

Transcending the Group, Discovering Both Self and Public Spirit:

Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* and Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*

An unabashed free spirit, *Stargirl* declares herself equal to the universe—and immerses herself in doing good for others. Brent Bishop clings to a stifling and demeaning peer group, but only until a fatal traffic accident forces him to turn inward; then, he discovers the power of his individual imagination—and learns to dance with all of humanity.

As a long-term resident of Japan, I am struck by these two fictional characters as near perfect exemplifications of Takeo Doi's theoretical model of the Western psyche. In *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Doi's discussion of Japanese and Western psyches focuses on the Japanese verb *amaeru*: to forge relationships with others in a way that allows one to indulge, like an infant, in passive dependence. Doi argues that Japanese culture encourages individuals to *amaeru* throughout their lives, whereas Western culture encourages them to outgrow the desire to *amaeru* as quickly as possible—the end result being an emphasis on the group in Japanese society and on the individual in the West. Public spirit can flourish in the Western world, Doi concludes, because the individual is not stifled by restrictive group loyalties.

To what extent Doi's theory applies to the American mindset is certainly open to debate, but the pattern of individual psychological growth in Western culture that he outlines—freedom from a suffocating conformity, discovery of self, the subsequent development of a larger sense of connectedness with humanity as a whole—was the prime focus of the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, and that the

pattern still looms large in the American imagination is clearly demonstrated by the two novels with which this paper is primarily concerned: Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* and Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*.

As *Whirligig* opens, high school junior Brent Bishop has just moved to Chicago and enrolled in the private and elite Montfort School. He feels inadequate and only hopes he can somehow weasel his way into his classmates' good graces. He is more than willing to "wear" their values, whatever they may be. Conformity is his religion. Discovering what radio stations are considered cool and making sure his earring is in the correct ear are, to him, "as vital as maintaining a sacred flame" (*Whirligig* 6). Sometimes he is irritated by his own weakness—as when the "de facto leader" seizes upon his family name, Bishop, and manipulates him, physically, like a chess piece, for everyone's bemusement (11); but essentially, Brent is willing to accept others' standards, submit to their judgments, and comply with their wishes—as long as they offer him what he considers love in return. In fact, he has primed himself to *amaeru*.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson wrote that "imitation is suicide," and Brent comes an eyelash away from proving these words true. At his first big Montfort social event, he hopes to win a certain girl's heart, knowing it "would mean instant respect" (12). Unfortunately, she screams out her rejection of him, for all to hear, and he immediately realizes the implication: "He was a leper now. No one would go near him" (16). Liquor in his bloodstream, he leaps

into his car, flies onto the expressway, takes his hands off the steering wheel, and closes his eyes. His failure at imitation has left him nowhere, and he is ready to kill himself.

Brent survives the accident he causes, but takes the life of another, an 18-year-old girl named Lea. Lea's mother tells Brent that her daughter had "a very caring soul" and "would have spread joy all over the country" (40). As a way of keeping Lea's spirit alive in the world, her mother asks Brent to travel alone to all four corners of the country and to erect whirligigs, each with Lea's image as a part of the design. In fact, she is giving him a chance at redemption and re-birth, a chance to be alone with his thoughts and contemplate spirit—the opportunity, as Emerson put it, to "enjoy an original relation to the universe" (*Nature*).

Thoreau felt there was never a companion "so companionable as solitude," and Brent, freed from peer pressure, comes to feel much the same. As he travels alone on a cross-country bus, he begins to see everything from a new perspective—and to see things that he never could before. A host of his very own thoughts provides him good company. Now, "he saw everything from the outside. Much that he'd taken for granted before now struck him as curious: handshaking, the Pledge of Allegiance, neckties on men, sport teams named for animals . . ." (49).

Soon he begins to see connections that he never could before. On the bus, he "marveled at how naturally some people spun lines of connection, turning a world of strangers into family" (43). He remembers the word *krass*, from a Vonnegut novel he had read, "a term for a disparate group of people linked together without their knowledge" (48). And he begins to understand that "[e]verything we did—good, bad, and indifferent—sent a wave rolling out of sight"; he begins to wonder "what his own accounting, generations later, would look like" (70-71).

