

Leaving *White Peak Farm*

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Phoenix Award winner for 2004, Berlie Doherty's *White Peak Farm*, consists of a group of narratives bound together into a trim novel in at least four ways. These four binding factors seem to be 1) a pastoral love of place, 2) a sense of familial heritage, 3) a strong first person voice, and, ironically, or at least oxymoronicly, 4) an anti-pastoral centrifugal force. Yes, from first to almost last, people are leaving White Peak Farm—not only are incomers being thrust out, but native inhabitants are driven to leave on their life journeys by an internal, outward thrust. Such internal drives towards “away” rather than “home,” according to Christopher Clausen's categorizations in “Home and Away in Children's Fiction,” are characteristic not of children's novels, but of adolescent and adult fiction.

I will return to the last proposition as well as the overriding question of who will go and who will stay at White Peak Farm. However, I prefer to examine these binding narrative characteristics in the order in which I have listed them, starting with the most obvious: the love of the rural landscape described in the first paragraph—the “soft folding hills” (3) and sheep-sheltering dales of Derbyshire, England—a landscape presumably inhabited by human beings since pre-historic times, as the burial mounds of the so-called Time Field demonstrate.

As Doherty presents Derbyshire through the voiced consciousness of Jeannie Tanner, her retrospective narrator, this rural landscape, although beautiful, is neither romanticized nor surrounded by a nostalgic aura. True, Doherty's own attraction to the Derbyshire landscape, which is not *her* native ground, comes through in her descriptive elegance.¹ Yet, during the composition of this work, which first appeared in part and piecemeal on Radio Sheffield, Doherty spoke to a number of Derbyshire natives, mainly her students. Their experiences convinced her that to farm this ancient land in mid-land England is an all consuming and not always fulfilling task for every person born there.² The unscheduled and back breaking labor required is not done by “invisible hands,” as in the literary pastoral tradition, but by men, women, and children. Accidents are frequent and not just among reckless daytrippers ascending the cliffs but among experienced farmers, as Jeannie's father's crippling fall beneath the tractor demonstrates. Then many farm wives and children are called upon to cope in terrifying and near defeating circumstances, such as the windstorm that tears the roof off the Tanners' lambing shed. This contribution of all its members is shown as essential even in a family like the Tanners, where it goes unacknowledged by Jeannie's morose father, committed to what he conceives as an ancient patriarchal creed. The grounding of this narrative on a working farm subject to disaster, while pastoral in its admiration for the rural landscape, even to a near mystical sense of ancient habitation, ultimately contributes to an anti-pastoral thrust in the narrative and to the characters' centrifugal course of behavior.

¹ A Derbyshire farm was to be in Doherty's future, not her past, as she notes on her website.

² See Doherty's website, www.berliedoherty.com/novelsf.

Second in my list of the novel's binding factors is the question of familial inheritance. Our attention is explicitly drawn to the patriarchal aspects of this family, if not this entire farming community, by John Tanner's close relationship to Martin, his first-born, only son, whom he fully expects to inherit the farm alone, although, as the farmer frequently notes, in Jeannie's jealous hearing, ". . .not till I'm good and ready, mind. Not before!" (46). The burden of the patriarchy implied in this teasing tone, at which Martin laughs at first, weighs not on females alone. As we come to see, Jeannie may well, consciously or unconsciously, have undermined the close relationship between father and son by encouraging Martin to develop his artistic nature. Nevertheless, Father Tanner's eventual violent reaction to his son's leaving home for further study initiates not the first, but certainly the most vital—if not ultimately irreparable—loss to White Peak Farm.

Certainly Martin's leaving White Peak Farm exacerbates the father's prejudices. The uselessness of all the female children in their father's eyes continues to be only too apparent to Jeannie, who strongly resents his unfairness to her and her older sister, Kathleen, sisters who have also done a share of the work. She also abhors his neglect of their youngest sister, Marion, and his exploitation of her mother's forbearance with his ill-humor. Seen through Jeannie's sharp eyes, John Tanner emerges as a man whose best characteristics can only be brought out by babies, animals, and the helpless injured—not a terrible if limited list of recipients, of course. However, he is still the man who shares a strain of cruelty with his only son. Frankly, through most of this narrative, Patriarch John Tanner appears to be the man most likely to become the single living human inhabitant left on White Peak Farm.

