

## Connecting with the Past: An Appreciation of Kathryn Lasky's *The Night Journey*

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According to folk belief and popular parlance, the eyes are windows onto the soul and the elderly are living links to the past. This year's Phoenix Honor Book, *The Night Journey*, commences from these common notions in presenting an exceptional story through familiar cultural patterns, thereby offering young adult readers extraordinary and deeply meaningful access to history. Two girls—one “there” in 1900 Tsarist Russia and one “here” in late twentieth-century Minnesota—come to share a gaze constructed through a narrative cord that weaves them together and draws young people in. A work that so effectively enables the past to come alive merits particular attention in light of the all-too-common tendency among contemporary youth to view history as irrelevant.

Rache, aged thirteen, is called upon every day to “make talky-talky” with her great-grandmother, Nana Sashie, whose “eyes were so pale that you could hardly guess what color they had ever been” (Lasky 2). Their inconsequential conversation bores them both until this “old old” lady (as she repeatedly calls herself, distinct from her “young old” daughter, aged seventy) suggests that it is her memories that make sitting in a rocker all day tolerable. She hastens to add that she is so old now that she is beginning to forget, and that scares her. Instructed to avoid upsetting her elderly relative, Rache struggles to distract her from the past but, “Playing Rache like a fish, [Nana Sashie] wanted to make sure that the hook was set” (5), such that the child (and by extension, through identification with her, the child reader) becomes eager to hear the story. Thus is Rache chosen as the repository for an especially significant personal narrative that must be released, given voice, and passed on, before the bearer herself can let go and “pass on.”

Real-life circumstances of this nature are frequently documented by ethnographers; for instance, Wendy Wickwire, a young, female, and non-native ethnomusicologist, was selected as the means of preserving his narrative repertoire by Harry Robinson, an elderly, Okanagan native person who had no heirs. He died shortly after seeing in print the first of two resultant books.<sup>1</sup> The 1989-91 *Living Libraries* project of the Ontario Folklife Centre bears an even closer comparison to this key aspect of the plot framework in Lasky's book.<sup>2</sup> Designed as a pilot project to demonstrate the potential for collecting accounts of settling in Ontario from occupants of seniors' homes, the *Living Libraries* fieldwork surprisingly garnered a number of unsolicited (typically tangential to the research topic) revelations of family crises and spousal abuse. There have recently been social work projects in various Western countries specifically designed to offer the elderly opportunities for such cathartic sharing of long-buried secrets. Generally, an unknown outsider is selected as a suitable vessel to receive the suppressed memory, just as I was after a presentation on family narratives at a synagogue in Toronto in the early 1990s. A woman with whom I had had no prior contact approached me, obviously driven by inner necessity, and anonymously poured out a sorry tale, never to see me again.

This verisimilitude, then, renders Nana Sashie's tale all the more appealing—albeit often unconsciously—and especially engaging for the intended audience since a child is the designated narrative heir. Beginning with a statement that her own grandparents (Rache's "great-great-great-grandma and grandpa") had been murdered (6), the old old lady lures her teenaged descendant into an extended account of her childhood in Ukraine; of prejudice and pogroms; of family and village life "there"; and of the escape she as a child of nine was instrumental in planning and even executing, so enabling Rache's family to be "here." Early in the narration (which lasts over numerous sessions), "Nana Sashie's faded eyes seemed caught in a flickering of dim memories. Stealthily, color began to seep into the ancient irises, a deep-brown flecked with twinkles and glints. Something seemed to be happening to Nana Sashie. . . . It was as if Nana Sashie were becoming Sashie, the little girl in the tintype on the mantel downstairs that Rache had seen all her life but had never really believed existed" (15). This is but one instance of the recurrent eye imagery throughout the novel, signifying Sashie's life and Rache's growing ability to "see" it for real.

Child unto child, then, the story passes as Nana Sashie reclaims young Sashie and the narrative moves forward through repeated transitions from past to present and back, or, as the dust-jacket would have it, the action "ping-pongs" from past to present. Rache increasingly identifies with and truly comes to know the young Sashie. Adroitly, Lasky forges numerous and disparate links between then and now, there and here, ensnaring the readers in a web woven between times and places. Examples include the following: the Purim story of Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai and its attendant traditions that transcend time and space (see Chapters V, X and XVI); the making of costumes for the Purim players "there" (Chapter X) and for Rache's friend, Amy, who is the unlikely lead in a school production of *Oklahoma* "here" (Chapter XI); and believably rendered conversations among Sashie's relatives often followed closely by comparable exchanges among Rache's multi-generational family. There are even segues, like the indirect reference to the folk belief (found in various traditions, including among people sharing Sashie's and Rache's Jewish heritage) that humans dare not aspire to perfection for it is attainable only by a deity. Therefore, Chapter X concludes as Sashie "deliberately began to make some of the hamentaschen [Purim cookies] look less than perfect—a messily pinched edge here and there, still tight enough to conceal the gold, but not perfect" (58), and Chapter XI begins with Rache exclaiming to her mother that Amy's costume "doesn't have to be so perfect" (59). While perhaps somewhat of an obvious ploy for the adult reader, this direct replication of the past in the present is an effective means of enabling the young, presentist reader to experience—however reluctantly or briefly—a historic gaze.

