

Consider the Source: Feminism and Point of View in Karen Hesse's *Stowaway* and *Witness*

Wendy J. Glenn

The source through which we receive information can influence significantly the message ultimately acquired. In a trial setting, for example, attorneys for the prosecution and defense tweak details surrounding an event to shape jury members' perceptions of truth. The same holds true in the world of fiction; the teller shapes the tale. In several of her novels for young adults, Karen Hesse, through the varied voices of her female characters, suggests a condemnation of patriarchal values. Maggie (*Wish on a Unicorn*), Rifka (*Letters from Rifka*), Nyle (*Phoenix Rising*), Hannah (*A Time of Angels*), Mila (*Music of Dolphins*), and Billie Jo (*Out of the Dust*) each struggle to survive in a male-dominated world; each character's account of life within patriarchy expresses contempt for a system that denies individual freedom and victimizes those who refuse to comply to established standards.

Although two of Hesse's newest titles, *Stowaway* (2000) and *Witness* (2001), continue to question patriarchy, they distinguish themselves from other works in her body of fiction in the use of a point of view other than that of the first-person, female protagonist. In *Stowaway*, our narrator is instead eleven-year-old Nicholas, who flees England by boarding a ship set to sail for the South Pacific. *Witness* takes its form from the *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters; eleven characters of varying ages and genders share their version of events in poetic form. In her decision to stray from her typical pattern, Hesse continues to explore gender issues but provides a look at patriarchal culture from within, in one case, and from multiple points of view in the other, ultimately strengthening the feminist pulse that beats within her earlier works.

Stowaway

Through the Eyes of a Boy

In *Stowaway*, we learn about the world as experienced and recorded by young Nicholas in the journal he maintains during the voyage. This world is a man's world, one in which women play a negligible role. Nick's mother has died, and

his sisters, who remain nameless, are mentioned only once. We see only passing glimpses of the wives, mothers, and daughters of the natives that the crew encounters during the course of the voyage. Men rule both on land and at sea. Especially noteworthy are Nick's observations of men who hold positions of power, both on the homeland from which he fled and on the deck of the ship he hopes will carry him to safety. That which Nick chooses to reveal tells us something about his perceptions of these leaders, in particular, and patriarchy, in general.

Hesse's decision to select these details simply reinforces her positive portrayal of the atypical male and further challenges an Imperialist patriarchy under which explorers dominated and destroyed native cultures.

The Abusers

Nick has fled his English soil as a result of the abuse he suffers at the hands of the men in his life. His mother has died, and he thus is raised by his father, a scholar who wants Nick to "overcome his soft-heartedness" and become a man (22). Because Nick is not interested in learning his Latin and becoming a scholar like his brothers, he is "a disappointment" to his father (3). One Christmas, Nick desires to leave his boarding school and spend the holiday in the comfort of his family. He runs away, and, after arriving home "tired, hungry, cold," his father says nothing, "not a single word," places him in his carriage, and drives him back to school (44-45). The father lacks compassion, embodying instead an emphasis on stoicism and "indifference," traits exemplified by the stereotypical male within the patriarchy (68). Nick's teacher, Reverend Smythe, is another powerful man; he takes "pleasure in beating others" (13). Realizing the punishment he might face should he beat one of his students, he instead, as patriarch and leader of his family, "beat[s] his own children, staring at [his boarders] all the while," forcing them to witness his cruelty (13). When Nick's father returns him to school after his attempt to run away for the day, the Reverend strikes "his youngest daughter, Josephine, eight years old, [Nick's] age, with a particular ferocity" (45). Nick is the only witness to the event.

When Nick's father completely gives up on his son's potential to enter the realm of the intellectual, he apprentices him to the local butcher, telling the boy, "The Butcher'll make a man out of you" (22). Once the Butcher brings forth the

whip, forever scarring Nick's tender skin, Nick does not wait to learn what else the butcher might teach him. In his few years, Nick interacts with men whose power gives them the self-perceived right to abuse that power, to manipulate those beneath them in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The Distanced Intellectual

