

Maxine Trottier and Nancy Keating, *Forget-me-not.*

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The second half is in many ways the meat of the book. Here we are told of the practical and the actual of making the mats and we hear directly from their makers. The individual voices are amplified by the presence of so many images, with each pattern built row by row, each colour newly animated by our better understanding of its hand-wrought birth. The women that produced the works may not be able to recognize which mats they were responsible for making, but they could well recognize themselves in this retelling.

The notes and bibliographic information alone make this a worthwhile addition to any collection of those interested in material culture, social histories, indigenous textile arts, or Newfoundland and Labrador. Its wealth of images make it a pleasure to view.

My questions and criticisms suggest that no one book can cover a subject so ripe, but Lavery has crafted an invaluable introduction here.

Jake Moore
Concordia University

Maxine Trottier and Nancy Keating, *Forget-me-not*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2008, ISBN 9781897174241.

Forget-me-not, a children's book written by Maxine Trottier and illustrated by Nancy Keating, is a work of historical fiction set in 1917. The story opens with a portrait of a young girl, Bridget Keats, who spends her days by the sea watching boats through her spyglass. While emphasis is placed on what Bridget sees and what she is told, her perspective is narrated in the third person limited point of view, a mode which is often privileged in historical narratives for the focus on the objective representation of facts in the text. Trottier, however, introduces elements of subjectivity in her book by introducing fiction into her story and by telling this story in the perspective of the main character. As Kelley Griffith puts it,

“as with omniscient narrators, narrators of the third-person limited point of view refer to characters as ‘he’ and ‘she,’ and still have more knowledge of the fictional world than we do of our worlds. But they restrict (limit) their perspective to the mind of one character. This character may be either a main or peripheral character. Names for this character are ‘central consciousness,’ ‘reflector,’ and ‘filter.’ A plot device that often accompanies this point of view is the character’s gradual discovery of some truth that climaxes with an epiphany.” (Kelly Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005, 37).

In this case, the story's narrative mode articulates Bridget's detachment from the world she is viewing and restricts interpretation to the reality and events that surround her. Trottier establishes Bridget's role as a “watcher” in the story to address unsettling and complex issues in a subtle and delicate manner. To make the story accessi-

ble to its young audience, both author and illustrator collaborate to create a book in which the illustrations are an integral part of the storytelling. The strategy of framing history within the context of Bridget's surroundings is a way for the author to deal with adult subject matter in an indirect way. By telling the story through a child's perspective, she attempts to make the past accessible to the young reader. The act of looking back to history is part of her approach to teaching children about the war.

Nancy Keating's drawings, which accompany the narrative, also engage the child reader in a retrospective look to the past. Barthes alludes to the particular relationship photographs have to the past when he refers to the noeme "that-has-been" to reflect on the photograph's representation of a moment in time that no longer exists in the present (See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 96). Each drawing in this book is framed with a border and contains a photographic illustration to depict an event in the narrative. Keating thus assigns a realistic value to her images, since photographs are commonly interpreted as accurate representations of reality. A naïve reading of the photographic image assumes the photograph is a pure and simple reproduction of reality (See Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique et autres essais*. Paris: Nathan, 1990 and Barbara E Savedoff, *Transforming Photographs: How Photography Complicates the Picture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Keating eloquently captures the act of recalling history by recreating the historical and geographic landscape of early twentieth century Newfoundland. Women are dressed in period clothing, for example. In one illustration, in which Bridget's mother is knitting, we see a copper kettle on a wood stove. Lighthouses and timber-framed houses are painted in vibrant colours. These structures, along with the natural scenery surrounding them, provide the visual backdrop to the story. The retrospective character of the images is confirmed in the narrative, through which Bridget's story is told in the past tense to evoke memories of a past era. Moreover, the use of vocabulary, such as "skiffs," "nets," "jiggers," and "schooners" contributes to the articulation of an authentic setting. The inherent ambiguity associated with the war in the narrative is also illustrated in the images. The use of water pastels blurs the vibrant hues to create a light mood in the book. The illustrations take on an impressionistic character and collaborate with the text to articulate the layers of subtlety, both stated and implied, in Bridget's story. The majority of the illustrations depict Bridget and her mother, and it is through the representation of these two characters that Trotter communicates ideas on war in the book.