The heart of the book is captured in the most powerful of Trina Schart Hyman's emotionally expressive black-and-white illustrations: the image of Rache and Nana Sashie, their eyes locked in an electric stare, a bridge through the decades and into each other's soul, while their intertwined hands clasp the top of Sashie's family's samovar (68). Such an instance resonates with cultural veracity in that it is not at all uncommon for traditional tale tellers to make physical contact with their audience, especially at key moments in a narration; and it is quite typical for an historical object to provide a tangible

passage to the past that its very presence represents. The time portrayed in this drawing is a liminal space, a powerful period of transition and transformation, such as Victor Turner discusses in *The Ritual Process*, when the past is brought into the present but is no longer what it once was as it is handed forward into the future. So the past is transformed for Rache into what it long has been for Nana Sashie as described in an earlier conversation during which Rache's father says, "To her it's all quite real, you know. It's not just history," and his daughter responds with a noted trace of defiance, "You mean, it's family!" (54). The transformation from this evident, but intellectual knowledge to realized understanding takes place through the medium (and well-established ritual) of oral tale-telling, specifically an account of the samovar that had occupied a presence of place in Sashie's childhood home, "like a polished good soldier" (92).

Earlier that same day, Rache had discovered the object tucked amongst fabric remnants in a box that came from her grandmother's house. She knew from the outset that "This is something! Something from *then*." Her response was immediate, strong and visceral, notably indicated in a description of her eyes which "flickered in an odd way, and when she said 'then' she felt the pull backwards through time towards another reality" (61). By comparison, her mother (Leah) and grandmother (Nana Rose) react tentatively to the object, uncertain of its nature and unable to remember it to the extent of needing Rache to identify what it *is*. An appreciation of what this family relic actually *means* emerges gradually—first through the gripping story shared by an elderly lady and a teenager in the middle of the night; then later, when Rache's father gives the reconstructed samovar to his wife for her birthday; and finally when, completing the return to its function of old, it is ensconced in Nana Sashie's room so that "If people wanted a cup of tea, they had to go to her bedroom, which consequently became quite socially active" (95).

For any family, much of their personal past is connected with and not uncommonly recounted or relived around various treasured objects, rendering this focal aspect of Lasky's story something else familiar to most readers. Objects transported by immigrants from their homelands are frequently invested with particular emotion and elevated to icons representing "there," the fullness of its loss and all that was involved in the transition to "here." The recent and extraordinarily successful "My History" project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities prompted the recollection of many tales involving family treasures, stories which likewise surface in virtually any collection of immigration accounts.<sup>3</sup>

Without willing and able tellers, receptive listeners and appropriate circumstances, such pivotal and personal narratives fall from daily presence—as is obviously the case for Nana Rose and Leah—though the potential relevance of these memories is evident from Lasky's tale, which offers contemporary readers genuine insight into the experience and power of oral narration. Through their subversive nocturnal communion over the samovar piece, Rache and Sashie have achieved a new level of understanding: now Rache refers to Sashie as just that—she is no longer *Nana Sashie*, but a more intimate, first-name connection (94). The remainder of the story involves the actual account of the journey from "there" and spills out in just five short

chapters through which the modern girl demonstrates a true appreciation of her ancestors, anticipating their reactions and understanding their situations, as the old-old child notes with delight.

“There” resonates “here” for them both as connections between the two accumulate, culminating in Reuven Bloom’s music. Sashie had first recognized it in the young man who helped her family escape, and much later, a link from past to present into the future, it is the presence of her deceased husband in her last hours, his accompaniment to her dying. As she is about to release her hold on life, Sashie’s eyes are “completely colorless” (149). She does seem to have kept something from Rache—the mystery of Wolf, a tortured man with devil eyes who spirited the family from their village of Nikolayev. In her account of that time, Sashie had said Rache was “too young for that” (116), but again true to life, before dying she releases the secret in a letter that is given to Rache on her eighteenth birthday. There Sashie “wrote as if there were no interruption in the narrative” (148) revealing something she had through circumstances decades past come to understand and vowed to “never forget” (116): namely, that long before her family’s escape, Wolf had abandoned his wife and children to their deaths, only to be condemned to a tortured living death as a result. So the story closes, “time laced with the bright filaments of memory [having] linked two people at the opposite ends of life” (150).

