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A Small Gardener Scripts Her Own Life

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A Small Gardener Scripts Her Own Life

A psychotherapist heals a traumatized child, in part, by enabling the child to transform raw experience into a healthy narrative. I take my understanding of “traumatized” from psychiatrist Pedro Boschan, who explains “that something is ‘traumatic’ not because of the intensity of the perception or the content of the representation, but in the inability for transforming the event to something ‘psychical’” (30).¹ The way such transforming might happen intrigues me. As an English professor who specializes in Children’s Literature, I am drawn to the wisdom of psychotherapy manifested in the narrative art of picture books.¹ I will present how the separate narrative art of illustrator David Small and author Sarah Stewart simulates the wisdom of psychotherapy in their 1997 Caldecott honor picture book *The Gardener*. Small’s pictures portray that Lydia Grace feels overwhelmed, while Stewart’s text conveys, with a first-person narrative for Lydia Grace, that Lydia also feels confident. Reading these double narratives, we observe Lydia Grace negotiate her bewilderment by telling her own story.²

From the start, I wish to qualify that the bewilderment Lydia Grace seeks to master is not “traumatic” in the clinical sense. Her experience is not on the magnitude of death, abuse, or egregious neglect. Nevertheless, the opening conflict in *The Gardener* is the most bewildering

¹In therapy with traumatized children, even more so than with traumatized adults, children have a greater tendency to see themselves as powerless. “Because of the immaturity of the ego,” notes Harold Blum in 2007, “children are more susceptible to trauma and require greater support from sustaining objects with whom they identify in order to recover from the traumatic experience with new mastery and adaptation” (64).

²For lay persons such as myself, exquisite picture books offer adults and children alike one of the most pleasurable forms of bibliotherapy in terms of relating healthily and humanly to the world and to each other. This art form offers the rare opportunity for “[p]arents and caregivers . . . to prize the intimate tactile experience of holding an illustrated book in hand while perching a young child on their lap, the adult and child basking together in the magical yet familiar glow of a good story shared” (Marcus 6).

experience she has ever faced. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression, Lydia Grace, presumably 8 or 9 years old, is sent from her country home with her grandmother and parents to live with her city uncle, whom she's never met. It is clear that living with her Uncle Jim is temporary; she's to live with her uncle until her father finds work, which takes her father a whole year. Lydia Grace appears well adjusted, yet it is the art of the picture book that enables us to understand her experience as her story of crisis.ⁱⁱⁱ To understand how reading *The Gardener* simulates a relational process of therapy, let's first see how the pictures and words work against each other in a dissonant, dynamic process of storytelling.

In the Caldecott tradition of picture books, for which *The Gardener* received its honor, illustrations should neither merely decorate nor merely duplicate the text. Rather, illustrations should bear mutual responsibility with words for telling the story, even by contradicting the words.³ In his 1964 Caldecott Medal acceptance speech for *Where the Wild Things Are*, the late Maurice Sendak called Caldecott's quality "contrapuntal," likening the relationship between the words and pictures to the point and counterpoint of a fugue (*Caldecott* 146). As in *Where the Wild Things Are*, other picture book illustrators have manipulated this contrapuntal effect. For example, John Burningham employs this "contrapuntal" quality in *Come away from the water, Shirley!*, showing the disconnect between the world of the parents and the world of their daughter.⁴ On the left side of the page, we hear the parents' kibitzing, "Careful where you're throwing those stones. You might hit

³It is this artistic task of Caldecott's picture books which informs the present-day award named for Randolph Caldecott (1846-86). Serendipitously, the Caldecott Medal was conceived by the American Library Association in the same era that Stewart and Small set Lydia Grace's story: "during the 1930s as the nation was recovering from the Great Depression" (Marcus 1). That coincidence attests to the fact, I think, that the compelling art form of the picture book can both inspire and transform its readers. Perhaps, both the acknowledgement and request for high quality in children's book illustration was more a case of Yankee competitiveness with European betters than a need for hope in dire times. Children's book critic Leonard Marcus qualifies that "[a]s America's industrial might grew, so did the conviction that the time had come for American illustrators to rise to the challenge of matching, or even surpassing, the high standard set by artists from across the Atlantic. It was with this ambitious goal in mind that in 1937 the American Library Association established a prize for illustration and named it the Randolph Caldecott Medal after the greatest of England's picture-book masters" (1-2).

someone”; on the right side, we *see* Shirley throwing herself, head first, into the sea, Jolly Roger and dirty dog in tow.

