

ON BETRAYING FAMILY

Louise Farmer Smith

First published in Glimmer Train's Newsletter.

My novel in stories, *One Hundred Years of Marriage*, just went up on Amazon this week, and my joy at finally having a book in print was accompanied by a queasy stomach. There in full color was the image of the book cover and a price, available to anyone in the United States or Europe or, God help me, my home town in Oklahoma. Readers who knew my family were going to say I'd thrown four generations under the bus. Of course, I put a disclaimer page at the front: "*This is a work of fiction. Any references to real people...*" But I know that's not going to keep people who see traits and actions they recognize in my characters from thinking my work is autobiographical.

This is the triumph and the curse. When a writer creates a story, she is looking for a sense of reality so vivid readers will believe this writer's great grandmother actually went berserk on a claim in Oklahoma Territory and was delivered to an insane asylum. Or they will believe her little brother really did build a canoe in an attic room with no door wide enough for the canoe's removal.

In "Return to Lincoln," the fourth story in *One Hundred Years of Marriage*, the eleven-year-old narrator, Dan, pioneered with his parents to the Oklahoma prairie in the late 19th century. Dan's mother suffered from what is today called manic depression. Dan was traumatized by his inability to heal his mother and by watching helplessly as his Civil War-veteran father returned her to an insane asylum in Nebraska. This wound to the boy set up the beginning of a series of flawed marriages. Unable to overcome his

sense of inadequacy in adulthood, Dan subconsciously sought another wounded partner, Victoria. In post-Civil War South Carolina, Victoria witnessed her own tubercular mother's death be hurried at the hands of own her father. Dan and Victoria marry and form a family whose children and their own marriage choices are much influenced by this history of damage.

In the first story in the book, set in 1960, "The House After it was Leveled," the image of a young boy, twelve-year-old Ernest, alone in the attic building a canoe from a tiny blueprint in *Boy's Life*, was a great metaphor for his emotionally stunted family, all of them well-meaning people who could not break out of their claustrophobic lives.

The problem for me this week of the launch on Amazon is that my family and some friends know that my great grandmother really did spend years in the Lincoln Asylum. And that unbelievable story about the canoe in the attic is patterned on my own little brother's building a canoe in a closed attic space. Why did I use these vivid, identifying facts in this book? I could have made up plenty of scenes to traumatize a boy or created numerous metaphors to show a family who had become emotionally paralyzed. But I didn't.

Once I was "inside" the stories, writing, I took what floated up. I trusted in that part of myself over which I had little control, my imagination—that busy little factory that spun the straw of reality into the gold of fiction, that took everything I had read and heard, everything that I knew and was, all my nightmares and old ghosts and sprang upon my imagination the stories that made up this book.

I fed that imagination with research. For instance I hired a lawyer to get a court order to release my great grandmother's records from the state mental hospital in Lincoln,

Nebraska. What I learned was that she was not insane, but had several times been briefly “incarcerated” after episodes of what was probably post-partum depression. The last incarceration, however, began on February 14, 1898, when her husband brought her to the asylum just before he and their grown children loaded a wagon bound for Oklahoma Territory. She was not “paroled” until October, 15, 1913. Her husband had died that year, and a month later her oldest daughter brought her out of the asylum to live with her in Clinton, Oklahoma. In Clinton, my great-grandmother had the reputation fitting a Quaker woman—quiet, loving, industrious, a gentle soul who always “took up for the underdog.”

You see that I picked and chose from her life, taking the personality whole, but leaving out three daughters as well as all the realities of the Lincoln Asylum, facts that my point of view character, her son, Dan, couldn’t have known and which would have distracted from the story of this family’s marriages.

No one is still alive who would be horrified by what they would regard as the disclosure of a shameful family secret. Those great grandparents, aunts and uncles are long dead. And the canoe story. That was fair game.

The reason I feel nervous and exposed to the world this morning is that the narrator’s father has much in common with my own father. Although my father had died before publication, I didn’t want people to think I was actually writing about J.L. Farmer. So I exaggerated flaws and left out some virtues and made up a great deal, telling myself I was disguising the facts and creating a new fictional character. What I did not do was make that character tall, peaceful and Nordic, so he could never have been recognized as my small, angry, Scotch-Irish father. Why did I let myself in for criticism of exploiting

the people who loved me? I didn't ponder this as I wrote, but I know now that if I had made this character tall, peaceful and Nordic, the whole fabric of my story would have unraveled. Inserting the tall Swede would have been like sewing a bit of scrape metal into a patchwork quilt. The wife and children would have had to be different. It would have been a fiction without resonance or breath, a story that belonged to some other writer, not mine to tell. Just something made up.

Will my cousins on both sides of the family forgive me for the unvarnished rendering I gave characters who resembled our grandparents? Maybe, maybe not. Why did I let myself in for this?

When I was inside the book—writing—I was not attempting to write memoir. I had tried that, and found, first, I wasn't very good at it, and second, I hadn't had the horrid childhood that kindles the burning desire for revenge. This was the territory that compelled the prize-winning writers, Mary Karr or _____, to tell the facts, maybe settle some scores, but certainly to seek to come to terms with awful childhoods. The truth in my case was that my childhood was lucky although burdened by what I witnessed of my parents' marriage which was a life-long, uphill climb for both of them, the theater major and the engineering student, married during the Depression in Oklahoma. My mother didn't go to her university graduation ceremony because she was ashamed of her dress. Besides, she told me, she was exhausted from having carried a full course load while working full-time trying to feed herself and help her parents financially. My father struggled just as hard working one job that provided his breakfast, another that provided his room, and a third that gave him supper, all the time struggling with dyslexia and studying engineering. No wonder these two poorly-matched people clung to each other.

The Great Depression, like the Civil War and other wars forced many couples into marriages not simply of convenience, but of survival. And the whirlwind of these social traumas, mixed with the foibles of personality collided in my family's marriages just as they did in families all over the world.

Like my mother's father I am a short story writer. When I go back to those browned, typewriter-hammered pages of his work, I see an heroic effort to avoid mentioning anything painful. I am in possession of his wife's diary, a dime-store volume someone must have given her late in life. Reading it broke my heart. Page after page, scrubbed with an eraser. So, two generations later, I discovered that six of the many stories I'd written fit together into one long one, which was the story that was mine to tell.

Ω Ω Ω