Storytelling of a traditional nature is the means to this personal connection through time just as it is in another, much more recent work: Jackie French’s imaginative Holocaust narrative *Hitler’s Daughter*, the 2000 Australian Book of the Year for Younger Readers. This story, like Lasky’s, rests on a solid, true-to-life understanding and representation of, as well as obvious appeal to, the basic elements of children’s culture. Quite apart from their exemplary literary qualities, both works are meritorious for their demonstrated capacity to entice young readers into a past so foreign to their present.<sup>4</sup> This quality arises from the authors’ recognition and rendering of the readers’ culture, which is oral and active; where story has primacy and in which play is omnipresent while subversion is key and humor abounds; where skip-generation connections are both common and significant, and tradition is central, secrets are commonplace, and imagination triumphant.

French’s story commences with four contemporary youngsters seeking diversion while waiting for their school bus. The older of the two girls, Anna, suggests “The Story Game,” which she used to play with her grandma and in which “someone makes up a character and someone else makes up a story about them” (4). Play begins with a story for Little Tracey about a pony and various attempts at hero and action tales of interest to Mark and Ben, but a single compelling narrative soon assumes precedence—Anna’s story based upon a “what if” notion typical of children’s imaginative play, here the extraordinary question, “What if Hitler had a daughter?”

Through this unusual means, French offers access to the reality of Hitler’s Germany as well as to an appreciation of the ideas that spawned the Holocaust. Anna recounts the life and thoughts of Heidi, Hitler’s daughter who is hidden “Because she had

a birthmark . . . [a] great red splotch across her face. And one of her legs was shorter than the other, so she limped . . . just a little bit” (11). In response to questions and prompts from the other children, Anna has to explain why Heidi must live as she does, can only see “Duffi” (as she calls Hitler) on occasion and secretly, and eventually needs to escape her situation. The innocent perspective of the child narrator’s voice combined with the indignant reaction to injustice among her audience of peers reveals the historical truth and enduring, never-to-be forgotten horror of the Second World War. The graphic pictures and overwhelming statistics may be absent, but the message is clear and powerful as well as personal, told in the guise of family narrative combined with make-believe, formats that are everyday commonplaces among children today as in the past to which we so wish them to connect.

The undeniable fact that books for children are received into another culture distinct from the adult world is not always fully appreciated in preparing and evaluating material for young people. The communication of information and understanding that is, on the one hand, intended, and that, on the other hand, may actually result must always bridge considerable time barriers, obstacles that should not be, though frequently are, underestimated especially with respect to books specifically intended to instill appreciation for the nature, significance, and continuing relevance of the past. Children’s culture—what they actually live and know most fully now—offers many forms, practices, beliefs, and other artifacts that authors can address or even, with understanding and due attention to concerns of cultural appropriation, potentially utilize to develop gateways to the past. Kathryn Lasky’s *The Night Journey* provides a touchstone for works that sit well in contemporary children’s culture while providing modern youth the means to gain access to and personalize that history that produced their present.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harry Robinson, *Write It On Your Heart* (1989) and *Nature Power* (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Undertaken by Barbara Karasiuk and Natalie Maus-Fisher under my supervision as part of the extensive “Being Here: Stories of Settling in Ontario” project commissioned by the Archives of Ontario. The tapes and documentation are accessible through the Ontario Folklore-Folklife Archive (of which I am Director) at York University as well as the Archives of Ontario both located in Toronto, Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Accessible on-line at [www.myhistory.org](http://www.myhistory.org). This project was initiated by the prominent folklorist, William R. Ferris, as Chair of the NEH. Both the Web site and published materials derived from the project are widely and very successfully used in schools throughout the United States. The Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia, has an extensive collection of comparable narratives, some of which pertain to objects brought from the varied lands of origin of that country’s increasingly multicultural population. The museum’s resources are accessible through its Web site, [www.immigration.history.vic.org](http://www.immigration.history.vic.org).

<sup>4</sup> In recent years I have increasingly encountered negative reactions among my students in an introductory Childhood Culture Studies course at York University to discussions of the Holocaust owing to their perceived over-exposure to the topic: “We do the same thing every year for Holocaust Week”; “We’ve all read Anne Frank’s *Diary* already”; “We know all about that.” Such attitudes bespeak a disturbing indifference related by some students when questioned to the “awful pictures” and “unbelievable numbers” presented to them, which effectively have “turned [them] off.”

## Works Cited

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