

# A book that influenced me

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**Bowral, 2004. Libby Gleeson**

How do you chose an influential title from a reading life of fifty years?

I first received this invitation from Nick when I was in America and assumed that the influence referred to, was for me as a writer, and I considered titles that I felt had inspired me to become a writer and then those that influenced my choices as a writer. And then of course I became aware that as a PEN event, the word influential meant something much more encompassing than the mere affecting of my career choice.

I contemplated talking about a book that I always cite when asked for my favourite title: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. That s a powerful novel set in the aftermath of the American Civil War. It s a book told me that I knew nothing of that war and that I also knew nothing of human suffering. But though it has affected me deeply and I cannot yet bring myself to reread it I think I was more deeply influenced by things I read when I was younger.

And so to another American novel first published in 1909. *A Girl of the Limberlost* by Gene Stratton Porter. I read it in a heavy, cloth bound edition, borrowed from the school library when I was about 13. I ve since purchased it in a paperback edition from 1986, a Dell Yearling Classic. If it were published now it would be a classic YA or young adult title although that kind of distinction was not made a hundred years ago. It would be marketed as a coming of age novel that deals with environmental issues. It would probably be edited down from its 400+ pages only J.K. Rowling goes unedited in the current climate.

It is the story of Elnora Comstock, a young girl who lives on a farm in an area that borders swampland. Her father drowned in the swamp before she was born and her mother stricken with grief is unable or unwilling to love her daughter. In fact she deeply resents the girl whose birth, she blames for her husband s death.

Elnora is determined to get an education. That costs money and her mother is totally opposed to supporting her in any way. And so Elnora arrives in high school on the first day having walked three miles from her cabin, dressed in brown calico clothes that are so out of date that she becomes the butt of jokes and unaware that she must pay tuition fees and also buy her own books. She is in despair, made worse when she realises that her mother was fully aware of all of this and yet did nothing to help.

Elnora is made of stern stuff. She works out ways to earn her living and pay her way. And it is the swampland, the Limberlost that is the means. Elnora becomes a hunter of butterflies and moths that she sells as well as Indian relics such as arrow heads.

She is of course beautiful and intelligent and she rises above the scorn of the other students to be successful, to win friendship and affection from her peers and eventually to gain entry college. She also wins the heart of a young man who is betrothed to another, city, girl and she nobly resists his advances until it is patently obvious that he has been scorned by the other young woman and so no ignoble act has taken place.

That summary of the plot line sounds like pure corn. But I loved it and

I know it influenced me in many ways. Why? I read it again this week, trying to answer that question.

Through my eyes, accustomed to reading, and writing in a contemporary, modern or post modern style, it is absolutely sentimental and unsubtle. The virtues of honesty, hard work, love of beauty, goodness and Christianity are trumpeted in no uncertain terms. The characters and their behaviour are beyond recognition. The prose is at times cumbersome and indulgent. But it is a rich romantic and exotic tale and, making allowances for the style, I could still appreciate it.

What a poem or a novel or a short story means is the outcome of a dialogue between the words on the page and the person who happens to be reading it: that is to say the meaning varies from person to person. They are the words of W. H. Auden.

Consider then, me as the 13 year old reader. There I was in Dubbo living a fairly straightforward, nineteen sixties existence. I went to school, I played sport, I hung around the house, and the café in the main street, and outside this ordinary town spread mile upon mile of red dirt in the drought and wheat fields or sheep grasslands in a good season. My family was supportive of an education I couldn't have contemplated not going to high school or indeed to University. All I had in common with Elnora was the red hair, and you must remember that this was red hair that didn't come out of a bottle that one uses to hide the grey. This was real red hair that went with fair skin and freckles and hats that your mother tried to insist upon and that was enough to have me identify directly in the same way that I had identified with Ann of Green Gables.

I was the only red-head in the class and though I was outwardly a sociable person, I was already the kind of kid who saw herself as different. I knew I was going to escape the town and go to Sydney and University when my peers wanted to grow up and at about 20, get married and have babies.

