

From Another Perspective

By Laura Stoll, Assistant to the Director

I recently read a book from a very unique point of view and I can't stop thinking about it. Catherine Chidgey's "The Axeman's Carnival" is written through the eyes of a bird; a magpie, to be precise. Tama (named after a Tamagotchi toy) lives in New Zealand with Marnie and Rob and when I say "lives," I mean Tama sleeps in their bed, eats from their hands, and knows what goes on in their minds.

I still can't decide if I liked it, but the book was well-written and memorable, and it got me thinking about perspectives and how focusing on different characters can change a story dramatically. While Marnie and Rob are fairly interesting characters, their story is a hundred times more captivating as told by a bird.

Another twist on perspective is taking a well-known story and telling it again from a different approach. This genre is called modern retellings or reimagined classics. Simply by changing the point of view or refocusing the timeline can drastically change the original story. Here are some books that take a classic story and turn it on its ear.

"James" by Percival Everett. This book retells Mark Twain's classic "Huckleberry Finn" from Jim's perspective. It had been a long time since I'd read about Huck but a short YouTube video brought me up to speed. Jim's life as an enslaved person is horrific (to put it mildly), but Everett's writing is gripping. The different ways that Jim talks to the people he encounters on his journey down the Mississippi will have you thinking long after you finish reading.

"After Oz" by Gordon McAlpine. We all read about how Dorothy Gale was carried off by a tornado to the land of Oz but what happened after she got home? In this book, Dorothy's memories are seen as senile so "when the body of a local spinster is found matching Dorothy's description of a witch she claims to have killed, authorities find incriminating evidence tying Dorothy to the real murder, and they sentence her to the Topeka Insane Asylum." Maybe life over the rainbow isn't as technicolor as we were led to believe!

"When We Flew Away" by Alice Hoffman. In this fiction book, acclaimed author Hoffman explores Anne Frank's life before she and her family went into hiding from the Nazis. According to the publisher, the book describes how the world closes in on the Frank family from the moment the Nazis invade the Netherlands until they are forced into hiding. This book is written for children but I can't wait to read it before I dive into another reread of Frank's diary.

"March" by Geraldine Brooks. While Jo, Beth, Meg, Amy, and Marmee are at home in Concord, as told in "Little Women," their father is far away fighting the Civil War for the Union Army. "March learns that his side, too, is capable of acts of barbarism and racism. As he recovers from a near mortal illness, he must reassemble his shattered mind and body and find a way to reconnect with a wife and daughters who have no idea of the ordeals he has been through."

If these sobering tales have got you down, think about the many ways Jane Austen's books have been retold over the years: the movie "Clueless" is based on "Emma," "Bridget Jones' Diary" is an homage to "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters" is self-explanatory.

While some might argue that these authors are using someone else's original idea, the depth and imagination in these books, not to mention the excellent writing, make them soon-to-be classics.