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REVIEW

Cherie Dimaline. *Into the Bright Open: A Secret Garden Remix*. Feiwel and Friends, 2023. 274 pages. ISBN: 978-1-250-84265-7

The Remixed Classics series invites "authors from diverse backgrounds to take different literary classics from centuries past and reinterpret then through their own unique cultural lens" (Macmillan). Given the opportunity to reimagine Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Cherie Dimaline explains that using her home community of Penetanguishene, Ontario on Georgian Bay for the setting was a natural decision. She knew that transposing the novel's core elements of love and struggle into a Métis context would work: "We're good at both", she says (275).

Dimaline unearths the better story buried beneath the cultural and temporal trappings (racism, classism, sexism) of Burnett's 1911 novel and pays homage to the story of a young girl coming of age. Dimaline has trimmed Burnett's *The Secret Garden* to its essential scaffolding: neglected children, a buried key, a locked garden, transformation – it's all there. And in a gentle nod to the classic story, she embeds Burnett's title within the body of her own tale, *Into the Bright Open*.

But she also makes the story her own. In her retelling, Dimaline writes about fifteen-year-old Mary Craven, a white girl from a wealthy family who must relocate from

Toronto to Georgian Bay in 1901 to stay with a distant uncle after a family tragedy. Profoundly lonely and socially awkward, Mary struggles to adapt to new customs and cultures. But the people she meets in this new place provide her with the family and community she has always desired, and she rises to the challenges that enable her personal growth and opens herself to a fulfilling and authentic life.

At its heart, Dimaline's novel meditates on the ways that loneliness and neglect shape us. While her Mary is less physically ill than her classic counterpart, she suffers from poor self-regard and often feels disconnected and numb. She retains the prickly oddness of Burnett's character, but in granting her more life experience, Dimaline also offers her a more developed voice. Instead of a thin, sickly 10-year-old named Mary Lennox living in British colonial India in the early 1900s, Dimaline's Mary Craven is an adolescent girl who awakens to her queer sexuality.

Dimaline potently transposes the colonial racism of Burnett's novel to a Canadian context. Her deliberate use of era-specific racial slurs is jarring, as Dimaline undoubtedly meant it to be. Because the racism is so specific, and because the people it is aimed at are central to the story, it feels personal. Dimaline's critique of canon is just as pointed: Sophie, the Métis girl who fleshes out the Dickon role in Dimaline's story, questions the power that Shakespeare wields over the Western canon. In a conversation where Mary aims to convince Sophie why they should stage a production of "Romeo and Juliet", Mary says to her,

> "William Shakespeare wrote [*Romeo and Juliet*], and he is a master."
>
> "Says who?"
>
> Mary threw her arms up and out, indicating the entirety of the world around them.
>
> "Everyone!"
>
> "You put too much stock in men who other men say are good, are right. Why do their words matter and not mine? […] They are what, England's best? This is not England. This is not where English words shape the land" (221).

Through the voice of a young Métis girl, Dimaline creates space for other voices to exercise necessary anticolonial critiques.

At the novel's end, when the girls produce and present their own stage play instead of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as previously planned, Dimaline is unequivocal in the

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statement she's making about language and power. By referencing canonical texts (and using a canonical children's text as the site of exploration), Dimaline achieves a meta-critique of canon that is both overt and subversive. And by centring her story with a largely female cast, she effectively dismantles the troubling sexism that readers and critics of *The Secret Garden* have long grappled with. Instead of the wealthy landowner's son, Colin, coopting the narrative with his own character arc and with his proselytizing that, from a modern perspective, is difficult to view as anything other than mansplaining, Dimaline's Mary remains central and is even cast as the hero. When Olive is finally freed from her life as an invalid, she says to Mary, "I feel like Rapunzel finally returned from exile." Mary adds, "And the prince saved you!" [in reference to Olive's father's return and intervention]. Olive responds, "No, Mary…You did" (265). Rather than granting credit to the usual hero (powerful, white, male), Dimaline makes sure that the credit is redirected to where it is deserved.

A question commonly asked of reimagined and revisioned classics is whether they need to be read in partnership with the original. *The Secret Garden* was a significant part of both my childhood reading and my early academic work, and this background familiarity did provide a richness to my reading of Dimaline's story and an appreciation for what she achieves with her revisioning. But in both critiquing and paying homage to a long-beloved children's story, she has written a novel that demonstrates a capacity to stand firmly as a classic in its own right.

Dimaline's work features many recognizable counterparts from Burnett's work, though they are uniquely fleshed out characters and not meant as mirrored images: Burnett's Ben Weatherstaff is apparent in a Métis labourer named Jean, Martha Sowerby is discernable in Flora, and Colin Craven, Burnett's mysterious sick-child-in-the-attic, is replaced with Mary's cousin, Olive. The addition of a sinister stepmother (Mary's step-aunt) amplifies the intensity of the story's trajectory and climax, a departure from the meandering and spiritual-philosophical bent of Burnett's novel, which perhaps enhances the accessibility of Dimaline's more plot-driven story for contemporary readers. And while the stepmother, Rebecca, is an almost painfully archetypal 'evil stepmother', her presence provides the catalyst for Mary's blossoming agency. Similarly, though Olive disappears for a little too long in the centre of the story, this gap leaves necessary space for Mary and Sophie to find their way.

Their way leads, like Burnett's characters', to the locked garden at the edge of the woods, which becomes their haven. For, just as the ancient, walled garden next to the Yorkshire moors provides a safe but wild-adjacent backdrop to Burnett's story, Georgian Bay's isolation from urban centres provides the necessary space to explore self-actualization and to learn to resist restrictive social norms. Burnett's Mary comes to life as she discovers the garden in winter and helps nurture it back to life through the seasons. Dimaline places her Mary in the garden in the heady, full-blown growth of June and transposes the concept of healing into a wider, more inclusive context. Ultimately, Mary's transformation is less about time spent in nature and more due to the kindness, love, and support that she receives from the Métis community. Subsequently, her understanding of class and race grows more nuanced through the relationships she has with the people from this community. As well, this place enables Mary to explore and embrace her sexuality. In her Acknowledgement, Dimaline says that she "wanted to write queer characters back into the landscape in this time period" because "they have always been here" (275). She has created a queer-positive coming of age story where the characters experience sexual awakening free from shame. The title, *Into the Bright Open,* appears as a refrain throughout, reaffirming the light and love at the core of this reimagined tale and speaks to the kind of story that can heal its readers.

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