Bridget and her mother, Mrs Keats, live in a small Newfoundland outport during the World War I. The subtle way in which the narrator alludes to Bridget's father's death is just one example among many in which harsh realities are diluted in the narrative through abstract thought. The narrator explains that Bridget's mother sails alone across the bay with a canvas bag containing "wool stockings for the soldiers fighting in the war." She takes the stockings to the post office, returning with letters "from away." Bridget's mom assumes sole responsibility for her daughter,

alluding to the death of her husband when she tells Bridget that her father would have gone to the war “had the sea not taken him.”

Although the narrator makes reference to war and the soldiers, the ideas associated with these concepts, much like other terrifying realities such as death, remain elusive to the young girl. When thinking about the soldiers at war, it is in a dream that Bridget perceives the war scene. Dreams are strongly associated with abstract thought, since their meaning remains mostly elusive to the dreamer and requires interpretation for clarification. In her dream, the war appears as an unknown and distant reality. Bridget’s thoughts reveal only that the soldiers are fighting in a “far away country.” Her failure to express the exact location of the soldiers explains her inability to fully comprehend the situation. Also, in her dream, Bridget sees the soldiers “sleeping all around her,” which may be a euphemism for death. The dark reality of death is implied in the dream when the moon overhead whispers to Bridget in her dead father’s voice.

By contributing to the war effort on the home front, Mrs. Keats serves as a filter through which her daughter perceives and understands war. In one particular illustration, we see a smiling Mrs. Keats reading a letter to Bridget. She reveals the contents of the letter to her daughter as she reads it aloud: “Dear Mrs. Keats, Thank you for the stockings you and Bridget sent us, we do love grey.” The narrator confirms that the letter’s contents cause Bridget and her mom to laugh. On the same page, the narrator reveals that bad news is kept from Bridget: “If the news was hard, and during the war it was sometimes very hard, they would wrap it up inside themselves. That’s what you did with hard news, Bridget understood, especially news about the war. But if it were good news, news about the soldiers, that was different.” In her decision to reveal only good news to her daughter, Mrs. Keats protects Bridget from the harsh realities of war. This is especially true when Bridget confronts her mother about a strange man she spots one day through her spyglass. While looking out at the small island nearby, where an old abandoned lighthouse sits, she spots a merchant’s boat leaving behind a man. She asks her mother about the identity of the man whose face is rumored to be “a cruel sight.” To this, Bridget’s mom reveals only that the man is an officer named Jake Wiseman who was sent back from the war because he was wounded. Mrs. Keats also mentions that Bridget will be delivering food to the officer on the island. However, she instructs her daughter to keep her distance from this man when she tells her to “leave him in peace.” On her first trip to the island to make a delivery, Bridget is overcome by her fears. As she stands at the door, she drops the bread and basket of eggs that she is carrying and rushes back home. The next time Bridget returns to the island to deliver food, she sees a note posted on the wounded officer’s door. The note reads: “I prefer my eggs unscrambled. J.W.” The officer’s lighthearted response to the dropped eggs pacifies the young girl’s fears and takes away some of the mystery surrounding the unknown man. To reciprocate the wounded soldier’s kindness, Bridget sets down some flowers she picks on the basket of food. This expression of affection allows Bridget to forge an alliance with Jake Wiseman. The following day,

upon her return to the nearby island, she finds another note attached to the front door. Next to the note is a pencil on a string. On the note Bridget reads two words: "Sea Lungwort." Unable to understand the meaning of the message, Bridget writes back to the officer: "If it is something you want, we have none at home. Mother will have to row across the bay for it. Yours, Bridget Keats." On her following visit, Bridget sees yet another note posted at the door. This time, the officer's message is in response to Bridget's note: "Sea Lungwort — also known as ice plant — not for sale, but still beautiful." The officer explains that "Sea Lungwort" is the name of the flowers that Bridget left for him. By initiating the dialogue with Bridget, the soldier broadens the young girl's understanding of the world that surrounds her. Bridget replies to Jake Wiseman's comment concerning the "Sea Lungwort: We call it blue bonnet." She then picks yellow flowers growing nearby and tucks them under Jake Wiseman's note, on which she writes: "what do you call these?" In his next message, the officer responds to Bridget's question by writing to her that the yellow flowers are called "Toadflax." Prior to learning the flower's name, Bridget had always referred to "Toadflax" as "butter and eggs." Each time Bridget delivers food to the officer's door, she brings him a different flower, for which the officer provides her with an alternate name. Through Jake Wiseman's influence, Bridget develops a new outlook on her environment, assigning new meaning to common experiences. With each new word that the soldier provides to the young girl, the narrator informs the reader that "what had been as ordinary as milk suddenly sounded magical to Bridget." Through her correspondence with Jake Wiseman, Bridget is able to engage in her own experience of reading letters outside of her mother's control.

