I cannot look at the moon without searching it for mothers, known and unknown. I still get up before dawn and wait for the whispering of secrets. I listen for them stealing toward me in some grand conspiracy, carrying my story within them, a child of lives passed in trust, a bride to the confidences of women.

— Betty Louise Bell, Faces in the Moon

“This essentially autobiographical fiction . . . except I have nine siblings and my mother was still alive when the book was written. Otherwise, it’s pretty much from my life.” This is how Betty Bell describes her first novel, Faces in the Moon.

This book is an adult’s search for connection with the child she once was. In the first chapter, we are introduced to the personal struggle of the narrator, the adult Lucie. Lucie has distanced herself from her childhood, and the real protagonist of the novel is the young Lucie, whom the narrator describes as “the child whose place I have taken” (6). Lucie is a little girl who listens raptly at her mother’s table to the stories she is told. She hears the stories of her women relatives time and time again: “I was raised on the voices of women” (4). Bell proceeds to show the reader that these stories are an integral part of Lucie’s life as a child and adult. The stories are the glue that connects her past and present, her child and adult selves.

Reviewed by Heather Cronin Ott

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Most children, at some point, try to leave their pasts behind them, and Lucie is no different. She has been abused; she has lived in poverty. She has not had the most fulfilling relationship with her mother. The trials of her childhood are experiences she wishes to be rid of, but escape from her past is not possible. She must come to terms with it. Bell uses the image of a foot race to describe the elder Lucie’s relationship with her familial past: “No matter how great my desire to run away from home I always take up my position at the table I almost out run them but in the long distance they pass me” (4). Running away from aspects of life is a central theme in the book. Many dream sequences are filled with dog chases or chases by unseen villains. Sometimes a character is chased by memory and ghosts. We see how running from the past and present has affected many of the characters we meet. Bell’s vision is that those characters who do not run or who stop running are able to remain grounded.

As indicated by the title of the book, some of the characters are gone now, to be found only when one looks upon the moon. The narrator sees the child Lucie in the moon “like a patient memory, for my claim” (6). This is the crux of the novel the need to reclaim history, memory, and the past, to stop running and accept the notion that the past is a needed piece for the future. A firm connection with the past allows an acceptance and awareness of where one comes from.

The women in this novel are all strong willed. Some, like Lucie’s mother Gracie and the elder Lucie, are running from their past and searching for their place. Others, like Lucie’s Great Aunt Lizzie and Grandmother Hellen, are shown as being grounded with a strong sense of identity. Gracie, Lucie’s mother, is a half-blood Cherokee who has essentially embraced her non-Indian heritage. She says that she has the “Scotch” blood. She dyes her hair blond, plucks her eyebrows, and is very materialistic. Gracie “mixed her own blonde dye . . . and called it scalping” (39). She lost track of friends but kept every material thing that came her way (40). Gracie’s sister, Rozella, is her “constant companion” (11), a woman who “drank and married hard-drinking no-good men” (11).

Hellen, Lucie’s grandmother and the mother of Rozella and Gracie, is the foundation of Lucie’s memory within this novel. Hellen had been the cherished girl of her family, loved by her father and brothers. She would ask to hear their stories again and again. Her reverence for these stories is indicative of her power within this book. Her own life story was told numerous times by her daughters. She left the family after a “no-account traveling Scotch preacher” (11) got her pregnant twice and left without marrying her. She raised two little girls on her own and married a white man in order to give them a better life. Although Hellen is separated from her people, she is redeemed by working so hard to care for her children. Her dedication to her daughters is her strength.
Lizzie, Lucie’s great aunt, is married to one of Hellen’s brothers. Lizzie is a wise woman who has a firm belief in God and knows her place in the world. She and her husband work a small farm near Davis, Oklahoma. Lizzie has a strong sense of her heritage and where she came from. It is she who shows Lucie that there is power in her world, seen through dreams, legends, and stories. She shares with Lucie the story of how Hellen’s father came to acquire a parcel of land through the allotment process. Historically, from a Native perspective, the process of allotment was yet another way for the United States government to force assimilation and rob American Indians of their lands. Allotment had a negative affect on family and tribal structures; it facilitated a disconnection with traditional identity. Hellen spent a lot of her childhood in Lizzie’s house, learning much from Lizzie’s mother. She listened to the stories told to her and wanted to hear them many times. Lucie looks to Lizzie in much the same way. It is Lizzie who gives Lucie the knowledge of her people, and it is this knowledge and understanding that will reconnect the adult Lucie with her childhood.

The novel begins in present time. Lucie returns to her mother’s house when Gracie has fallen ill. While her mother is in the hospital, Lucie stays at Gracie’s house, and her memories take her back to different parts of her childhood. We are offered a glimpse into a very bleak reality. Lucie is required, at the age of four, to make breakfast for Gracie and her current boyfriend, J.D. One morning while Gracie is sleeping off the drinking from the previous night, J.D. begins to verbally abuse Lucie. He mimics her; he tells her she’s trash and so is her mother. All of this is being said while the four year old makes him breakfast. After J.D. sexually molestes her, Gracie decides to take Lucie to the farm to stay with Lizzie. Unaware of the abuse, she only sees that J.D. is upset with Lucie’s lack of respect. Lucie remains on the farm for two years, and most of the novel takes place during this time. It is here that Lucie hears more stories of her heritage. Arriving a child wise beyond her years to the pain of the world, Lucie’s time at the farm allows her to learn how to be a child, to play, to pretend.