5 With less slap stick, Stewart and Small employ this contrapuntal quality in *The Gardener* by picturing simultaneously the fear and optimism of Lydia Grace, scripting her own life. The ebullient tone of Lydia Grace’s words does not jibe with the somber tone of their illustrations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the most emphatic pictures of the book—the three double spreads. 6 In the first double spread, the book’s darkest picture, Lydia Grace stands dwarfed in a corner by the cavernous train station. Only she is defined by definite line and bright color of blue dress, red hair, green hat. All other human figures are distant shadows, creating an impersonal, unwelcoming response to her arrival in the city. In fact, Small renders the other human figures so blurred that Lydia Grace appears utterly alone. When we would expect feelings of abandonment or paralyzing fear expressed in the corresponding text, Lydia Grace writes on the following page with exuberance.

7 Her letter reads,

September 5, 1935

Dear Mama, Papa, and Grandma,
I’m so excited!!!
There are window boxes here! They
look as if they’ve been waiting for me, so now
we’ll both wait for spring.
And, Grandma, the sun shines down
on the corner where I’ll live and work.
Love to all,
Lydia Grace

P. S. Uncle Jim doesn’t smile.

This letter accompanies Lydia Grace’s new scene in the heart of the city, where brick roads have replaced green pastures.

8 *The Gardener's* second most sobering, monochromatic double spread is of Uncle Jim's rooftop, the place Lydia calls her "secret place." Again, words and pictures do not jibe. Lydia Grace writes joyfully, "I've discovered a secret place. You can't imagine how wonderful it is." Upon turning the page, we really can't imagine it so "wonderful." Small pictures a rooftop, trashed by paint cans, pigeons, and a bathtub belly up. Once again, Small pushes Lydia Grace to the periphery of the frame, not at all holding center stage as she describes herself to be. In her letter, Lydia Grace portrays herself industriously, as "really busy." 9 Small portrays her as bedraggled, slumped-shouldered, climbing up over the edge. Seeing such a disconnect between pictures and words is not ingenious, but apparent. Thirteen years ago, when I first read this picture book alongside my own son Will, who was at the time seven, about the same age as Lydia Grace, he said, "The words are happy, but the pictures are sad" (Sonheim, 1999).

How might this picture-book art, then, relate to psychotherapy? As *The Gardener* holds simultaneously two distinct versions of Lydia Grace's experience—one pictorial, the other verbal—so also do some traumatized children simultaneously experience dissonance between an external situation and their own responses to it. Although Lydia Grace has not undergone the trauma of war or abuse, she is negotiating the crisis of going all by herself at a very young age to a place she has never been before to live under the care of an uncle who appears emotionally distant. As a young kid, Lydia Grace needs a parent figure who cares about her might. Her need might compare to the traumatized situation of an older adopted child who struggles to identify with alien adults as his parents.ⁱⁱⁱ Like Lydia Grace, the adopted child could experience external situations that contradict with subjective desires, unable to make them correspond. In negotiating just such a situation, Lydia Grace transforms herself to belong to her new place with Uncle Jim by transferring the identity she learned from her Grandmother.

Before we *bear* Lydia Grace articulate her identity, we *see* Small illustrate it. **10** As soon as we open the picture book, on the end pages, Small presents a double spread of the garden, in which Lydia Grace kneels and offers a tomato to her adoring, portly Grandma. In the illustration, we realize that Lydia Grace sees herself as her Grandma sees her—as a cherished gardener.

11 In the next double spread, Lydia Grace follows proverbially in her Grandma's footsteps. Lydia Grace emulates her Grandma, dressing, acting, and even carrying similar tool and basket. She has learned who she is by imitating her grandmother.

The developed identity of Lydia Grace is confirmed a few pages later, when she puts her own sense of self into words for Uncle Jim. **12** She writes,

Dear Uncle Jim,

I'm mailing this from the train station.

I forgot to tell you in the last letter *three*

important things that I'm too shy to say to your face:

1. I know a lot about gardening, but nothing about baking.
2. I'm anxious to learn to bake, but is there any place to plant seeds?
3. I like to be called "Lydia Grace"—just like Grandma.

