



Blind Spot: Daddy-Long-Legs

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[91](#) [2]

Article Category:

Blind Spot

Byline:

Robert Leeson on why he resists the appeal of Jean Webster's classic, **Daddy-Long-Legs**.

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I first knew **Daddy-Long-Legs** in a hostile boy's way. The title, as with *Fauntleroy* and *C. Robin*, made me, like Tontant Weader, want to throw up.

But at 12, I read my older sisters' mags, and **Jane Eyre**, and Gene Stratton Porter's **Girl of the Limberlost**. So I read **DDL**.

Books about orphans had a family resonance. Poverty, through the early death of grandparents, projected my father and his siblings respectively into the Army and children's homes. When, later, they married, they found their name was not their own. They were fanatics for education. That took my siblings and me, via scholarships to fee-paying schools where we mixed with bosses' offspring. Not culture shock as much as culture stress.

So Jerusha Abbott, plucked from the John Grier Home by a mysteriously anonymous Trustee, to rival rich girls in college and marry her patron (who turns out to be just 14 years older than she) had a certain fascination.

I suppose in the end the love interest deterred me. But there was also a dis-inclination to believe in Jerusha Abbott as an orphan. This Cinderella hit the palace a bit too quickly.

I read the book a second time many years later, after an unfortunate encounter with the chairperson of an award jury, who proclaimed, five minutes after we met, 'Of course, **Daddy-Long-Legs** is just about the best children's book ever.' I replied in the tones of that crusty character from the *Navy Lark* - 'I happen to think you're wrong.' Jury service was fraught from then on. But it made me read the book again. My respect for the social passion and skill of the author Jean Webster, increased. My scepticism about Jerusha (or Judy) Abbott, the orphan, was consolidated.

I read the book a third time, when challenged on the subject, with wine glass halfway to my lips, by the **BfK** Editor. My third and final conclusion is as follows:

Daddy-Long-Legs is a charming love story, an amusing naturalistic romp through college by a well-founded American middle-class girl at the turn of the century. In passing it makes shrewd points about social conditions and even shrewder points, implicit and explicit, about the man-woman power struggle in New York society pre-1914.

But it is really the story of Jean (or rather Alice Jane) Webster, including her first attempts to get published. The persona of Judy Abbott, the working-class orphan, is a flimsy, even perfunctory disguise so transparent it almost negates the author's intention (a) to prove that an orphan with financial backing can make it through college and (b) that orphanages ought to be reformed. So they should, but first they must have credibility.

We are asked to believe that Jerusha/Judy, at 17, earning her keep by being den mother to the younger kids, knows the matron's confidential method of choosing orphans' names (the phone book and the cemetery) - yet the trustees (and particularly the one who sponsors her) are just shadows on the stairs. We are already in Contrivance County here.

We are asked to believe that a working-class orphan (or as Judy in her later Socialist mode primly says - 'proletarian'), that such a girl, instructed to write letters to 'Mr Smith' from college, does so immediately in terms of teasing intimacy. Pull my other long leg, I say. These letters are without doubt the sort of letters Jean Webster may well have written to her great uncle, Mark Twain, who bequeathed her a sense of humour. What is more, the Webster narrative style in the introductory section is identical with the Abbott epistolary style in the second section.

We are asked to believe that Judy floats through college immune from all but the most passing embarrassments, hob-nobs with young socialites, absorbs the spending and the clothes, fending off almost with nonchalance any tentative questions about her origins. (Anyone reading Gene Stratton Porter's **Girl of the Limberlost**, written at roughly the same time, will see what crossing cultural boundaries really involved.)

We are even asked to believe that an orphan deprived of books can, on entering college, produce a complete list of the main novels, etc, she has missed out on. Only an accomplished reader can make lists like that.

The point is that Jerusha/Judy is seen from the outside with the greatest sympathy, by Jean Webster who visited orphanages while studying economics. The real inner feelings of the orphan are not lived, but described - when the author remembers (which isn't all that often) who the 'I' character is supposed to be.

As I said, it is not a story about an orphan. It's a love story, sometimes novelettish, a kind of Sweet Valley Higher Ed. But it contains some neat dramatic ironies as when she meets, unknowingly, her patron and they fall for each other. He uses his patron's finances to try to separate her off from rival suitors and to keep her in his power. This was the kind of pressure which stiffened the back of more than one middle-class suffragette/Socialist in the early twentieth century.

At first sight, assuming **Daddy Long Legs** (forgetting the orphan bit) is autobiographical, then Jean Webster's was a happy life. Endowed with a comfortable lifestyle, intelligence, a bubbling sense of fun and compassion, she seemed to have everything. And, apparently, she married the man she loved. Then a year later, as her baby daughter was born, she died.

In the end, though she may not have got ash on her dresses, she was closer to reality than Cinderella.

Daddy-Long-Legs by Jean Webster was first published by Century, New York in 1912. The Puffin Classics edition (0 14 035111 6) is available in paperback at £3.99.

Robert Leeson's latest book is **The Dog Who Changed the World** from Hamish Hamilton (0 241 00244 3, £8.99).

Yvonne Whiteman and Judith Escreet write:

'As a children's fiction editor and a children's art director, we read with mounting dismay and sinking hearts Rachel Anderson's 'Blind Spot' in the September issue of **BfK**, on the subject of Edward Lear and his verse. Children, we fear for you, if nonsense and humour are to be sourly tossed out with the bath water by the Ms Andersons of this world in pursuit of the fashionable norm:

There was a dull Dame who thought Lear

Was no more than a non-PC queer.

When they said, 'What of Snark?

Owl & Pussycat??, ?Art,?

Droned the Dame, 'should be worthy and drear'.

Rachel Anderson responds:

There was a weird person of Cromer,

Stood accused of having no humour,

She said, 'You're so right.

It's a terrible blight.

And from now on I'll only read Homer.'

Page Number:

23

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