

Julie Johnston: An Exciting New Voice

Jean Little

Résumé: *Jean Little a eu le grand plaisir de découvrir un auteur de premier plan quand on lui a demandé de faire le compte rendu des deux romans de sa jeune collègue Julie Johnston, Hero of Lesser Causes et Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, qui lui ont valu tous deux le prix du Gouverneur général du Canada. Elle montre comment l'une des représentantes les plus douées de la génération montante parvient à inscrire dans le corps même du texte la colère des femmes si longtemps tue ou étouffée.*

Julie Johnston's first two novels, *Hero of Lesser Causes* (1992) and *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (1994), have both been given the Governor General's Award. When I heard this news, I felt the jury had been unwise. I did not know the author and I had not read either book but it seemed doubtful that such a neophyte deserved so great an honour *twice*. After receiving major prizes early, some authors become intimidated and stop writing. Remember Harper Lee. When I was asked to review the two books, I wondered if I ought to seek out several major flaws in these stories just to keep Julie Johnston from being thrown off balance. Then I read the novels and realized that I could not do it. These books are simply far too good.

The moment I heard the title *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* I wanted to read the story. I remembered the riddle from my own childhood, of course, and I enjoy titles that set off echoes in my memory. When I was told that the novel was about foster children, I was even more intrigued. As a child, I read with total absorption and identification every book I could find about unwanted children left lost or orphaned. I made with each the often hazardous but eventually joyous homeward journey. I not only read but often reread *The Secret Garden*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Just David*, *Pollyanna*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, *Heidi*, *Nobody's Boy*, *The Chestry Oak*, *Daddy-Long-Legs* and all the rest. I loved each of them, although not equally, and I still love rereading a few even now that I am sixty-three. As an adult, I have added many other titles to my list of treasured books about stray kids finding new families or discovering a place where they belong. A few favourites are *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson, *The Pinballs* by Betsy Byars, *The House of Sixty Fathers* by Meindert DeJong, *Outcast* by Rosemary Sutcliff, *Homecoming* and *Dacey's Song* by Cynthia Voigt and *Goodnight, Mr. Tom* by Michelle Magorian. My own second novel, *Home*

From Far, is about a lonely girl whose family takes in two foster children. Julie Johnston certainly had a lot of people blazing the trail ahead of her. Could she follow where we had led? Would her book have anything new to say?

Not having read her earlier book, *Hero of Lesser Causes*, I had no idea what to expect. My sister Pat read *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* aloud to me. As she did, I realized that I not only loved this book; I wished I had written it.

We read it after the four-year-old who lives with us was safely asleep. We were about halfway through when Pat said to me, "Isn't it lovely knowing that book is waiting for us? It's something to look forward to all day long."

Sara Moone, a fifteen-year-old child newly arrived in her latest foster home, types the story of her life into a computer which has no printer, a far safer repository for confidences than any conventional diary. (The computer, holding its secrets in a file nobody can open, is a powerful metaphor used to great effect throughout the novel.) At the beginning, Sara's most satisfactory relationship is with this machine. She pours out to it, with candour and an acerbic wit, exactly what she thinks of the people among whom she is forced to live and her private plans for eventual escape. The moment she turns sixteen, she is determined to quit school and head north to where, she believes, everything is white and free of growth and unpredictable emotions which threaten her peace. She yearns for a setting she can control completely.

Sara is the girl Anne Shirley would have been if L.M. Montgomery had made her the true product of the love-starved childhood Anne herself describes. The red-haired orphan has been shunted around, like a wrongly-addressed parcel, useful only as an unpaid and unhandy drudge. When she is dumped at the railway station to await Matthew Cuthbert, she is facing just such another placement. After all, nobody has come to meet her train. Yet young Anne Shirley arrives at Green Gables chatty, ebullient, optimistic and the possessor of a lively imagination. The wounds she must have sustained have left her mercifully unscarred and she, idiotically when you think of her previous experiences, runs to meet life with irrepressible hope.

Sara Moone, on the other hand, is guarded, hostile, cold, withdrawn and extremely angry. Significantly, she has been passed around for an extra four years. Josh, a younger foster child, is less damaged and a little less wary. Although Sara is set on behaving in such a way that nobody will find a chink in her considerable armour, she begins to breach it herself when she starts recording on disk her history and her daily encounters with people. When writing about your anger and denial, you are apt to gain insight and even a sense of perspective, especially when your own sharp wit insists on mocking or correcting all flowery, dishonest, overly sentimental or melodramatic bits. Sara is older, more sophisticated and more self-aware than Anne. While Anne longs, entreats even, to be accepted by the Cuthberts, Sara initially rejects her foster parents, the other two foster children, her sympathetic caseworker, Matt Bellington, the boy who wishes to befriend her, even Edith-Ann, the goofy dog.

She has no intention of being drawn into yet another family only to be discarded again.