Your niece,
Lydia Grace Finch

Lydia Grace perceives herself as "just like Grandma." It is this relational pattern with Grandma that Lydia Grace transfers to her Uncle Jim.

Small has the pictures suggest such a transfer. **13** Uncle Jim is the only other character in the book who is as portly and pudgy as Lydia's grandmother, her parents both being lean like Lydia. Small renders Uncle Jim in Grandma's image with a mustache. **14** As Lydia Grace copied Grandma's dress when learning to garden, when learning to bake, Lydia Grace copies Uncle Jim's uniform, wearing a white apron. By the end of the book, Lydia Grace is not only passively related, but also

dynamically *relating to* her uncle. **15** After Lydia Grace plants Uncle Jim a garden, he bakes her a cake. To demonstrate that uncle and niece now correspond, Small pictures both in blue, as he formerly pictured both grandmother and granddaughter in green.

Throughout the book, Lydia Grace works with her Grandma, then works with her Uncle Jim. This constant relationship is what enables her to see herself not as a victim of circumstance. Moreover, Lydia Grace is not trying to change herself. She is not working on herself. She is focusing on the relationship, on the work, *between* herself and her uncle. Neither she nor Uncle Jim is at fault; rather, similar to a relational process in therapy, it is the relationship between Lydia Grace and Uncle Jim that is the patient.⁴

The challenge of going to live at the mercy of an uncle whose ideas of her differ from her own is what motivates Lydia Grace to write letters, to script her own life. While Lydia Grace views herself positively, at first, Uncle Jim does not. Although she acknowledges that Uncle Jim “wants [her] to come to the city and live with [him] until things get better” at home, throughout the whole picture book, Uncle Jim never actually speaks for himself; Small’s pictures speak for him. **16** In the first picture of Lydia Grace and Uncle Jim together, he looks none too pleased. Shown paying the cabbie, he looks hot and bothered. We can assume he regards a little girl in his bachelor life, at the least, as a bit of an added expense.

As in a relational process of therapy, this first-person, epistolary narrative cannot be resolved by the heroine’s single viewpoint. Lydia Grace’s plight cannot be resolved until her antagonistic new world corresponds positively to her. To tell the story in letters is a brilliant stroke by Stewart, for writing letters is, of course, the art of corresponding. **17** As Lydia Grace writes her letters, she

⁴For this understanding, I am indebted to the article “‘Dialectical process’ and ‘constructive method’: microanalysis of relational process in an example from parent-infant psychotherapy” by Judith Woodhead.

actualizes the vision she has of herself and of Uncle Jim by creating a roof-top garden. The fact that other characters grow to share the same perception that Lydia holds of herself is demonstrated by the way the other characters begin to refer to her. On June 27th, Lydia Grace writes to her Grandmother, “They don’t call me ‘Lydia Grace’ anymore. They call me ‘the gardener.’”

Since a story delivered in letters creates the illusion that the letter-writer is her own narrator, Stewart’s narrative gives the heroine supposed control over telling her own story. Tailoring their picture book to fit its epistolary expectations, Stewart and Small handle the necessary time lapse between Lydia Grace’s having an experience and writing a letter about it also in counterpoint. In the epistolary tradition, Stewart has Lydia Grace use present tense; in the illustrations, Small renders episodes either in the past or future, the pictures depicting either what has happened before or what will happen after the letter is written.

18 A case in point is this double spread for February 12th. Writing to the moment, Lydia Grace will use the present progressive tense. She writes, “When I first arrived, Emma told me she’d show me how to knead bread if I would teach her the Latin names of all the flowers I know. Now, just half a year later, I’m kneading bread and she’s speaking Latin! More good news: We have a store cat named Otis who at this very moment is sleeping at the foot of *my* bed.” Yet, in the accompanying picture, Small does not portray the bedroom, rather he changes the setting to Uncle Jim’s bakery, suggesting either the past or future of Lydia Grace’s work in the kitchen. Through the dissonance of words and pictures, Stewart and Small create a sense of extended time, time necessary for transferring Lydia Grace’s identity to her new home.