While aboard *Endeavor*, Nick encounters Mr. Banks, another man who wields power. A botanist and gentleman assigned to gathering and cataloging new plant and animal life discovered on the journey, Mr. Banks represents the culture of dominance in its civilized form. Mr. Banks is well-educated and has risen to the top of his field by virtue of his accumulated knowledge and subsequent expertise (5). He is used to getting his way and demonstrates little patience when the weather refuses to cooperate or the captain refuses to allow him and his fellow scientists and artists to go ashore. He is not cruel but shows the marked self-centeredness of a man in control. Although his "dark eyes are lit with an eager curiosity," he admires nature not for what it is but for what it can offer him as a man of science (5). When, for example, the ship comes upon a waterspout the "width of a tree trunk," Mr. Banks is unimpressed. Nick notes, "I suppose he could not shoot it, nor bag it, nor stick it in a glass bottle, and felt it not much to consider" (108). Nick, in contrast, views it as "a thing of wonder" (108). In another instance, Mr. Banks is asked to part with one of the dogs that has been traveling with him; the natives consider dog a delicacy. Mr. Banks parts readily with the beast, even though Nick claims it to have been loyal to and valued by the crew. He reveals, "Mr. Banks says nothing about Lord Grey's absence. Only a Gentleman could have given something so dear with such ease" (245). Mr. Banks is not unkind like the men Nick has known in his past, but he lacks the ability to empathize and consider the needs of those below him.

The Gentle Leader

Nick finds a model of masculinity that he can admire in the form of Captain Cook, a "clean-shaven man, strict and stern, with cold eyes," but "a good man" who repeatedly demonstrates his concern for others (2, 44). Although a respected leader among his men, Cook does not take advantage of his position of power. He, for example, "eats no more, no less, than any man on the ship" (222). In addition, he is "determined to keep his men healthy and well fed," even to the extent that he administers "twelve lashes a piece" for turning away one's portion of beef (13). Further, after the captain is insulted by the Portuguese sailors who control the port at Rio de Janeiro, he refuses to give in to his anger, realizing his men's lives depend upon the provisions that will be stocked on this stop (36). Finally, when the vast majority of his crew members die as a result of bad water collected at Batavia, the captain is obviously overcome with sadness and loss. Although he continues to perform his duties, "his heart seems broken" (259). Nick reveals, "He kept us safe and healthy for so long, and now he watches the men slipping away" (259).

In addition to caring for his men, Cook is respectful in his dealings with the natives; he teaches Nick the value inherent in every man. When landing on King George's Land, he cautions his men to respect the natives by taking "nothing from the island without making payment, not even wood"

and to behave as guests in the home of a foreigner (73). Before landing on Otaohiti, he requires the ship's surgeon to "check all the men for infectious disease" so they "might not bring European illness among the natives" (87). Finally, when King Raja of the West Indies excuses himself from a feast, thinking he is not invited due to his black skin, the captain "soon made it clear that he was welcome" (243).

Critic Elizabeth Bush claims this portrayal of Cook reflects Hesse's attempt to be politically correct; the description of his treatment of the natives is "inserted to soothe twenty-first century sensibilities rather than reflect contemporary mores" (65). However, while Hesse depended on historical documents in the creation of her text, she is creating fiction and is thus allowed to select details that best fit her perception of the character, even if an historically accurate portrayal does not result. Even contemporary men sometimes clash with "contemporary mores." Hesse's decision to select these details simply reinforces her positive portrayal of the atypical male and further challenges an Imperialist patriarchy under which explorers dominated and destroyed native cultures.

After observing Cook in the duration of the voyage, Nick deeply admires him. He writes, "Captain is a wondrous man, I think. I did not have a very high opinion of certain men when I came aboard. Captain has taught me that a man might be stern, even harsh, and still be fair" (222). He respects the captain for his compassion and convictions, seeing in his leader the kind of man he, himself, might become. As a male, Nick is granted access into the realm of social power; that he chooses to emulate a man who behaves outside the realm of stereotypical masculinity says much about the novel's representation of what a praiseworthy man should be.

Nicholas is both outsider and insider, providing a unique view of life within patriarchal culture. He is, at first, an outsider due to his age. He must learn the ways of men in order to be admitted into their ranks. Unlike the female protagonists we have seen in Hesse's fiction, Nick has the opportunity to enter the world of the insider by virtue of his gender. Indeed, over time and with hard work, he demonstrates his ability and dedication and is thus rewarded with approval on the part of his crewmates. More importantly, however, Nick chooses to forgo the invitation into the traditional patriarchal world; he knows that he is giving up power (a choice not granted to his female peers) but does so anyway. In novels told by a single, female protagonist, we witness the primary character passing judgment on a system in which she does not have and will never have significant power. As a male, Nick's rejection of patriarchal values is all the more telling of Hesse's stance.