Each of these heroines is a product of her time. Our whole vision of childhood has undergone radical changes in the eight decades since Montgomery wrote. The society in which Lucy Maud Montgomery belonged, when she created Anne Shirley and launched herself as a novelist, saw children as innocent beings “trailing clouds of glory.” They had within them a radiance which could almost transform the hardened adults around them. They were gifts straight from the hand of God. Today, whether we like it or not, we are much more prone to see kids who have been displaced like Anne and Sara as victims, irreparably damaged by the traumas they have had to survive.

Comparing Montgomery’s and Johnston’s books to the detriment of either is to do both a disservice. Yet there are further parallels which I, for one, find fascinating. Both girls at first are faced with foster “mothers” not to their taste. (Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert never thought of themselves as foster parents but, willy-nilly, that is what they turn into.) Marilla Cuthbert is too stern for Anne’s liking; Ma too soft for Sara’s. On the other hand, Matthew and Hud, both rather inarticulate farmers, quietly befriend their fosterlings. As the men nurture the youngsters in their care, the children begin to flower. Anne’s response to Matthew’s kindness is immediate while Sara predictably fights off Hud’s gentle overtures for awhile. Even when he has won her over, she struggles to conceal her affection for him and does not truly capitulate until he is rushed to the hospital. Her telephone conversation with him after that is marvellous. So much is expressed in so few words. When the two men die, the girls they have loved both grieve and then decide to remain with the lonely women who are also left grieving. Yet Anne’s sorrow, though clearly deep, is circumspect. Her loneliness is not touched by rage. Sara’s grief is much more real to anyone who has had to face such a wrenching death. She is angry, confused, frightened and collapses with a bout of “emotional flu” which I, for one, recognize as reality. When Sara’s birth mother finally offers the girl almost exactly the life she once longed for, artificial, shallow, pain-free, devoid of change, Sara, after a battle with her old self, turns instead to the messy but wonderful world full of hurt and joy, love and loss, confusion and exultation which she has found at the Huddlestons. As the girl turns down her mother’s offer of a “home,” her compassion for the sadly limited woman who, sixteen years before, gave her away, allows the reader a glimpse into the awakened heart of the new Sara Moone.

Before I move on to Johnston’s other novel, I must mention my delight in the secondary characters in this book. The habitués of the Ee-lite Diner, along with Sara’s nicknames for them, would tickle anyone’s funny bone. Josh and Nick, the other foster children, are handled with compassion and insight. I was especially impressed by the way Johnston shows us Nick’s humanity even while she courageously makes clear that his problems are too deep and troubling for

Ma to be able to help. Bettelheim told us years ago that “love is not enough” but children’s literature usually dodges this unpalatable truth. Ma herself is endearingly real with her ceaseless chatter and, at the same time, her immense kindness to the waifs and strays she harbours. Ruth Petrie, the Children’s Aid worker, is refreshing, to put it mildly. Never before have I read a novel where the social worker gets her own romance. Would every child in trouble could have such a friend to stand by her or him. The Children’s Aid should give Johnston yet another award for creating such a human professional.

It is not only the gritty gutsy personality of the heroine and those of her friends and acquaintances that make this book such a joy. The imagery throughout the novel is subtle and compelling. The contrast between Sara’s birth mother’s fixation on white artificial flowers which will never fade and Ma’s garden full of colour and bees and constant change is a good example.

At first, I was captivated, too, by Johnston’s use of the Adam and Eve and Pinch Me riddle. Sara tells her story so well, to that computer, that I laughed aloud more than once at her caustic comments. She turns the lens upon herself with honesty rare in a teenager’s self-analysis. Far too many novels written in the first person by teenage protagonists are one long whine from start to finish.

If I could have written Julie Johnston’s novel instead of *Home from Far*, disloyal as I feel towards my own created characters, I’d jump at the chance.

I was excited and yet a bit wary when we began reading Julie Johnston’s first book *Hero of Lesser Causes*. How could Keely measure up to Sara? Well, she couldn’t quite. It is invidious to compare an author’s books but I found *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* slightly more rewarding. Yet I loved *Hero* also. It tells the story of Keely Connor’s thirteenth year when her beloved older brother Patrick contracts poliomyelitis and, after being given all the treatment medical science has to offer, is brought home almost completely paralysed. He can breathe without an iron lung, open and close his eyes, swallow and speak but that is about all. The slight use of arm movement he attains is important but still minimal. Keely’s task is twofold as she sees it: first to convince her sadly changed, remote brother that life still holds goodness; and, second, to wake in him the will to reclaim and celebrate the self locked inside his stricken body. Patrick keeps closing his eyes at her insistent approach and desperately tries to shut himself away from the world around him. Otherwise he is powerless and frail. Keely refuses to admit defeat and is successful bit by bit in drawing him back, but it is a horrendously difficult year for her as well as for her brother. Johnston does a great job of moving her heroine back and forth between the busy world and the hushed sickroom. Patrick’s parents, intent on their stricken son, have a hard time bringing their daughter’s needs into focus. A delightful practical nurse with an offbeat sense of humour helps. Other characters, zany and yet real too, also play their parts. But Keely must begin it and keep at it like a terrier refusing to let go.