The transferring of Lydia Grace’s identity from a gardener in the country to a gardener in the city is accompanied by Small’s emblematic transformation of the settings through color. 19 As mentioned before, the first double spread is the dark train station. In proportion and design it

overshadows the child. As you may remember, Lydia Grace introduces this scene with indomitable hope, writing, “. . . every time I doze off, I dream of gardens.” Throughout the remainder of the picture book, Small crescendos the use of colors **20** from a December scene of a sparse red and green tree **21** to his third double spread of red, green, blue, yellow, purple, and orange blossoms filling Uncle Jim’s rooftop in July. Lydia Grace has not only colored her world; she has colored Uncle Jim’s.

Small shows that the grace of this young girl can even transform the most foreboding scene in the book. **22** On the penultimate double spread, the reader turns to find the once dark train station recast in gold. Small dramatizes the theme of redemption by showing the usually undemonstrative Uncle embracing his niece, but this picture does not conclude the story of *The Gardener*.

As Lydia Grace integrates back into her former home, this time, she keeps something from Uncle Jim’s world to take with her: the “store cat named Otis.” **23** In the concluding end pages, Uncle Jim’s world continues to correspond or coincide with Lydia Grace’s former world by Small’s pairing of odd couples—the old country dog with the new city cat, little Lydia Grace holding a basketful of gardening tools with her fat Grandma losing a basketful of her letters.

Perhaps, though, the most surprising doubling implicit in this picture book is realized in retrospect. **24** Lydia Grace’s grandma in *The Gardener* and David Small’s grandmother in *Stitches* appear to have similar figures, though not similar souls. **25** Could it be that while Lydia Grace, under the positive influence of Stewart, scripts her own life, Small re-pictures his own grandmother as part of a therapeutic process? **26**

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Endnotes

ⁱ Empowering examples of young heroines righting their wrongs by writing in Young Adult novels, such as Liesel Meminger's authoring her own book in *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak and Abilene Tucker's becoming a journalist in *Moon over Manifest* (2011) by Clare Vanderpool.

ⁱⁱ The engaged reader notices that Lydia's going to live with her uncle is an emotional challenge for the little girl because *The Gardener's* pictures and words do not jibe. The illustrations give one impression and the text another. When the book first appeared in 1997 this fact was lost on two early reviewers. Critics Stephanie Zvirin and Susan P. Bloom described the illustrations as providing context for the words, much in the same way theater critics describe a set design as supporting the performance of actors. In her review for *Booklist*, Zvirin complimented the illustrations as creating an apt backdrop for the story line, describing Small's scenes as "muted backgrounds [conveying] perfectly the urban 1930s setting where most of the story takes place" (1722). Bloom gives Small a bit more credit for influencing the action of the story. She describes his "double-page spreads" as "[dramatizing] Lydia Grace's situation without any accompanying text." She also states that in places "Small controls the action with dramatic angles" (673). Yet, both Zvirin and Bloom fail to recognize how Small's illustrations concurrently narrate contradicting Stewart's text.

ⁱⁱⁱ In her 1996 article "Trauma and the Developmental Process: Excerpts from an Analysis of an Adopted Child," psychoanalyst Shlomith Cohen relates her arduous sessions with five-year-old Danny, adopted at age 3 from abusive, maladjusted parents, by well-meaning, caring adults to whom he resists forming a parental attachment. Although severe in comparison to Lydia's situation, Danny's situation parallels hers in that each child shares the basic developmental need for "being born to a caring parent, not to an environment that is alien and indifferent to one's existence" (Cohen 288). The main difference, then, is that Lydia Grace, having been born to a nurturing family is able to transfer her sense of self to the way she relates to Uncle Jim. Danny, having been neglected and abused by his first parents, is unable to relate to his adoptive parents as his parents. To adapt to his new parents, Cohen notes that Danny relates to his new parents in the way he felt he related to his biological ones. Because Danny had been treated like excrement by his first parents, during sessions with Cohen, he would defecate and urinate on the floor of her playroom, telling his story by explaining, "I am a kaka boy. I came out from the behind" (294). According to Cohen, five-year-old Danny regresses to infantile behavior in order to be a baby with his new parents, as he was with his former ones. At one point when his adoptive mother is in the playroom with him and his therapist, Danny crawls under a cave-like table and table cloth, sheds his clothes, and emerges naked to run around the room as a feral child. Cohen interpreted Danny's behavior as manifesting the conflict he felt. Cohen notes, "From the beginning Danny made it clear that he could not afford to experience himself as a needy baby who expects a mother" (293).