



Mirrors and Windows

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I Am a Camera: Photography in Literature

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"A picture is worth a thousand words," goes the old saying, yet sometimes the greatest literary truths are revealed not in pictures, but in words about pictures. A number of works for children, young adults and adults use photographs, photographic images, pictures captured on paper or film to reveal their ultimate message.

Photographs can be a powerful literary device, one which allows the author to reveal or illuminate some essential truth in his or her work. Consider the photographic process -- the aperture is opened, light is allowed in, and this light captures the image on film. A skilled photographer can play with the opening, can allow more or less light in, can even manipulate the image in the darkroom to create his or her own version of the truth, but the essence of the process, the need to allow light in, never changes.

In Kathy Stinson's young adult novel, *One Year Commencing*, twelve-year-old Al arrives in Toronto to live with her father for a year, as per a court order regarding her custody in her parents' divorce. When she arrives, Al is determined to return to her mother and friends in Alberta as soon as she can find a way to tell her father she doesn't want to live with him. But she delays, can never find the right way to tell him, or the right moment. Nevertheless, Al continues to write to her friends as if she will be back soon, or at least as if once the year is over, she will not choose to stay on longer. Over the course of the year, her father takes pictures of her, but it is not until Al helps him develop the film that she realizes how much she has changed, not only physically, but also emotionally. It is at this moment that Al discovers that she may not find the decision to return to Alberta so easy. Why? "Because -- but this was just too weird -- she was feeling pretty at home where she was." (Stinson, p. 109) As her new friend, Kim, points out, "Stuff changes." (Stinson, p. 111) Sometimes, though, we need a photograph to reveal the truth about that, to show us, like Al, the change that has taken place.

Another young adult novel by a Canadian writer uses a photograph as a central device. In Martha Brooks's *Bone Dance*, seventeen-year-old Alexandra inherits land and a cabin on the prairies from a father she has never known, whose only contact was through six brief letters. When she receives a final letter from him, one that reveals to her a great deal about her father, she opens the envelope, and out tumbles his picture. In that moment of truth, she finally stares into his face, if only in a photograph, and "(a)ll of her life as she had known it just seemed to stop." (Brooks, p. 150) The pieces of Earl McKay's life, and their ultimate importance for Alexandra, fall into place in that moment of discovery.

But is the truth about a person always revealed in a photograph? Sometimes the process itself is more important than the eventual result. In American writer Sharon Creech's novel for children, *Chasing Redbird*, Zinnia Taylor's Uncle Nate has been struck seemingly senseless with grief after the death of his wife, Aunt Jessie, the Redbird of the title. He spends his days chasing around with a camera, trying to capture the proof that he has seen her. When the film returns from being developed, his family is eager to see what is there. Zinnia's mother points out to him that the picture he has selected is merely a picture of himself, but Nate claims that it is indeed proof that he's seen Aunt Jessie, for, in his words, "Dag-blast it, *she* took the picture!" (Creech, p. 108) Zinnia tries herself to see Aunt Jessie, and takes her own set of pictures, but apart from the "flash of red" that her family insists is "a bird or a leaf", she doesn't see her. Her brother Ben and Uncle Nate, however, take this "dot of red" as proof that it's her. Zinnia discovers that the truth of this situation is not necessarily whether or not she or Uncle Nate can actually take a photograph of the elusive Redbird. Instead, the mere act of being a



photographer itself reveals the truth of the feeling that Uncle Nate and Zinnia feel for Aunt Jessie. "I kind of liked the idea," says Zinnia, "of me dashing around with a stick and a camera, chasing someone I love." (Creach, p. 252) The truth about Aunt Jessie is that they loved her, and are willing to try to show that, no matter how crazy it seems, in the act of trying to photograph her.

American Patricia MacLachlan's children's book, *Journey*, is the most complete examination of how photographs ultimately reveal the truth of a situation. In MacLachlan's book, the photographs are the means by which one can see those things that are sometimes missed in the course of daily life. Photographs capture those small, yet important moments, the ones that slip in and out of our imperfect memories like perfume. The protagonist, eleven-year-old Journey, and his sister Cat have been left with their grandparents by their mother. Journey is, as his name implies, on a quest, to discover how and why their mother could leave them as she did. He wants to deny that his mother has really left, never to return. His denial stands in direct contrast to the blunt truthfulness of his Grandfather. For example, when their mother leaves, she tells Journey she will be back. Grandfather immediately intervenes, "his voice loud in the barn." "No son," he tells Journey, "She won't be back." (MacLachlan, p.1)

But Grandfather's pictures, Grandfather's role as revealer of truth, are essential to Journey's own journey of discovery. He begins taking the pictures "in the weeks since Mama left." (MacLachlan, p.2) Many of these photographs are mundane: Grandmother reading, Grandfather himself, imperfectly executed with a timer. Grandfather's first picture of Journey reveals Journey's anger, and the very next one is a picture that Journey tells us "would startle me every time I saw it: not Grandma, her hair tied back with a piece of string, smiling slightly as if she knew the secrets of the world; not Cat, her head thrown back, laughing; but my face, staring into the camera with such fury that even in the midst of the light and the laughter the focus of the picture is me." (MacLachlan, p.6)

Journey, however, doesn't see the point of pictures: they might obliterate, or eliminate, those things on the farm he knows without having to look. They won't tell him anything his Grandfather hasn't already told him. More importantly, they won't help him remember his own father. Journey tells us of a picture of his father that was on Cat's dresser: "When I was little, I carried that picture around, trying to remember him, trying to place the picture so that the eyes would look into mine. But they never did. His face was like carved stone, not flesh and blood. And the pictures never told me the things I wanted to know. Did he think about Cat and me?" (MacLachlan, pp. 4-5)

For the most part, truth in MacLachlan's work is revealed through Grandfather as photographer. The exception to this is the photograph that Journey takes of his Grandfather with baby Emmett. Journey makes the connection between this photograph, and the memory he believes he has of his father, a memory which ends with him not being able to see the face, when he and Grandfather are in the darkroom developing pictures. All along, Journey believes he had been on his father's knee, but realizes at this moment that it was his Grandfather that he was remembering, and not his father as he previously believed. This truth only reveals itself to Journey in an image taken when he, like Grandfather, is the one holding the camera.