Not as explicitly articulated by Jeannie in her adolescent resentments is a line of inheritance through the females, clearly a leitmotif in the novel, beginning with the initial chapter, entitled "Gran." Indeed, I would say one of the most attractive aspects of this prizewinning novel is its matriarchal recognition, which balances out its patriarchal disharmonies. Gran, the maternal grandparent, isn't strictly an inhabitant of White Peak Farm, but lives in her own cottage in the village, which may have been inherited from the mother she came home permanently to nurse after only one year at Oxford College. Of her grandchildren, Jeannie is Gran's chosen heir, not of the cottage but of the academic bent that Gran did not have a chance to develop and which Marge, Jeannie's mother, did not share. When we meet her, frail, elderly Gran has announced her intention to sell her cottage and go to India as a missionary. Under this guise she distributes her worldly goods—among them her unopened box of school books to Jeannie. Gran also admonishes Jeannie not to waste her life as Gran clearly thinks she herself has done by giving up her education—a powerful feminist message that goes against the example of a settled family life in Derbyshire.

Sadly, we learn at the end of Gran's gala farewell party—really her funeral in advance—that she is going off to a hospice near Sheffield to be cared for during her terminal illness. This first chapter is an odd and intriguing introduction to the theme of leaving White Peak Farm, for it suggests that for a female to remain in this area, to become a farm wife, (there seems little chance of inheriting the familial farm itself) is unlikely to be fulfilling for a young woman like Jeannie, who may have other opportunities. Jeannie, for the time being, shares with her brother her insight into other opportunities. Her helping Martin to leave his patriarchal inheritance in

order to become an artist as well as a farmer is an ironical use of her maternal inheritance.

The maternal inheritance does not stop with Gran, however. The matriarchy includes Aunt Jessie, Gran's sister, who lives independently in another nearby cottage demonstrating her own artistic skill (perhaps passed on to Martin?) and her contentment in being a spinster, preserving only the stuffed fox left from her taxidermist fiancé, with whom she decided she could not live. After Gran's death Jessie's loneliness causes her to take in an outsider, a woman lodger, Winifred. One of the fascinating chapters in this book depicts the lodger's obsessive assimilation into Jessie's life and Jessie's final casting out of Winifred. In the end, Jessie plays an important part in helping Kathleen's marriage to Alec Baxter bear fruit for the whole family, making the maternal inheritance work for another of the Tanner daughters.

Marge Tanner, Jeannie's mother, too is a fiercely independent woman when it comes to everyone except her husband. She has a steely strength brought out by his disability. Marge's abilities as a farm wife go, however, most clearly to Kathleen, who in a Romeo and Juliet turn, has run off to marry the boy in the next farm, son of Father Tanner's perceived enemy, Boy Baxter. After Gran, Kathleen is the second to leave White Peak Farm. And Marge's undeveloped musical talents go to the third daughter, Marion, who may well, unlike her mother, use them to leave White Peak Farm in the future. Part of the suspense of the book in terms of Jeannie, not to be decided until near the end, is whether she, tested by her father's illness and showing herself able to work beside her mother, will settle for that possibility: to become her father's anathema, a woman farmer, or, more orthodoxly, a farmer's wife. In any case, her paternal heritage makes leaving White Peak Farm inevitable; her maternal heritage gives her more choices beyond that.

One other curious note in terms of maternal heritage involves jewelry. Gran's jewelry has been left to Kathleen, who thinks such a gift is unfair to Jeannie, when measured against the old box of books. Although Jeannie accepts the books as a kind of trust and does not desire Gran's jewelry per se, a piece of jewelry plays a role elsewhere in demonstrating another level of maternal heritage. Feeling rebellious, Jeannie assists a young intruder in digging up a burial mound in Time Field. When she finds and holds in her hand an ancient brooch, it becomes a symbol of her own semi-mystical ties to this land: whatever her father's patriarchal claims, this land is also a matriarchal heritage writ large. In returning the brooch to its resting place, Jeannie accepts the responsibility of holding in trust *this* inheritance as well, whatever she decides to do with Gran's books.

A third binding characteristic, I claim, is Jeannie's strong narrative voice. If I examine the chapters individually, I discern certain characteristics of Jeannie's voice that might be attributed to these stories being written for reading on radio in near their present form.³ One of these is the fact that much of the action is recorded without comment; Jeannie's voice is not continually intrusive, and Jeannie's understanding of events is withheld until the end of each chapter, or even beyond, despite periodic revelations, such as the true nature of Gran's leave taking. This is true even though the point of view is ostensibly retrospective, revealing the past, not the dramatic present. The retention of suspense, that almost O'Henry twist at the end of each

³ I was able to question Doherty about this in person. The chapters initially broadcast were not "dramatized" with many voices but were read by one person.

of the chapters, might have made this novel seem episodic if other factors didn't support the intertwining of many concerns from story to story.

