



Personal Reflections

Sue Easun, editor



Her One Reluctant Peer; A Critical Approach To Lillian H. Smith's *The Unreluctant Years*

Sue Easun

You may recall that I ended my [inaugural column](#) with the comment:

Though what I shall do about those captivating little tarts, I can't imagine.

I confess I found the word play too delicious to resist, and you can rest assured I would not be writing this column if I thought I had to exercise either refinement or restraint. (Though my Fearsome Editor may have other thoughts...) However, until I sat down with my pot of Quartermain Special Blend and a package of sesame snaps, it hadn't occurred to me that Lillian Smith herself might have been a captivating little tart! Consider the following anecdote by Margaret Johnson, one of Smith's contemporaries at the Toronto Public Library:

One of her fondest memories of her time there [at the New York Public Library] was of a group of boys who frequented the library not to borrow or read the books, but solely -- or so it seemed -- to annoy the librarian. While Lillian read aloud to a group of children, they tried in numerous ways to distract her but found that nothing succeeded. Curiosity gradually overcame their impertinence as they began to listen to the stories. Eventually they became an attentive audience, and on Lillian's departure from New York [for Toronto], they took her on a picnic to Coney Island. (Johnson, p. 4)

Now if that isn't captivating, I don't know what is!

I digress. I am here to talk about *The Unreluctant Years* which, as far as I can tell, serves as an extended rationalization of all that Smith accomplished, believed in, and fought for as a librarian and child advocate. Am I faulting her for this? Not at all. But before I embark upon what promises to be a series of essays on her magnum opus, I wish to point out upfront that (in this book at least) Smith isn't the least bit interested in self-analysis. She does not wonder, question, reconsider, second guess, regret, prophesy, or excuse; and my initial impression is of a woman for whom the past is so inextricably bound to an eternal present, it doesn't even occur to her that she might differentiate among them. Put another way, she is neither timeless nor timely. She's a time-binder.

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, a massive tome which has held court in the FIS Inforum (née Library) since before my own student days, time-binding refers to "the characteristically human activity of transmitting experience from one generation to another, especially through the use of symbols". That certainly sounds like our Lillian, if her references to children's books can be considered symbolic. For certain, as I wend my way through *The Unreluctant Years*, I have the eerie impression that I am being visited by some sort of Dickensian Christmas spirit. I'm less sure which one, and how my own life enters in.

Until I stare into the dregs of my teacup and see a future where, if I don't get to the point, I'll be hardpressed to make it through the Foreword! So let us begin.

It is always fun to find a sentence which seems as apt when last read as it was when first written:



There are many forces in our life today which tend to separate the child and the book. Yet does not this make it only more desirable and more necessary that the best efforts be made to bring them together? (xxx1)

When Smith penned these words in 1953, it is unlikely she was referring to television or computers. What then is she talking about? No answer is forthcoming, at least from this book (although I am making a mental note to do some sleuthing before next we meet.) Rather, it is assumed that the reader knows. Which may explain why it seems so apt today, now that literacy has become such a mighty battle cry. But here's where I note a subtle difference between the Smith of yesteryear and her '90s' counterpart. What the former phrases "tend to separate", the latter would declare "have [already] separated". In Smith's mind, children and books were natural partners; whatever else was going on, they certainly weren't abandoning good books on purpose. These unnamed forces are in "our" life, not theirs; and so, implies Smith, that makes it "our" responsibility to do something about it.

In each case, we are left with the question, who is "we"? Presumably, "we" are those who choose books "for the home, the school or the public library" (xxx1), which includes a fair number of people not all of whom are librarians in the professional sense: academics, parents, politicians, members of the media, to name a few. Same as now. But read more closely, and you will see that the reins are firmly held by those whose function it is to "[find] and mak[e] known the best in children's literature" (xxx2). And how many nonlibrarians can do that?! More now than then, we must admit, except for that pesky word "best" which, according to my trusty *Webster's*, implies advantage to both bestower and bestowed. Smith, as we shall see, could sniff out advantage despite a headcold. However, librarians of Smithian calibre are not as prevalent as they once were... apparently, society can no longer afford them... which suggests there may be little advantage in being able to recognize "the best," at least if you're planning to work in the public sector.

On that note, a word about symbols. Smith herself states that it is her intention to:

...indicate the signposts which point the way towards a recognition of those qualities which are basic in good writing... The books which have been chosen for analysis are a personal choice from the many books of permanent quality... Personal response to particular books is an individual matter and lends the urgency of conviction when [they] are discussed as literature rather than as commodities or tools. (xxx1, xxx2)

So I warrant I'm not far off the mark when I suggest she is using not just children's literature but her own "personal choice[s]" to do her time-binding. Which means, if she is to do so successfully, those choices must be meaningful to me as well. I too must see in them both the librarian she was and the librarian I could have been. And I in my turn must have you see both the librarian I was and the librarian you may aspire to be.

I confess I've never been very good about having someone tell me how I ought to do my job, and Smith seems so very sure she knows what's best. Then again, no one's ever taken me to Coney Island, so what do I know?

Next issue: More (un)reluctance, as Sue prepares to enter Chapter One ...

Bibliographic Information:

Smith, Lillian H. *The Unreluctant Years; A Critical Analysis of Children's Literature*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1991, c1953. ISBN 0838905579

Johnson, Margaret. "Lillian H. Smith," In *Lands of Pleasure; Essays on Lillian H. Smith and the Development of Children's Librarians*. Adele Fasick et al, eds. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1990. pp.3-12. ISBN 0810822660

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language; Unabridged. Springfield, Mass: G. & C. Merriam, 1965 (c.1961). [No ISBN]



Site design and content, except where noted, © The Looking Glass, 1997. Send all mail regarding The Looking Glass c/o The Toronto Centre for the Study of Children's Literature. Images © Bernard Kelly, 1997. (Tenniel images in the public domain.)
"Stealing Sips of Tea" © Sue Easun, 1997.