I cast myself into Elnora's position, passionate, persecuted, unloved but determined to overcome all. I could put aside my ordinary life and live out fantasies of this intense, emotional, other world.

The rest of my reading diet was probably Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner the Bronte sisters were still a year or so away, and so I became engulfed by the emotion of this book. This was no sentimental mother daughter stuff. When so many of the titles of Victorian or Edwardian fiction contained women that were dead, expiring on the chaise-louge, or being called by the sickly title of Marmee as in *Little Women*, this was warfare at home, the two women yelling, white faced, at each other across the table as the girl struggles to have her ambition and her identity taken seriously.

It is a story that focuses in on the ambition of one person in a claustrophobic family environment. But the desires of Elnora are universal:

- To become educated
- To have her voice heard
- To be allowed to grow to autonomy
- To free herself from the controls placed upon her
- To rise above the petty discrimination of her contemporaries

And to achieve all of this as a young woman in a society where the land and education are normally the preserves of men.

Alan Garner, an English novelist whose fiction for children has also influenced me, says it like this: When I am at my most personal, then am I most universal.

There are characters other than her mother who love and sustain her in her journey, and in time she and her mother are reconciled, but it is their initial struggle that stuck in my mind when it was brought back to my mind fairly recently.

As a 13 year old I think, I know, I was a romantic, I wanted some challenge that would allow me to struggle nobly and succeed. I was stirred by the efforts Elnora had to make to achieve that which I was being given as my right. And I was stirred too by the almost gothic leanings of this text.

The land the Elnora loves challenges beauty as my other books had taught me to believe. Forget rolling hills and dales, sweeping plains and beautiful coastlines. Here is swampland. There are hints of danger and a dark side to human behaviour. The father has been swallowed up by the swamp and gradually secrets about him are revealed. Unsavoury secrets, he was not the noble character his wife and daughter believed him to be. There are other men out there in the night and one of them spies on the beautiful young Elnora as she sits studying at night. She is innocent of his observing her, but his intentions are lewd and were certainly as obscure to me as a young reader as was the sex scene of *Tess of the d Urberveilles*. I didn't fully understand that then, but I felt the intense thrill of the writing I also didn't understand about landscapes being metaphors for human behaviour but I know I responded to the rich sensuality of this work.

Like other works of fiction since, this book allowed me to become another human being, to take on her life, her hopes and her dreams, her struggle for that which was important for her. And in doing so I grew a little in my own movement towards autonomy and adulthood. Into part of me was ingrained her belief in beauty and in goodness, a valuing of education and service to the community. Overwhelmingly the right of the individual to become the person they want to be and to express themselves the way they choose, unfettered by oppression, whether by parents or by others. I'm considerably older and more cynical now than I was at 13, but I still believe in those things although events in the wider world try to dissuade me.

I read this book 40 years ago and I think for about thirty years since, I forgot about it. I forgot about its author, Gene Stratton Porter who was in fact Geneva, a woman and a naturalist and nature photographer who mourned the disregard for the natural world as she watched the destruction of the forests, the draining of swamps and wetlands that happened as capitalist, industrialised America grew after the Civil War.

And then, in the late seventies I realised my own dream of writing a first novel that achieved publication. I'd been through University, trained as a teacher, become impressed or obsessed with children's literature and had done a major study of the role of women and girls in that literature. To any of you around at the time it would be no surprise to learn that the girls were overwhelmingly passive, or absent, and major active roles were overwhelmingly played by boys. I was determined that my first book would centre on a young, feisty girl, growing up in the bush, who is living her life and growing through various moments unhindered, and unaided by the boys around her. She would be strong and she would have red hair.

As I said, I had forgotten this book. I had moved a long way from my Dubbo childhood. This book was gone from my conscious mind. But for some reason that I was never able to explain to my publisher or to my readers, or indeed to myself, I named my central character Eleanor.

