

Returning to a book that shaped my imagination

Is there a word for nostalgia tinged with trauma?

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Jianan Liu)

Every so often I am overcome with the desire to find and reread a book I vaguely remember from my childhood. This generally requires strange web searches. “Ribbon head fell off” easily turned up “The Green Ribbon,” a story by Alvin Schwartz in which—you guessed it—an elderly woman’s head falls off when she finally allows her husband to untie the ribbon that has been snugly looped around her neck since she was a child. (It turns out many children of the ’80s were mildly traumatized by this story.) Locating *The Sisters Impossible* proved a challenge for years, until I finally found the right combination of details to summon the juvenile novel about a clumsy child and her perfect ballerina sister.

But no book evaded my adult grasp more persistently than the one about the little Swiss girl—no, not Heidi, another little Swiss girl. I remembered a small child injured in a bad accident, an old man who whittled figurines, and a lot about accepting Jesus into your heart. These plot points didn’t coalesce in any particular literary direction.

Finally identifying the novel—*Treasures of the Snow*, published in 1948 by British author Patricia St. John—felt like solving the best kind of riddle. Yet, while I waited for Amazon to deliver a copy, I couldn't help but contemplate my complicated relationship to this book. Is there a word for nostalgia tinged with trauma?

My first copy of the book was a gift from my childhood best friend. Lara and I had matching eyeglasses and short bobbed haircuts; we looked like Mary Engelbreit drawings come to life. We both loved to read, and we often concocted elaborate make-believe games from the stuff of *Baby Island* and *Hardy Boys* mysteries. We were kindred spirits in every way—except religiously. Lara's family attended a church that was far more evangelical than my own mainline congregation. I wouldn't be surprised if its members unapologetically identified as fundamentalist.

One night we were snuggled in sleeping bags, giggling and swapping stories. It was, in the rhythm of sleepovers, the moment when secrets start tumbling out. But the secret Lara divulged was not about a crush on a classmate. Rather, Lara shared that her family prayed regularly that my family would get saved.

I was startled and confused. I didn't know we needed saving—and yet, this new information did make a certain sense. Maybe our unsaved condition was the reason I seemed to possess a perpetually unsettled soul. When Lara gave me a copy of *Treasures of the Snow* for my tenth birthday, I read it as if it were sacred scripture. Despite my foggy recollections of the plot, I vividly remember what I did when I finished the last chapter: I clutched the book to my heart, closed my eyes, and invited Jesus to enter my heart, just as the characters in the book had done.

I felt nothing. No shift in my soul or transformation of my personality. I was crushed.

Long after Lara moved away, I tried to get saved again. Twice, actually: once at a Carman concert and again at a Billy Graham crusade. Each time I felt the same heavy disappointment. I was still the same insecure, selfish, and skeptical person, apparently incapable of encountering God. By age 15 I was frustrated and angry. I had started to accept that I must be destined to be an agnostic.

But confessing my lack of faith to a camp counselor at church camp prompted a wholly unexpected twist: a few months after I tearfully admitted my godlessness, I started to sense a call to ministry. The irony was not lost on me that I was not entirely sure I believed in God, yet I believed this hypothetical God wanted me to be a pastor.

Over time I came to accept that this was a form of faith. It took faith to move across the country for seminary, faith to kneel and receive the laying on of hands at my ordination, faith to step into a pulpit determined to preach with integrity. But despite the fact I've been a pastor for more than 17 years now, I've often felt that same sad nothing—a persistent sense that God is elusive. Faith has had to mean groping for God even as I serve God.

I suspect the Holy Spirit was involved with my long-awaited reunion with Annette, Lucien, and little broken-legged Dani. If I had reread *Treasures of the Snow* in my 20s or 30s, I think I would have found it preachy, saccharine, and manipulative. Annette's mother dies during childbirth in the first chapter, on Christmas Eve no less. Gone to spend "Christmas in heaven," leaving the girl and her father to raise newborn Dani with help from the children's deeply religious grandmother. Annette and Dani are uncommonly good children, drawn in sharp contrast to Lucien, the selfish and cruel boy responsible for Dani's catastrophic injury. This tragedy tests the limits of Annette's goodness, however, and Grandmother helps the girl find faith and forgiveness in the gospel.

The book *is* preachy, saccharine, and manipulative, and I expected to feel little more than disdain upon rereading it. But despite myself, I found it endearing, wholesome, and heartening. I was shocked to discover how thoroughly *Treasures of the Snow* shaped my Christian imagination. I've long perseverated on the notion that Jesus is knocking on the door and I don't know how to properly let him in; this image of Jesus longing to cross the threshold of one's heart is the central motif of the story.

Likewise, I suspect my obsession with redemption stories started with this book, which is to say my love for *Schitt's Creek* traces directly back to *Treasures of the Snow*. Moira Rose's transformation has nothing on Lucien's:

Ever since that night when he had asked Jesus to come into his heart, he had known that there must be a difference. The old bad temper and laziness and unhappiness could not stay for long in a heart that was open to the love of Jesus. Gradually Lucien began to find that, as long as he kept close to Jesus by praying and reading his Bible every day, the love was stronger than the bad temper and the laziness, and that he was growing into a nicer sort of boy.

Perhaps it's simplistic, but this isn't the worst way to imagine sanctification.

I've always told myself that I am a Christian and a pastor in spite of having failed to get saved the way Lara's family prayed that I might, in spite of having asked Jesus into my heart and felt nothing when the little Swiss children felt everything. As I finished reading *Treasures of the Snow* some 30 years after I first encountered it, I was stunned to feel that same urge to hold the book tight and pray to Jesus according to the Gospel of Patricia St. John. Even if this book stirred up spiritual angst, it also stirred up spiritual hunger.

The Holy Spirit didn't just bring *Treasures of the Snow* into my life a second time. I reckon the Spirit was collaborating with Lara the first time, all those years ago.