Chief among these concerns is Jeannie's adolescent development as played out in her relationships with each of the family members, particularly her mother and father. This narrative begins when Jeannie is fourteen, and its protagonist shares at least one characteristic of the protagonist of the *bildungsroman*: the drive to decipher the secrets of the family romance. Jeannie observes the fraught relationship between her mother and father almost obsessively. In order to understand it, she and the reader need to put the pieces together over a period of time: her mother's confession of having once had the chance to marry Boy Baxter, the easiness of their household when the father is in the hospital and they are assisted by the hunchbacked Wilby Hodge, her mother's pleasure at going to the village dance without her crippled husband, her mother's dancing with her crippled father as Jeannie spies on them. The unspoken primal sexuality of that secret dancing scene becomes an undercurrent in Jeannie's developing relationship with farmer Col Stephens.

All these factors contribute not only to the adolescent girl's understanding of the strength of shared sexuality in binding her mother to White Peak Farm, but threaten to cause Jeannie to make the same decision her mother and Kathleen did. Her initial solution to the conflict she feels is to leave White Peak Farm only to move down the block, so to speak, just as Kathleen did—thus wasting her life in Gran's terms.

Doherty's decision to minimize the retrospective comment in Jeannie's observant voice keeps the suspense going not only in the individual chapters but throughout the novel as to whether first Jeannie's mother will leave her father, and then whether Jeannie will abandon her plans to go to Oxford and settle down on a farm similar to White Peak. Doherty so effectively depicts that drive to settle and have babies—that drive not to leave and separate but stay rampant in adolescent girls—that I could only breathe a sigh of relief at the unfolding of the penultimate chapter. True, it had a telltale title, "Leaving Home," but I despaired for the Jeannie who was prepared to lie to Col, to tell him she has flunked her entrance exams to Oxford. Although Col has throughout told her, "You're too clever, that's your trouble" (90), I had to admire him, for first applying to an agricultural college in Oxford and, after having been accepted, then responding to her lie by telling it like it was: "Of course I'll go. You wouldn't want me to do anything else, would you? I've got my own future to think of now, Jeannie. And you've got yours" (92).

Col's pragmatic, anti-romantic stance provides the last centrifugal turn of this novel. Even a man as wedded to the land as Col sees his future as no pastoral idyll, shared by a young love but as one for which he needs to train himself in modern farming methods.

In the last chapter, "Reunion," Jeannie returns to White Peak farm after a term at Oxford. Unlike Gran, she will not be giving up her education to help out at home. All seem to be doing well without her. Dangling threads of plot will be tied up, although not in expected ways. The whole family is gathered for Christmas, including Kathleen and her husband, as well as Martin, who is prepared to take over his father's farm only when he is "good and ready." The mellowing of the father is seen in his working the farm side by side with his wife—and his acceptance of

Alec Baxter's help until Martin is ready to return. Jessie provides a place, vacated by Winifred, for Kathleen and Alec to live and to have their first baby without crowding into either the Baxters' or White Peak Farm.

The note of sadness Jeannie sounds in describing her return and her temporary reunion with the place and people of her childhood is in many ways typical of the end of the novel of adolescence I perceive this book to be. No matter how often she returns to it, White Peak Farm is no longer home, and the future is uncertain for Jeannie. Doherty gives Jeannie intellect but no special artistic talents—she is neither a graphic artist like her brother nor a singer like her younger sister. The Welsh gypsy who has called Gran “a writing lady,” Doherty explains elsewhere, has come to Doherty herself, but she doesn't give that prophecy to Jeannie.⁴ I admire Doherty's subtle feminism in showing how uncertain the process of leaving White Peak Farm is for a young woman, how easy it would be to fall back on the ties that bind her to that place and any prospect of love and marriage it might hold—even with a mentally disturbed mother-in-law like Colin's mother. However, the romance in the ending is the lot of the middle-aged Marge and John Tanner, finding their love as the other generations leave them. Jeannie, our protagonist, gives us no hint of what will sustain her in the future except pastoral visions and the knowledge that people can change and grow, to find themselves in many different ways. That is a secret worth knowing for Jeannie and the young readers of Doherty's *White Peak Farm*.

⁴ See Doherty's website.

Works Cited

- Clausen, Christopher. "Home and Away in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature* 10, 1982: 141-52.
- Doherty, Berlie. *White Peak Farm*. London: Methuen, 1984.