

NEWBERY AWARD ACCEPTANCE

by *Elizabeth George Speare*

Report of a Journey

How can I thank you for your vote of confidence? For I feel that this time you have given this honor not so much for an achievement as for an endeavor. And with special gratitude I treasure this big, beautiful, totally unexpected "A for Effort."

Because for me *The Bronze Bow*, which was my third book, was quite different from the first two, both in the purpose and in the making. It was not so much an adventure as a challenge, and at the book's completion I knew that I had recorded no more than the first steps of a lifelong search that can never be fulfilled.

Mr. Theodore Holden, literary editor of the Hartford Times, who had given me encouragement and support from the beginning, led off his review of *The Bronze Bow* with the words, "She walks serenely where angels fear to tread." His tactful paraphrase was flattering, but also disturbing. I was only too well aware of

my temerity. Even now I wonder how I had the rashness to venture upon ground which is not only hallowed but salted as well with traps for the well-meaning trespasser. For many years there had been in my mind the urge to write something about the land of the New Testament, and I could only have explained this compulsion in

the words of George Mallory when he was asked why he had wanted to climb Mount Everest and he replied, "Because it's there." True, I did not rush in, but never for one moment did I walk serenely. I approached with uncertainty, and I was beset every step of the way by doubt and discouragement.

When I stood in just this spot before you in June of 1959, I was already committed to this quest. I had completed a year of research, but my characters and story existed only in the shadowy glimpses I tried then to describe to you. One scene only was very clear to me, and you might like to know the part the American Library Association had played in that scene.

On a Friday afternoon the preceding March, in Mr. Melcher's office in New York, the unbelievable moment had come when the Newbery medal for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* was placed in my hand - to be held for a moment only. After the ceremony, Barbara Cooney, the Caldecott medalist, and I, with our long-suffering husbands, were feted at a party which included not only champagne, but the kind of talk about the making of books which

was far more heady to a still green writer from Connecticut. On Sunday morning my husband and I ended this improbable Queen-for-a-day week end with a service at Riverside Church. In my overstimulated state the trumpeting organ prelude was a final intoxicant. I did not hear a word of the service, because, in response to the music, the climax and final chapter of my new story began to play itself out in my mind so compellingly that I was aware of nothing else. From that moment I knew where I was going, and in all the changes and about-faces that were continually to alter my course, that final chapter, though it was many times rewritten, remained essentially intact, just as I first saw it that morning.

I told you that June that my stories began with people. Yet I made the mistake of trying to begin this story with a theme. I

knew what I wanted to do. I was teaching a Sunday School class at the time, and I longed to lift the personality of Jesus off the flat and lifeless pages of our textbook. I wanted to give my pupils,

and others like them, a glimpse of the divided and turbulent society of Palestine, an occupied country with many parallels in our own

day. And I wanted to stir in them some personal sharing of what must have been the response of boys and girls who actually saw and heard the Carpenter from Nazareth.

I think the initial theme of the book rose out of a discussion our class had one Sunday morning on the great heroes of history, and on what qualities a hero must possess. I longed to have them see that the preacher who walked the hills of Galilee was not a mythical figure, but a compelling and dynamic leader, a hero to whom a boy in any age would gladly offer all his loyalty.

I had no illusions that this would be easy. But I did not foresee

the almost insurmountable difficulties that would block my way for the next three years. The research itself was never a barrier. I plunged eagerly into Jewish history, into the accounts of travelers who spread before me the land, the people, and the ways of Palestine, and into the rich and complex treasury of Bible scholarship. Finally I knew that I must pull myself from the absorbing joy of reading and begin the task of writing.

And here I came up against the truth I stated to you. There was no story to write, because there were no people. I had an outline, and some shadowy figures. But no real and living people.

There was a girl, of course. I had written two stories about girls, and I assumed that was my natural province. So I forced myself to begin Chapter One. I gave my girl a brother and sent them off on a lighthearted picnic on a mountaintop in Galilee, bright with spring flowers. In Chapter Two my heroine, hidden behind a rock, witnessed some lively action. But Chapter Three brought me to a dead end. I suddenly saw that a girl hidden behind a rock would never be a heroine. Palestine was an eastern country in which women stayed submissively at home. Even the remarkably emancipated female my heroine was going to be would need the most ridiculous contriving to be on stage at the right moments. And a girl's-eye view of Palestine would be a narrow and limited view.

