



Looking Glass Lore

Jeffrey Canton, editor

Dialogues with Dolls

by Jeffery Canton

When you're a kid and have a powerful hunger for books, you just read everything. Not only did I read my own books, I read everything -- and I mean everything -- that my younger brother and sisters were reading. I read my brother Jamie's Hardy Boys books and Jack London adventure stories and books about hockey. I read my sister Abbie's Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew books, Monica Dickens's Follyfoot series and even little Alison's picture books. Abbie and I were in competition when it came to books and reading. She was three years younger than I and she read just about everything too. Once she even stole a book that I was in the middle of reading and hid it so that neither of us could read it. We still compete, Abbie and I, even today. And it was in that spirit of "competition" that I first read Janet Lunn's *Double Spell*. If Abbie was going to read *Double Spell*, then I had to read it too.

And I just loved it. Why? In part because it was a story about that moment when past and present mysteriously and magically come together, as in Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* and Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*. I get a chill thinking about how the Toronto of the 1840s seeps out into the lives of the twin heroines of the novel through their doll, Amelia. *Double Spell* is also a great ghost story -- and Hester, the malevolent spirit who tampers with our contemporary twins, Jane and Elizabeth, is one of Lunn's most striking fictional creations. With a few deft strokes, Lunn conjures up this spiteful old spinster who craves forgiveness for a terrible mistake she made in her youth and is never able to free herself from her bitter sense of being a victim. By the close of the novel, Hester has woven the twins and the reader into her tragic history.

But I also fell in love with *Double Spell* because of a doll that my grandmother had in her basement. The doll's name was Danielle and Granny had bought her on a visit to Percé on the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec. Danielle didn't look like the other dolls that my sisters played with. She was a china doll, to begin with, and she was dressed like a voyageur with a brightly coloured Red River cap. She would casually open her big brown eyes and peer out at you from that stiff china face and, then, just as casually, she would close them. And smile. I'm sure that when she closed her eyes, she smiled. She was kept in a cupboard and was only taken out on special occasions. And whenever I saw Danielle, I thought about Amelia with her chipped china face and faded clothes in *Double Spell*.

I retain a very clear picture of *Double Spell* in my mind's eye even though it's been well over twenty years since I first read it. I still get a tingle as I walk down Yonge Street in Toronto, just south of Rosedale subway station, where there are antique stores like the one in which the twins find the doll. The black and white scratch-board cover illustration by A.M. Calder cleverly highlights the novel's ghostly theme. The front of the dust-jacket shows Jane and Elizabeth looking into the antique store window; the back cover gives a mirror image of that scene, with the doll looking out at them. The Victorian Toronto of *Double Spell* is also present in neighbourhoods like the Beach or the Annex, their brick houses trimmed with fancy gingerbread fretwork.

Lunn talks about *Double Spell* in *Writing Stories, Making Pictures: Biographies of 150 Canadian Children's Authors and Illustrators* (Canadian Children's Book Centre, 1994): "*Double Spell* was written when I got to know a pair of identical twins. I discovered that they didn't always love being twins. I'd always wanted to be a twin (in my head I was often many people) so this fascinated me -- and so the story began. As stories will do, it grew and changed, shrank, grew and changed some more. I wrote whole chapters that I couldn't use, created characters who never appeared in the final writing. It still seems strange to me that my long daydream is lodged between book covers for other people to read."



When *Double Spell*, Lunn's first book, was published in 1968 by Peter Martin and Associates, she was already known for her work as a children's book reviewer. In fact, she was for many years Canada's only children's book reviewer. *Double Spell* marked her first exploration of Canadian history. In *The Root Cellar* (1981) and *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* (1986), Lunn has delved a little deeper into the past and created powerful young adult novels that have become an integral part of the Canadian children's literature canon. In *The Republic of Childhood* (Oxford, 1975, second edition) Sheila Egoff comments, "...this is Lunn's first book and it is to be hoped that her considerable talent will blossom in another... This is a slight, somewhat flawed fantasy for younger children, yet it touches the nerve of darkness and terror and is a significant step in the development of Canadian fantasy." *The New Republic of Childhood* (Oxford, 1990) gives *Double Spell* a rather more just appraisal: "...its virtues far outweigh its faults. Lunn's concept of what can now be described as the 'new fantasy' (the intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday) was not only a first in Canada but, of its type, it carries unusual conviction."

I re-read *Double Spell* this past week and it remains for me, all these many years later, a fast-paced mystery, a suspenseful ghost story and an inventive exploration of the thin line that separates past from present. Readers who have enjoyed *The Root Cellar* would be wise to go back and read Janet Lunn's first fiction: *Double Spell* still casts a powerful spell.

Bibliographic Information:

Janet Lunn. *Double Spell*.

Toronto: Peter Martin and Associates, 1968. ; Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1986.

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(Published in the United States in 1969 as *Twin Spell*.)