Through stories and memories we see how poverty has touched the lineage of Lucie’s family. When Gracie and Rozella were children, Hellen left them in a car at a junk yard while she went in search of employment. They lived there until she made enough money to pay rent. Later, they stayed locked in their shack of a house for fear that authorities would take them away from their mother. Hellen walked to work five miles each way, seven days a week. This dedication to her daughters is an important aspect in the stories they will tell when they are adults.
Lucie’s mother grew up during the Depression and was always hungry. Later, as an older woman, Gracie keeps her cupboards stocked with hundreds of different kinds of canned foods. Gracie’s life has led her to become a hard-handed mother. She drinks and has boyfriends who are abusive toward her and her daughter. She has sharp words and hands for Lucie. The expository information about Gracie indicates that she has had a struggle for identity which has led her to embrace a non-Native appearance. To Gracie, Indian blood means “black hair . . . and . . . quiet ways” (10), and she sees herself as the opposite of that. Although she has respect for her mother, Gracie seems to balk at other aspects of her Indian heritage. She makes comments about Lizzie as being an “uppity Indian” (122). While she is set apart from her Native side, Gracie still remains a vessel for the stories. It is Gracie’s storytelling that Lucie is touched by, and it is because of these stories of her history that the adult Lucie will be able to love and forgive her mother (9). In a pivotal moment in the plot, Gracie sends Lucie to the one relative left alive she feels has Indian blood. While she can’t show her daughter how to empower herself as an Indian, she sends her to Lizzie who can.

It is through the lives of her female characters that Bell shows the reader the strength and constitution of women. This book empowers its women. These characters are not perfect, but it is their believable humanness and their force of will to carry on which will most impress the reader. Bells themes are survival, loyalty, love, loss, and renewal. The child Lucie, her mother Gracie, grandmother Hellen, aunt Rozella, and her great aunt Lizzie all are a part of the story which the elder Lucie must understand before she can accept her identity. Through the females of her past, she is able to find vitality in her life. The novel ends with this advice remembered and spoken by Lucie: “Don’t mess with Indian women. You don’t need to know no more than that” (193).

Although Bell refutes the idea of a vanishing Indian culture in several ways, she does show there has been cultural loss and change. Lucie’s Uncle Jerry says, “Its like were a mess of children raising other children . . . Since the old people died there don’t seem to be a place for the young folk any more . . . young people just go their own way” (162). We see Gracie and Rozella living lives far from Cherokee traditions. Even Hellen’s Cherokee father facilitates this loss when all he can dream about is getting a piece of allotted land. Loss of control of Cherokee land is complicated by the marrying of Cherokees and whites. Lizzie has become a Christian. Lucie grew up and left the state, marrying a Jewish man and becoming a teacher. She is vaguely ashamed of her heritage. But even with all these fractures, still it is only loss that we see, not the vanishing of a race and culture. There is no loss of a people, but rather a realistic portrait of loss of connection with traditional tribal values.
With loss comes change but not disappearance. Gracie and Rozella may be changed but they still retain awareness of the power and importance of storytelling. They still believe that their mothers face can be seen in the moon. Lizzie too realizes the power and necessity of story, the need to remember where you came from and who you were. By the novels end, Lucie has come to terms with her heritage. She realizes the importance of continuing the story. She says, “I am your worst nightmare: I am an Indian with a pen” (192). Bell has rejected the notion of fragility and vanishing. She has shown strong characters who are changed but who continue to be connected with the past.

Bell does not give readers stories of ancient oral tradition. Instead we are told of modern day oral stories that have been passed down one generation to the next. The stories are of modern heroes such as Quanah Parker who was a half-blood Comanche chief in Texas. His greatness came from never losing a battle to white soldiers. After much fighting, he eventually surrendered, but he continued to lead his people after surrender. He became a controversial figure among his tribe. He signed papers that eventually broke up the reservation. According to the director of the Fort Sill National Historic Landmark, Quanah was a man who “came in and surrendered, and following the white mans road he continued to maintain the Indian values and customs in spite of living in two worlds” (Magers). Although he became part of white society, he still maintained the Native traditions of his people: he practiced polygamy and the peyote religion (Simmons and Martin). Lucie hears this story from Lizzie and embraces Quanah Parker as her champion.

Bell chooses Lucie’s hero to be a man whose place in society reconciles two worlds. Many of the characters in Bells book live stories grown out of assimilation and its effects, but their stories also hold tight to the importance of memory. Bell touches on the effects of the modern world on ethnic identity, creating a story of how assimilated Indians find a sense of place in a modern world. Their “Indianness” is not necessarily steeped in pre-colonial tradition but is made up of several Native themes: fighting back, kinship, heritage, the power of words, and continuation.

In his book *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*, Arnold Krupat highlights the idea of retention and change in American Indian novels: “So again there is a movement out, of progress or advance, but as well a movement back, a return in memory to the kitchen table as home. But this return will not ideologically authorize anything like the presumed satisfaction, unity or plentitude of a pre-colonial past” (50). Krupat’s views are insightful in regard to this novel.
The return is a connection with family members who have passed away. The return brings the narrator and thus Bell to a place of connection with her family history, a history that began when traditional, pre-colonial life ended. While there may be no return to unaltered traditionalism, the return to family is indeed filled with satisfaction, unity, and plentitude. Bell and the elder Lucie are each a nexus which leads to the future. Bell empowers herself and Cherokee women of the past, present, and future.

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