I was a teenager myself during the forties. I was fifteen, Patrick’s age rather than Keely’s, in 1942, and I knew a young man who contracted polio and died

three days later. The movies, the mores and the morals in the book were familiar to me. I found Keely's desire to gallop into battle and vanquish the world's wrongs single-handed also totally credible. She is a fix-it girl who makes everything slightly simpler than it really is. I think I often approach life's problems that way still, even though I'm old enough to know better. Letting go of that coveted first place in somebody else's life and heart and freeing him to find help and friendship elsewhere is another hard lesson some learn better than others. Keely is a champion at it, once she sees that is what her brother requires of her. Yet she is, as the reader is well aware, Patrick's first most important link to living. Her courage is infectious. Eventually he takes her greatest dare and decides to come alive again.

Patrick's withdrawal and bitterness are credible. The one weakness I detected in the portrayal of this proud boy's being faced with paralysis was the omission of the humiliation he would suffer at having to be washed, wiped, shifted about and fed by a bevy of well-intentioned women. I felt that his father might have seen this need in him and tried, however ineffectually, to help. Yet his failure to do so was not unreal given the conventions of the time. Of all the characters in the book, however, the Judge remains most shadowy and least believable. My back ached for Patrick's weary mother.

The message that war has a cost beyond the millions of dollars spent on it is subtly shown in the veteran who has lost his memory. No morals are hammered home, however. Readers are left to grow up with Keely and Patrick at their own speed. And the bread wagon ride balances out any feeling that life isn't something to be laughed about and celebrated.

Having compared *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* to *Anne of Green Gables*, I would also mention that in the novels I read as a child there was often a character with some crippling disability: Colin in *The Secret Garden*, Klara in *Heidi* and so on. Those authors knew, too, that some of the handicap was not in the muscles alone but in the defeated, diminished, and fearful self. Colin and Klara, like Patrick, initially choose disability over freedom and need someone's belief in them to win them over to giving life a chance. Their lack of any believable diagnosis of the ailments the disabled children suffered and their abrupt miracle cures to ensure a happy ending were problems the authors failed to solve. Patrick's paralysis results from a known and named condition and his slow and slight recovery from almost total immobility is necessary to the novel. He is a life-loving, active boy before his illness. This makes his position more tragic but gives him a better chance at recovery. While other literary invalids have never known any other way of being, Patrick Connor knows, with every useless fibre of his body, what it is to be whole. His mastery of slight movement in one leg, at the conclusion of the book, is necessary not only to the reader's happiness but also to the plot since, without it, it would have been difficult to demonstrate what may follow the boy's awakened will to fight. His awkward suicide attempt is moving and might conceivably give another youngster running out of hope

reason to pause. But this book is not “mere bibliotherapy.” It is funny and rich and heart warming.

Sara Moone also has to cope with a disability. Under stress, she stammers a little. Her problem is handled so deftly by Sara’s creator that I, like Sara’s other friends, had forgotten all about it until I was checking the spellings of some names with my closed-circuit TV print enlarger. Suddenly, right there on the screen, she began to have trouble with an initial consonant. I have worked with children with similar speech impediments and never once found Johnston’s treatment did not match my experience. As I said before, I soon stopped noticing. It takes Sara slightly longer, of course.

Johnston’s first two novels are both beautifully written books. The difference in the two main characters, Sara and Keely, is insightfully shown. Sara is much the more sophisticated, being not only nearly four years older but also a child of the ’90s. But Keely’s instincts are far ahead of Sara’s, young as she is, because of her life being rooted in love. Their roles are opposite. Keely has to coax and bully Patrick back from accepting death in life; Sara must allow herself to dare the same journey and relinquish the death in life she has sought. Although these novels are more realistic than *Anne of Green Gables*, they leave you with the same sense of celebration.

I await Julie Johnston’s next book with eagerness even though I do think it is time she stopped winning the Governor General’s Award. After all, I myself have a new novel coming out this spring.

Jean Little, author of 22 published children’s books, lives in a 138-year-old stone farm house near Elora, Ontario, with her sister Pat De Vries, her four-year-old great niece, four dogs, and three cats. In 1978 she received the Canada Council Prize (now called the Governor General’s Award) for *Listen for the Singing*, and since then she has been given two honorary PhD degrees and has been made a Member of the Order of Canada. Her books have been translated into ten languages. In 1995, she is publishing three new books (all with Penguin Canada): *His Banner Over Me* (a novel based on stories of her mother’s childhood), *Bats About Baseball* (co-authored with Claire Mackay), and *Jenny and the Hanukkah Queen* (a picture book).