His world expands in ways he could have never imagined a year earlier. In Seattle, he meets a Canadian who introduces him to *go*, a Chinese board game—"Wheaties for the brain" (48). In San Diego, he meets a German who gives him a copy of *Two Years Before the Mast*, a work published by Richard Henry Dana in 1840, just fourteen years before *Walden*. Dana and Thoreau, it happens, both graduated from Harvard in 1837—the very day before Emerson appeared on campus to give his Phi Beta Kappa

speech, "The American Scholar" (Lauter 605). Dana's two years at sea—and *away* from Harvard—were not too unlike the two years Thoreau spent at Walden Pond, and though Thoreau chose to explore nature by taking walks in the woods and growing beans, he was not incapable of a sailing metaphor himself: "be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought." This seems to be what Brent is learning as he works his way through *Two Years Before the Mast*.

In a park on Puget Sound, the site for the construction of his first whirligig, Brent feels ignorant of nature.

He looked up at the stars, glinting silently, a movie without a soundtrack. Or was he simply deaf to their music? He realized he knew no constellations. Likewise the names of trees, flowers, rocks, birds, insects, fish. He was a foreigner here. He wished he knew some names. (49)

As he settles into his solitude, however, he begins to understand what Emerson proclaims in *Nature*—that "[t]he stars awaken a certain reverence," and if a man "would be alone, let him look at the stars." The more Brent educates himself, especially regarding the heavenly bodies, the more he sees how essential his individual viewpoint is in understanding his place in the universe.

Brent moved to a seat across the aisle so as to scan the darker eastern sky, waited through a long stretch of trees, then thought he spotted it: Deneb, in the constellation Cygnus, the swan. [. . .] He grinned in the darkness, unknown to those around him. He spoke the word *Deneb* in his mind and felt himself to be Adam, naming the new world around him. (63)

Before long he has grown "accustomed to feeling separate from the other passengers" on the bus, and when he looks out the window, he can tango privately with the trio of stars known as the summer triangle; he can believe they "shone for him alone" (64). The summer triangle becomes "a familiar face" (72), and his high school peers, "who'd once loomed like giants," become "barely visible" (74). The stars enlarge his perspective, give him a new measure by which to determine what is important, and in their honor, he determines, humbly, to master "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on his harmonica.

For the Transcendentalists, symbols of the interconnectedness of nature were commonplace. Thoreau could recall observing a railway bank of

thawing sand and clay and declare “that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all operations of Nature.” The symbol that seizes Brent’s imagination is, of course, the whirligig. As Brent sets up his first one near Puget Sound, he is no longer worrying about impressing others; now he can believe that he is only watched when the wind blows life into his whirligig, blowing life into Lea’s spirit, dispersing her spirit everywhere. Intentionally, he sets up this first whirligig in a public park, so that anyone and everyone can enjoy it. In San Diego and Miami, he contemplates more ambitious projects. The “much more complex system of rods and pivots” (93) he employs in Miami mirrors his growing understanding of the complex connections in nature, and after completing his final whirligig in Weeksboro, Maine, he can consciously think through the idea of his whirligigs as symbols of the workings of all nature.

The breeze off the water ruffled his hair and made the whirligig flash in the distance. He’d interlocked some of the blades so that one would pass its motion to the others. In his mind, his whirligigs were meshed the same way, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. The world itself was a whirligig, its myriad parts invisibly linked, the hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carrying motion across the globe and over the centuries. (133)

Emerson and Brent’s statures may differ vastly, but when, in “The American Scholar,” Emerson declares, “It is one light that beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men,” and Brent comes to believe that the human spirit blows through his whirligigs, they are fairly well in tune with each other.

Finally, when a woman he has only just met tells him that he is “a good person, not a bad one” (129), Brent realizes that though he may have done something horrible in causing Lea’s death, he cannot banish himself permanently from his rightful place in nature and in humanity. He can now listen to “his own wind surging in and out, and [feel] at one with the whirligig” (126). After completing this final whirligig, he walks back to Weeksboro to discover a lively country dance taking place in the Town Hall. He pays his money, goes in, and recognizes that the dancers are “a human whirligig” (130). A young woman asks him to join in. “It was exalting to be part of the twining and twirling,” he discovers, “and strangely thrilling to touch other hands and to feel them grasping his” (131). Brent has overcome petty

worries and peer pressure, experienced a journey all his own, and discovered for himself a legitimate place in humanity. It occurs to him that he may want to spend his lifetime building whirligigs. He is ready to make a positive contribution to the nation of men.