Witness

Truth in Many Voices

Witness is composed of poems narrated by eleven characters who tell us the story through several first-person perspectives. In addition to conversations and sermons in which an audience is present, Hesse provides the unspoken thoughts of each character. We are offered a look into a hidden self that is often not revealed in the use of a single narrator. We have access to the inner reaches of the mind and thus know the thoughts and beliefs of each speaker without having to interpret them through the descriptions provided by a first-person narrator. Through "the kind of silence" she maintains, by

the manner in which she leaves her characters "to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible" to achieve" if she allowed a spokesperson to "speak directly and authoritatively to us" (Booth, 273). Hesse's emphasis on the depiction of truth is evident when she writes that:

My gut knotted as I wrote from the point of view of characters whose lives were rooted in bigotry and intolerance. But there were also narrators who made my heart soar. Disabling my censor, allowing each character to speak his or her mind, I have, in *Witness*, attempted to piece together a mosaic of a community giving birth to its conscience.

("Statement accompanying Advance Reader Edition")

Although it is difficult to give voice to characters whose mouths shape words of prejudice and hatred, readers are able to witness characters in the vulnerable state of self-expression and thus make judgments on their own.

Every character in *Witness* faces the same experience, the arrival and increasing influence of the Ku Klux Klan, the embodiment of patriarchy at its worst. Its members are armed with cultural power and the belief that God has granted them the authority to exercise that power. The characters have choices to make in response to the Klan's attempts to strengthen its dominion, choices determined largely by how the characters perceive the Klan. Some see it as a vehicle for power, others as a source of misplaced masculinity, and still others as a dangerous deception.

The Power-Hungry

Three men fall prey to the Klan's rhetoric, believing involvement will help them to garner or maintain power. Reverend Johnny Reeves first embraces the Klan due to the attitude toward Blacks that its members share. He claims to be a man of the Lord but regularly denounces Blacks as henchmen of the devil. During one sermon, he damns a Black minister whose congregation consists of both blacks and whites, claiming, "it's a sorry state, neighbor, / it's a pitiful state of affairs when a colored preacher / can lure good white folk from their hearths" (14). In another, he argues that Harlem is "the den of the devil," the "center of sin"; he claims that "if we are patient, my good neighbor, / we can stay here at home, / we can take care of our problems at home / and down there in harlem, the / negro problem will / settle / itself" (16). When the Klan gains a hold in town, Reeves carries the message of its members to the pulpit, using his position as minister to spread the word, the word of men who follow a creed of hatred and destruction. He tells his flock how he and his fellow Klansmen took a pine, forty-feet in height, constructed a cross, wrapped it in kerosene-soaked burlap bags, and set it afire on the hill above town; the "flames leaping, / seeking heaven, / neighbor, the white / crucifix scoring / the night / blazed perfect. / perfect" (52). He is overwhelmed with pride when, due to his pontificating at the pulpit and involvement in Klan affairs, he is asked to lead the group in the morning prayers. He shares the event with those to whom he ministers, telling them, "the gathering prayed with me, / neighbor, in the summer morning / with the bees humming in the clover. / they prayed with me as I declared the klan a / movement of god" (70). As a member of the "ruling" body, this man has the power to manipulate the doctrine of the church to which he claims to belong.

Mr. Harvey Pettibone, a local shopkeeper, also falls prey to the Klan's ability to bestow power on its members. At first, he views his involvement with the Klan as a potential money-making endeavor. In trying to convince his wife that they should join, he tells her, "if we join the klan, / we can wipe out bronson's grocery by next year, vi. / all the klan members will shop here, / even if they live closer to bronson. / bronson's made his feelings against the klan clear. / if we join up with them, how long could bronson last six months, nine?" (29). Although he is unable to convince Vi to join, he becomes a member and relishes his newfound sense of power. When the Klan learns that a hotel is serving liquor to its patrons, members step in to see their kind of justice enacted. After the event, Vi asks Harvey, "so you go in, dressed in those ku klux nightclothes of yours and you / think / you'll save the world from the evils of drink / by raiding the place and smashing a few bottles." Harvey replies, "it felt so good breaking that glass, vi" (102). Once he becomes a member of the dominant group, Harvey allows his passion to overcome his principles; he is swept away.