Suppose I were to write from the brother's point of view instead? I rewrote the three chapters, and this time my boy and his sister met a young outlaw on the mountain. Daniel was not a new invention; he was the hero I had had in mind all along. He was to be the romantic and bold young leader of a band of Zealots. But the boy I saw on the mountain was quite different from the confident leader I had planned. This boy was unsure and defiant and bitterly unhappy. All at once he began to move and to talk and to think with a fierce urgency that left no room for doubt. I had a person at last, a real person, and to my dismay he was a wild and difficult one. But the story had to be his. As I began the first chapter for the third time, the girl and her brother leaped to life beside Daniel, and I knew that I was on the right road.

But the lightheartedness and the spring flowers were gone. This was an altogether unfamiliar path. From the first it took a direction I had never planned. Sudden turns opened up vistas I had never anticipated. There were blind alleys from which I had to patiently retrace my steps. Events I had moved toward with confidence turned out to be mirages as I approached, and worthless. Moreover, I saw that this road must lead to violence, and all my life I have been a timid mouse, shrinking from the least hint of violence.

And the most serious stumbling block of all loomed constantly ahead. I wanted my young people to meet Jesus. But how could I portray Jesus, when many years of searching to understand his life and his teachings left me still facing a mystery? I read countless versions of the life of Jesus, most of them written with reverence and deep faith, some with skepticism, a few even with venom, each one differing from the others. The personality of the Man from Nazareth has been at the mercy of hundreds of interpreters.

There is no definitive biography. The quest for the historical Jesus has never yielded the surety for which the scholars hoped. The incontestable facts of history barely established his having lived at all. Yet he stands like a mountain peak, which, however high we climb, looms forever higher, rising into the mist, its full dimension hidden from our sight.

In the end I realized that in this case research was defeating my purpose and only clouding my vision. The sum of my search is contained in one line which I put into the mouth of Simon the disciple, "We are forced to choose, not knowing." In my portrait of Jesus I failed. I know that failure was intrinsic in the attempt, but I wish that I could have climbed higher. I knew before I had gone far on this road that I was not big enough to do what I had hoped. But I set myself to do, to the best of my ability, one small thing. I would show the change wrought in just one boy who came to know the teacher in Galilee. This is the story of *The Bronze Bow*.

This is also my endeavor to share in the work that you as

librarians are doing. For we are all dedicated to preparing children for life. There are many needful ways of equipping young people for the future. We have chosen to place books in their hands, books that will serve not only as companions and teachers

but as guardians. For the world into which our children are about to step is filled with peril. And perhaps of all the dangers that lie in wait, the most terrifying is that they may settle for a world without meaning

The philosophy of meaninglessness and nihilism has already reached down to our children through television and movies and in more subtle ways. In the teen years it speaks to them with the persuasive voices of some of our most brilliant writers. We should not underestimate this appeal. The man who stands erect in the face of emptiness is a heroic figure. In the words of Martin Esslin, writing of modern drama, "The dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness."

How can we give our children something more worthy of their courage? Joseph Wood Krutch, who has spent a lifetime recording his own search for meaning, recently gave to writers this commission: "If Love and Honor and Duty can be salvaged, then someone must write about them in a fashion which carries conviction. If we are to get along without them, then someone must describe a world from which they are absent in a fashion which makes that world seem worth having."

Many of our most talented writers are trying to make a senseless world seem worth having. I believe that all of us who are concerned with children are committed to the salvaging of Love and Honor and Duty. Not only our own faith, but the children themselves compel us. Young people do not want to accept mean-

inglessness. They look urgently to the adult world for evidence that we have proved our values to be enduring. Yet perhaps never before have they looked so clearly, so despairingly, at the evidence we offer. They demand an honest answer. Those of us who have found Love and Honor and Duty to be a sure foundation must somehow find words which have the ring of truth.