There is a corollary saying to "a picture is worth a thousand words". It is: "nothing lies like a picture." This second saying is most telling: if photographs can illuminate truth, then may they not also obscure it? One might think that "shedding light on a subject" should only ever lead to truth; nevertheless, photographs or images are also used to tell lies. One need only consider George Orwell's *1984*, in which all recorded information, including photographs, is continuously altered in order that it may reveal the ever-changing Truth of Big Brother and the Party.

If pictures don't always reveal truth, it may be, then, that the creator of the image has deliberately set out to obscure the truth, to create a different version of the truth, though not necessarily for the sinister reasons outlined in Orwell's work. Or, that the simple act of selecting one thing to be true results in the elimination of that which the lens cannot see. The mother of Jane Urquhart's protagonist in *The Underpainter* (a novel for adults) understood this: "...they eliminate things," she said, in explaining her edict forbidding her family to use their Kodak Brownie. "Even now," he says, "I can see the way she gestured as she spoke, her arms sweeping back and forth, conjuring the rest of the world, the world that a photograph might have obliterated, the world of the stampeding river, the world I was afraid of." Unlike his mother, the Underpainter, as the title indicates, uses his paintings to hide the world he so fears, obscuring images under layers and layers of glaze. (Urquhart, p. 21)

British author Penelope Lively, in her autobiography *Oleander, Jacaranda: A Childhood Perceived*, tells the reader about a photograph of herself and her friend Steven Hurst, a photograph which shows the two of them involved in an "elaborate game which centred on a wooden packing-case." Lively tells us



that in the photograph, they both looked "rather cross", because they resented the game being interrupted to have them pose for the picture.

"And once again there is an unnerving conflict between what is in my head and what I see in this old photograph. There, I see two quite small children and an upturned packing-case. But memory supplies something entirely different -- an impression of mature preoccupation, of significant business rudely broken into by importunate outsiders. And the packing-case is not a packing-case but a house. It has doors and windows and furnishings, smoke comes from the chimney. Outside, the buffalo roam. Or something of the kind. At any rate, I know the camera lies." (Lively, p. 57)

This conflict between the moment the photograph captures, and what really happens, is, in Lively's words, a kind of "double exposure." (Lively, p. 75) Two truths, then, existing side by side, or perhaps one hidden by the other.

This is one way in which photographs hide essential truth: the photographer, in attempting to capture the reality of a situation, cannot reach into the mind of the subject in order to understand what he or she is feeling at the moment a photograph is taken. The exception is, perhaps, candid photography, where the subject has no time to pose, to compose his or her thoughts and change what the camera might see. There is an instance of this in Anne Fine's children's book *The Tulip Touch*. Tulip is a troubled child from a troubled home, who manages to enchant many of those around her, even her friend Natalie, who knows first-hand Tulip's menacing side. The novel is Natalie's attempt to tell the story of her brief friendship with Tulip. "What were we like then, the pair of us, Tulip and Natalie?" writes Fine.

"I lift a photograph out of the box, and see us laughing. We look happy enough. But do old photos tell the truth? "Smile!" someone orders you. "I'm not wasting precious film on sour faces." And so you smile. But what's behind? You take the one Dad snapped by accident when Tulip came down the cellar steps just as he was fiddling in the dark with his camera. Suddenly the flash went off, and he caught her perfectly (if you don't count the rabbit pink eyes). She's a shadow in the arched entrance of that dark tunnel. And how does she look in that, the only one to be taken when no one was watching?

"Wary, would you say? Or something even stronger? One look at that pale and apprehensive face, and you might even think haunted. But there's something else that springs to mind. I turn the photo in my hand, and try to push the word away. But it comes back at me, time and again. I can't get rid of it. If you didn't know her better, you'd have said she looked desolate. (Fine, pp. 28-29)

Such images remind us that photographs themselves have two sides: their positive image, the one we place in our albums, and their negative, the one from which that positive is produced. Two sides, light and dark, of the same image. Two truths as well, perhaps, captured for all time.

According to the Concise Oxford dictionary, that which is true is, amongst other things, that which is "in accordance with fact or reality." But whose fact? And whose reality? As we have seen, this may very well depend on who is holding the camera, on what the photographer chooses to capture on film, or on what he or she eliminates from view. It may also depend on what image the person being photographed decides to show to the camera. And ultimately, it may be influenced by the photographs one chooses to destroy. In *Bone Dance*, Alexandra's mother has ripped up all the pictures of Alexandra's father, as has Journey's mother her family's pictures in *Journey*, perhaps as a sign that the photographs hold a truth that neither of them really wants to face. "Revelation and obscurity," the two main pursuits of Jane Urquhart's protagonist (Urquhart, p. 180), might also be considered the two main pursuits with truth, the two main human reactions to it. Either we choose to reveal truth, or have it revealed to us; or, we choose to hide it, or it is hidden from us by those who would have us remain ignorant. Ultimately, this photographic device reflects the writing process, writer as photographer, affording the reader a snapshot glimpse into the lives of the characters illuminated through the writer's words.

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