Perelle Johnson, town constable, commits his crime not through his actions but through his lack of them, resulting from his fear that the Klan will strip him of his existing power. Johnson is intimidated by and fearful of the Klan and thus remains a bystander, guilty of refusing to act when he possesses knowledge of that which is occurring in his town. He first allows the Klan to rent the town hall for its meetings, even though he has some reservations (18). Later, when faced with the arrival of two hundred Blacks hired to work on the nearby dam, he is concerned only with himself and the fact that his "job sure doesn't pay / enough" (101). He is frustrated by his obligation to "protect them / from the ku klux" and exposes his own prejudice in his claim that he will have to also protect the Blacks "from themselves" (101). When the Klan situation in town becomes too severe for him to handle after the shooting of Ira Hirsh, an innocent Jewish man, he hesitates to contact authorities who possess greater resources. He claims, "I hate calling for help" (127). When the detective from Boston arrives, Johnson is not at all surprised how quickly he uncovers "all the dirty little / things" that have taken place, including "the letters sent to mr. hirsh / threatening to tar and feather him / if he didn't move out" (127). Johnson shirks his duty as a man of the law out of fear of retribution on the part of the Klan, as well as out of his own concern for his reputation. His pride causes innocents to suffer needlessly.

The Worthy Men

In stark contrast, two of Hesse's adult males question and even impugn the ideology of the Klan, recognizing that its members hide behind masks rather than face the world as individual men. Newspaper editor Reynard Alexander vows to remain impartial and neutral when dealing with the issue of the Klan (26). It does not take him long, however, to realize the truth about the Klan and begin writing articles that eventually result in threats against his life. He writes without fear, seeking to present only the truth as he sees it: "from state to state, / from town to town, / men join who can not be trusted. / unscrupulous men / who work in the dark / behind hoods and masks. / it takes but ten dollars. / and when that sort of scoundrel / starts hiding under hood and robes, / no good can come of it" (69). Despite the threat that he should be careful about what he says and prints or there may come a

day when he is unable to write or print again (108), Alexander continues to rail against the Klan (79, 103, 125, 137, 149). He refuses to cater to the demands of those seemingly in control, speaking his mind and undermining their power.

Dr. Flitt is progressive in his thinking and quick to defend those who are criticized by the Klan. While Reverend Reeves bemoans the changing role of women in his society, Dr. Flitt celebrates their newfound freedom. Reeves argues, "have you seen the way the girls dance? / sinful, neighbor, sinful. / these girls / doing the unspeakable gyrations of satan. / with each step they unravel the / moral fiber of our country" (21). The Doctor responds, "the flapper / is not the least bit alarming, / nor a sign of the declining social standard. / I doctor these women / and I have seen over the last years a transformation in them. / and what I see, / the opening of roses kept bud-tight so many years, / it warms this aging soul" (22).

The Wise Women

Although women are not granted the rights and privileges of full membership in the organization, they are given the opportunity to serve in a secondary role. If involved, their task is to attend to the domestic chores associated with helping the needy community members (at least those who are white and Protestant). The Klan espouses the idea that "the average woman / is happiest when she prepares food in her own kitchen / and sits down with her family to enjoy it. . . . / the average woman, / she loves her home and family first. / she might have got distracted / when she was earning wages / while her man fought in the great war. / but the trend is the other way now" (44).

The novel's women, however, see through this rhetoric and stand against the values of the Klan. Not a single female character in *Witness* chooses to associate with the Klan; each seems to discern and reject the deceptive tactics used by the group to recruit members. Ms. Sara Chickering, a local farmer, realizes the potential power of the Klan, claiming the "klan can seem mighty right-minded, with their talk of family virtue, / mighty decent, if you don't scratch the surface. / there's a kind of power they wield, / a deceptive authority" (59). Even after a threatening letter wrapped around a stone comes crashing through her window warning her to evict the Jewish man and his daughter who are living with her, she maintains her stance against the Klan. Ms. Iris Weaver, restaurant owner and rum runner, has chosen a non-conventional life that doesn't include marriage or family (19). The Klan disapproves of her way of life, but she perseveres, stating, "I was born protestant, / but i'd join the catholic church / before / i'd throw my lot in with the klan" (58). Mrs. Viola Pettibone, shopkeeper, ignores her husband's attempts to convince her to join the Klan. He promises her "parades," "picnics," and "speakers from all over" and assures her that "they take care of their women." In response, she "shakes her head slowly back and forth" and tells him outright that they should not join (25).