Bridget steps outside her role as a "watcher" to do her part to help in the war effort. Jake Wiseman is the closest that Bridget is able to get to the reality of the war. As he becomes familiar to Bridget through their verbal exchanges, he becomes a common fixture on the small island, and no longer seems "strange or terrible" to her. Instead, he becomes a comforting presence for the child. One day, while making a routine delivery of food and flowers for Jake Wiseman, a storm hits. The violent winds and rain disturb the sea and send its waves crashing to the shore. Bridget remembers having seen her mother prepare her boat to return home from the post office. Afraid that her mother is caught in the storm, Bridget rushes back to the lighthouse. In a frenzied panic and in search for help, Bridget returns to the officer's door and pleads for him to do something. She then runs up the lighthouse stairs hoping to light the lamp in order to guide her mother through the storm. Bridget struggles to ignite the flame as the matches fail to strike in her wet hands. Suddenly, light beams from the lamp. She looks up and sees Jake Wiseman standing in front of her. He reassures the young girl that her mother will find her way home. Bridget, "too young to think of what it must have cost him to show his face," thanks the wounded soldier. When the storm passes, she leaves Jake behind at the lighthouse, and rows across the shore to where her mother is waiting for her. The officer watches Bridget as she rows back to her mother. Isolated on the island because of his disfigured face,

Jake makes himself vulnerable to Bridget; he shows his face to her to save her mother from harm. This offers a moment of revelation in the story which symbolizes the soldiers' countless acts of selfless bravery. As he watches Bridget return to safety, Jake thinks about his comrades who sacrificed. When the ocean calms and a perfect sunrise appears above the horizon, he "puts out the lamp" and exits the story. The following day, Bridget and her mother are informed that Jake has left the island. Bridget returns to the lighthouse to find no sign of the officer except for a sheet of paper on a table, next to which are the flowers she had left on her last visit. The soldier's last message: "Forget-me-not Bridget Keats. Yours, Jake Wiseman."

Forget-me-not is titled to reflect on the literal and symbolic meaning of the expression. Jake's final words leave a lasting impression on Bridget and carry significant meaning in the book. His message is literally the name of the flowers she had picked for him, but of course suggests a deeper meaning to Bridget's relationship with the officer. Due to the bond he forges with Bridget, Jake Wiseman asks the girl not to forget him. Characteristic of the delicate way in which Trottier articulates concepts of war in the book, Jake's fate is left open to interpretation. The Forget-me-not becomes a symbol for the wounded soldier to recall his selflessness and a broader frame of reference for Bridget to which she associates the soldier's deeds with public ceremonies of remembrance. The narrator reveals that Bridget thinks of these flowers in later years as she watches soldiers march by, hears bagpipes playing, and listens to speeches. The flower bears a strong significance in the history of Newfoundland. The Forget-me-not is used in Newfoundland as a symbol of remembrance for those who have been wounded or who have perished in the war. Although the Forget-me-not alludes to a harsh reality, it associates this reality to love and hope in a way that memorializes the many acts of valour and selfless heroism that were demonstrated on the battle lines and on the home front. Although *Forget-me-not* does not specifically look to the soldiers in the field, which provide the primary reference point for the flower's symbolism, this was clearly not Trottier's intention. Her story focuses on the unsung heroes of the war.

To the history of the flower, Trottier adds the story of the women who worked courageously on the home front to do their part. She does her own bit in remembering the war and brings new meaning to the expression Forget-me-not. Although much of the symbolism in the book would escape the young reader's scope of knowledge and understanding, the language still retains strong elements of simplicity to remain accessible to its young audience and to impart its main message of remembrance. A nuanced and thoughtful book, yet simple to understand, *Forget-me-not* adds to Maxine Trottier's growing legacy of children's writing in which history overlaps with fiction to teach inspirational lessons on exemplary figures in Canadian history. Trottier's books act as tributes to Canadian history, in which the past is disclosed, remembered, and celebrated through a fictional lens.

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