Whereas *Whirligig* is the story of one boy breaking free from suffocating group pressure and heading out on a solitary journey, a search for self and the place of self in a larger communion, *Stargirl* is the story of a girl already secure with her individuality, oblivious to peer pressure, whose sudden entry into a public high school throws into jeopardy the status quo of the entire student body.

As the narrator of *Stargirl*, junior Leo Borlock tells us, Mica Area High School (MAHS) is “not exactly a hot bed of nonconformity.” Students are so scared of being anything but mediocre—or different—that if they “happened to distinguish [them]selves, [they] quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands.” They “all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music” (*Stargirl* 9). The role model for most boys is Wayne Parr, an attractive but extraordinarily ordinary and boring boy who is admired “because he [is] so monumentally good at doing nothing” (20).

Into this environment walks Susan “Stargirl” Caraway. Homeschooled up until then, she is unconcerned with fashion trends and wears whatever she likes: a 1920 flapper dress one day, a kimono another. Unlike the other girls, she wears no make-up. She recites her own personal version of the Pledge of Allegiance. She brings a pet rat to school. She joins the cross country team, but when the course bends right, she goes left. When the P.E. teacher calls everyone in from the rain, she stays outside and dances. Most perturbing to her new classmates, she is not fazed at all that they think she is crazy.

A consummate individual not beholden to any small group, Stargirl has been free to develop an enormous sense of public spirit. Her days are consumed with doing good for others, without the slightest concern for receiving credit or payback. She scours the newspaper and bulletin boards for information about people’s wants and needs and sends them cards and presents. She somehow discovers the birthday of all her schoolmates and sings “Happy Birthday” to them in the cafeteria. She takes pictures of the little boy down the street, believing a scrapbook

of candid shots will bring him and his family great joy a few years down the road. Knowing what a thrill finding a penny can be for a small child, she leaves small change everywhere she goes.

At first, the MAHS students consider Stargirl a quirky freak. However, when she becomes a cheerleader, her enthusiasm is so inspiring that it dawns on everyone that individualism might just be interesting, and Leo is amazed to watch “the once amorphous student body separate itself into hundreds of individuals” (41). He also notes how their new individualism leads to public spirit.

It was wonderful to see, wonderful to be in the middle of: we mud frogs awakening all around. We were awash in tiny attentions. Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life. For years, the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. (40)

Ironically, as we discovered and distinguished ourselves, a new collective came into being—a vitality, a presence, a spirit that had not been there before. (41)

The novel’s focus, though, is on Leo and his feelings toward Stargirl. Her arrival affects him more than any of his schoolmates, for he falls head over heels in love with her. At first, Leo is confused by his feelings, and he pays a visit to the neighborhood guru, Archie Brubaker, a retired archaeologist whose opinion is highly respected by Leo and his friends. When Leo’s buddy Kevin suggests that Stargirl is of a different species, Archie quickly disagrees: “On the contrary, she is one of us. Most decidedly. She is more us than we are. She is, I think, who we really are. Or were” (32). Immune to peer pressure, Archie means, Stargirl has been able to create and maintain her original relation to the universe. She is just like Emerson’s “great man,” who “in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (“Self-Reliance”). All this really hits home with Leo. He has felt himself drifting in a malaise and senses the opportunity for an awakening.

Soon Stargirl is leading Leo into her “enchanted places,” especially the desert at the edge of their town. She knows in her heart what Archie later explains to Leo: the stars “supplied the ingredients that became us, the primordial elements” (177). For a while Leo has sensed that her voice came “from the stars” (74), and now she tells him: “The earth is speaking to us, but we can’t hear because of all the racket our senses

are making. [. . .] The universe will speak. The stars will whisper” (91). She advises Leo to tune out the trivial chatter in his life and tune in the universe. When *she* tunes in, she explains, “[T]here is no difference anymore between me and the universe. The boundary is gone. I am it and it is me” (92). Here, she is the quintessential Transcendentalist.