Those who refuse Klan membership and remain outside its realm of influence emerge from the events unscathed. Reynard Alexander, Dr. Flitt, and each of the females suffer out-

rage but, because they have not sacrificed their principles, feel no guilt. Those who sympathize with the Klan and enter its ranks, however, are destroyed. Reverend Reeves sleeps with a young girl (9) and ignores her resulting pregnancy; the child is found "stuffed in a shoebox, / wrapped in newspaper, / tied with a heavy cord, / and left behind a tree to die" (136). Once the Klan learns of Reeves' immoral behavior, his membership is revoked and the letters, "k.k.k.," are branded on his back. He attempts suicide by jumping off of the steel bridge that rests across the Connecticut River (140). The fitting irony is that he is condemned by the Klan, the very organization whose principles he advocates. He is a hypocrite whose very heroes become his persecutors. Even within the Klan, no one is safe. Harvey Pettibone also suffers as a result of his involvement with the Klan, both socially and emotionally. After participating in several Klan events, his reputation among the townspeople diminishes, and his wife is forced to try to "buy back [his] good name" (128). His conscience also begins to peck at him and he subsequently "cannot get in bed with viola," a woman who, unlike himself, has remained true to her values (120). Percelle Johnson loses all credibility as constable.

In *Witness*, the use of multiple perspectives of the same events allows each character to tell his or her version. In doing so, personal biases are revealed, and judgments about the nature of the character can be made. Without the author-imposed limit of a single nar-

rator, we know what each character is thinking. In Hesse's other novels wherein she gives voice to the primary female character, we hear the protagonist describe the actions and presumed thoughts of hurtful men, for example. To hear the words come from the men, themselves, is all the more disturbing.

Concluding Thoughts

In both *Stowaway* and *Witness*, Karen Hesse takes a risk in choosing to stray from her typical employment of the first-person female protagonist. The result, however, yields two works of fiction that allow Hesse's questioning of patriarchy to emerge not only unscathed but become unabashedly more convincing. In *Stowaway*, the eyes of young Nicholas show us the various men who inhabit his world. Hesse chooses a gentle leader, one who does not fit the mold of what a patriarchal male should be, to inspire the young boy. Although Nicholas, unlike his mother or sisters or female peers, is guaranteed a place within patriarchy, he opts for a gender identity beyond that which is expected of him. In *Witness*, we hear the voices of many characters, bigots and kind souls alike. Hesse chooses here to celebrate those whose voices ring with words of goodness and equality rather than those who spout the rhetoric of power or patriarchy. In the end, those who accept the dogma of the Klan are destroyed. Although Karen Hesse is the ultimate teller of her tales, her characters serve as her voicebox, conveying her views of the world through their words. In *Stowaway* and *Witness*, the voice of a boy and the voices of many unite to perpetuate Hesse's message of hope, that we may be free to be who we choose, regardless of whether we are born boys or girls.

Every character in Witness faces the same experience, the arrival and increasing influence of the Ku Klux Klan, the embodiment of patriarchy at its worst.

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Wendy Glenn worked with "amazing students" as a public junior high and high school teacher in Mesa, Arizona, before teaching future English teachers at Northern Arizona University. Currently she teaches at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. A passionate reader of young adult literature, she "believes in the power of words to change perspectives and, ultimately, lives".

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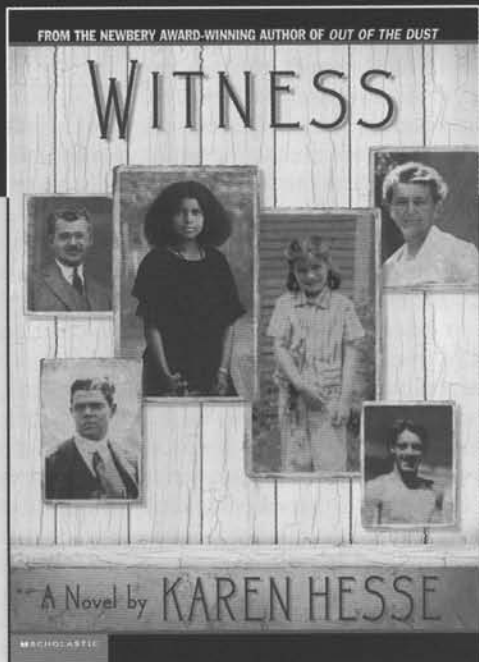
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