element throughout the story, both in the classroom and in Lucie's private play, in which she transforms her bean into a new baby for her doll family. When Miss Pimm discovers that Lucie did not plant her bean as directed, the other girls joke that Lucie swallowed the bean and a beanstalk will grow out of her head with a giant on top. Such recurring allusions to the fairy tale are not accidental: Cassedy wants the reader to connect the tale to Lucie's story.

At the surface level of the fairy tale retelling, Lucie plays the role of Jack. According to Goldberg, the hero of "Jack and the Beanstalk" is always "poor and unpromising" (15). In the *School Library Journal* review of *Lucie Babbidge's House*, Ellen Fader notes that Cassedy makes "the extremely literate and imaginative Lucie appear dull and stupid in the company of her insensitive teacher and horrid classmates" (272). Lucie, we are told, is clothed via the hand-me-down basket and her locker in the dorm is almost empty, thus implying poverty. One would expect poverty in an orphanage, but the other girls seem to have nicer clothes and belongings as well as an uncle or two to send occasional presents. Miss Pimm's irregular kindness lecture stresses that Lucie is less fortunate than the other girls although she does not specify in what way. Certainly Miss Pimm considers Lucie as feckless and lazy as the fairy-tale Jack. She speaks about Lucie in the third person in class: "What did Lucie fail to do?" (7). During a private conversation, she even suggests that Lucie is stupid and ugly: "You are not a gifted girl, Lucie, and your looks are plain" (71). Just as Jack's mother is furious when he trades the cow for a handful of beans, Miss Pimm gets angry at Lucie for not following instructions to plant the bean in the designated paper cup.

The main similarity between Lucie and Jack, however, is the presence of giants in their lives. Lucie's giants are not as literal as Jack's: Miss Pimm figures as the most obvious giant, but the gaping wound of Lucie's traumatic loss is an even more threatening giant. In the fairy tale, Jack hides from the giant when he visits the giant's house at the top of the beanstalk. Like Jack, Lucie has a number of hiding places, but her primary hideout is the unused storage room where she found the dollhouse. Here she hides from Miss Pimm, the other girls, and the memory of her parents' death. Whereas Jack steals valuable items from the giant, Lucie steals small things: a tack and some paper reinforcements, an old brown cloth from the chalk tray, several stamps, and a classmate's new handkerchief. All of Lucie's stolen items become dollhouse decorations. In the final scene of "Jack and the Beanstalk," Jack chops down the beanstalk and brings the giant tumbling to his death. Lucie slays Miss Pimm more figuratively, standing up to her at last and talking back to her when the teacher picks on her in the last chapter.

Despite Lucie's clear similarities to Jack, at another level of the story, Lucie herself is the giant. From the perspective of the dolls, all humans are giants, and Lucie climbs downward rather than up a beanstalk to get to her cellar hideout. By virtue of their size, giants are powerful, controlling figures. Once Lucie realizes her power over the dolls and, by sympathetic magic, her

power over Delia's family, she voluntarily chooses to give up that power. Having rescued the dolls from her classmates, she restores the dollhouse to order and then says goodbye to it:

> How long, she wondered, would it take? How long now before Delia and her family were rescued and restored to their house? How long for everything to stop being strange? For odd words to stop appearing in Delia's mouth? For Francy to stop tripping? For the piano keys to stop brightening by themselves? (232)

Rescuing the dolls, and thus indirectly Delia and her family, can easily be interpreted as a rescue fantasy of the kind associated with childhood traumatic grief (Brown *et al*. 904), but Cassedy also presents it as a real rescue. Giving up her power over the dolls frees Lucie to take power in her own life. One of the goals of therapy for CTG is to help children find their voices so that they can learn to express their grief. At the end of *Lucie Babbidge's House*, Lucie literally finds her voice, both her written voice and her spoken voice. Having avoided responding to Delia's many letters, she now writes back at length, and having spoken only in a hoarse, fuzzy whisper for six years, she stands up "straight and tall," looks Miss Pimm in the eye, and speaks "in a voice both strong and clear" (243). Like Miss Pimm's beans, Lucie experiences two miracles: she planted her bean in the dollhouse, and it transformed into something magical, and now, like the withered beanstalks, she is producing new life within herself.

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