Under Stargirl’s Transcendentalist tutelage, Leo’s vision clears. “She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day,” he tells us. “She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see. [. . .] After a while I began to see better” (107-108). As she points out things she sees, things he had never noticed before, he understands from where her public spirit has sprung. For a brief while, they are “two people in a universe of space and stars” (95).

Unfortunately for Leo, he is an apprentice Transcendentalist at best, and when the student body turns against Stargirl again (because she insists on helping and cheering for *everybody*, including players on the opponents’ teams), he is left in a terrible bind. He does not want to lose her, but “the silent treatment” (97) that descends upon the two of them, “the chilling isolation” (99), causes him great emotional pain. Doi suggests that, in Japanese society, the indulged desire to *amaeru* leads to such a strong dependence on a particular group that “to be ostracized by the group is the greatest shame and dishonor” (53). This is exactly what Leo experiences. He is terribly ashamed of being shunned by his schoolmates—those who have liked him and comforted him even though he has done nothing of any particular merit—and his loss of their indulgent acceptance proves more than he can bear.

The only solution that comes to him is ill-conceived: he will change Stargirl. He will make her understand that she must bend her will to that of the group’s. Their discussions on the matter, though, reveal how different their deep-rooted ways of thinking are.

This group thing, I said, it’s very strong. It’s probably an instinct. You find it everywhere, from little groups like families to big ones like a town or school, to really big ones like a whole country. How about really, really big ones, she said, like a planet? Whatever, I said. The point is, in a group everybody acts pretty much the same, that’s kind of how the group holds itself together. Everybody? she said. Well, mostly, I said. That’s what jails and mental hospitals are for, to keep it that way. You think I should be in jail? she said. I think you should try to be more like the rest of us, I said. (137)

Leo, though more understanding of Stargirl's individuality and altruistic sense of public spirit than any of his schoolmates, ultimately finds himself valuing the comfort of the group over the self-actualizing energy and love that she can give him. Finally, he chooses the group over her.

Whirligig and *Stargirl* are novels, not empirical sociological studies, so we must be careful in suggesting how much they represent an American mindset. Still, it is interesting to compare how Brent and Stargirl fit into their local societies with how Emerson and Thoreau fit into the nineteenth century. In his introduction to the nineteenth century in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Paul Lauter describes, basically, the irrelevance of the Transcendentalists to their contemporaries (614-615). Their ideas may have held sway in certain literary circles, Lauter writes, but their "immediate effect on their time was not extensive." Their journal, *The Dial*, only had a circulation of about three hundred, and Thoreau's publisher had to return him most of the copies of his first book. Emerson was considered a heretic by the church, Thoreau a crank by his neighbors. According to Michael Meyers (9), one reason Thoreau liked speaking of himself as a Transcendentalist was it greatly dismayed the people around him.

Stargirl also dismays those around her. Her classmates at MAHS can revel in a spontaneous moment with her, as when they join her in the Bunny Hop at the school dance, but most of them are likely to remember her as they first saw her: "weird," "strange," and "goofy" (11). While Leo's memory of their relationship will color his outlook for the rest of his life, most of the others seem unlikely to absorb and retain significant amounts of her Transcendental vibrations.

Whirligig is constructed in such a way that Brent's schoolmates appear briefly, then move offstage. We are not privy to many of their thoughts, but as the theme for the party they have organized is chess, and the guests that come are required to take their roles as pawns, Fleischman does not leave us with the impression that many of them are cultivating strong leanings

toward individualism. And while Brent may encounter a lot of like-minded "Transcendentalists" on the road (though ironically, many are not Americans), we have to acknowledge that as Brent embarks on his journey, his classmates stay right where they are.

In the world of these two novels, then, the western psyche that Doi describes seems alive and well in Brent and Stargirl, but it is hardly observable—or *fleetingly* observable—in other characters. Both Fleischman and Spinelli seem eager to encourage their readers to think and act transcendently, while seeming to recognize that most of their readers' peers will only occasionally, and many of their readers' peers hardly ever or not at all. Thus, while *Whirligig* and *Stargirl* demonstrate that Transcendentalist ideas still thrive in the American imagination—they also seem to express Fleischman's and Spinelli's belief that the spiritual void felt by Emerson and Thoreau is still in need of filling.

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