

SECOND READ

THE AUTHOR WHO BROUGHT THE MONTESSORI METHOD TO LIFE IN HER FICTION

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novels took family life and childhood development seriously, glorying in the daily accumulation of small insights and struggles for mastery.

By Perri Klass

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Throughout her career, Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a passionate Progressive reformer whose strong and influential opinions informed her writing. Photograph courtesy Alton H. Blackington Photograph Collection / Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center / UMass Amherst Libraries

When it was published in 1924, almost a century ago, "The Home-Maker," a story of radical gender-role reversal by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, was one of the ten best-selling novels of the year. Lester Knapp is a miserably unhappy clerk at the local department store in his small town, hating his job, mumbling poetry to himself to get through every day of tedious and humiliating professional inadequacy. Meanwhile, his wife, Eva, spends her days frantically cleaning their house, brutally policing her children's every move to teach them good manners, and serving up picture-perfect healthy meals, which her family have trouble eating and digesting. "What was her life?" she thinks, near the beginning of the novel. "A hateful round of housework, which, hurry as she might, was never done. How she *loathed* housework! The sight of a dishpan full of dishes made her feel like screaming out. And what else did she have? Loneliness; never-ending monotony; blank, grey days, one after another, full of drudgery."

All three Knapp children suffer under this regime. The older two are constantly terrified of making their mother angry. The youngest, Stephen, an out-of-control five-year-old, is himself prone to volcanic rages. After an accident leaves Lester unable to work, Eva takes a job at the store, Lester becomes the homemaker of the title, and suddenly everyone is happy, parents and children. Eva is a brilliant saleswoman, and Lester loves cooking and spending time with his children. The various ailments that plague the members of the family disappear—Eva's intractable eczema, her husband's dyspepsia, their older son's nausea and vomiting spells.

Canfield Fisher was, all through her career, passionately politically engaged, a Progressive reformer with strong and influential opinions that informed both her nonfiction and her fiction. She often tended toward the didactic; the plot of "The Home-Maker" is indeed as schematic as it sounds. But the characters are forceful and still alive on the page today, and the book is compulsively readable. It's a complicated and passionate story about family life, about the inner lives of parents, and also of children, one of Canfield Fisher's most important subjects. For much of her life, her political energies were trained on education—first, on the education of children and the need for school reform, and then, later in her life, on the importance of adult education. Along with education reform, she was also deeply involved in war relief during and after the First World War, including Braille publications for men who had been blinded in battle. In the course of her life, she supported prison reform; women's issues, including contraception and representation on juries; and the struggle for civil

rights for Black Americans. As one of the founding figures of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which began in 1926, she was responsible for choosing the books that every educated American was supposed to read, and she used that position to champion writing she believed in, notably including Richard Wright's 1945 memoir, "Black Boy." She wrote to Wright in 1944, "In the South, it is frankly violent brutality which bars the way to free Negro development. In the North it is hypocrisy." When the book was published, she wrote the introductory note.

Canfield Fisher died on November 9, 1958, and eleven days later Eleanor Roosevelt devoted part of an installment of her syndicated six-day-a-week newspaper column, "My Day," to the author's achievements. Roosevelt had known Canfield Fisher "slightly," she wrote, certainly not "intimately." But she had read and reread the Progressive author's books, both to herself and to others. "Mrs. Fisher was a woman of great spiritual perception, and for many years it has given me comfort if I found myself on the same side of a controversial question with her," Roosevelt wrote. "We might discover ourselves to be unpopular at the moment, but in the end our position would probably prove to be the best one, I felt, if she believed in it."

Canfield Fisher's adult novels are mostly forgotten, and nowadays she is not always included on lists of distinguished American novelists (or women). Several years ago, she became the subject of some controversy in Vermont, over her alleged connections with the eugenics movement, and news articles chronicling the debate explained, sometimes rather laboriously, that Eleanor Roosevelt had once called her one of the ten most influential women in America. One Canfield Fisher book that has stayed in print, and can claim "classic" status, is her 1917 novel for children, "Understood Betsy," which grew directly out of her contact with Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educator who had opened her first Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in Rome, in 1907, and developed a philosophy of education based on independent work and engagement with educational materials. Canfield Fisher's highly successful publication, in 1912, of "A Montessori Mother" was followed, a year later, by "The Montessori Manual," and these books brought Montessori's work to the U.S., majorly influencing American thinking about children's education and the nature of childhood. (Canfield Fisher also published a novel for adults in 1915, "The Bent Twig," which drew extensively on Montessori ideas about childhood and education.)

"A Montessori Mother" is "dedicated by permission to Maria Montessori," whom Canfield Fisher had met in Rome, in 1911, and the book is presented as a response to the battery of questions that the writer had faced since her return: "Now, you've been

to Rome; you've seen the Montessori schools. . . . Is it really so wonderful? Or is it just a fad? Is it true that the children are allowed to do exactly as they please? I should think it would spoil them beyond endurance. Do they really learn to read and write so young? And isn't it very bad for them to stimulate them so unnaturally?" Canfield Fisher proceeds to a wondering and almost religious description of the Casa dei Bambini, marvelling that the twenty-five young children in the room were completely absorbed in their different tasks, responding rhapsodically to the teacher, who was, in the best Montessori tradition, not interfering with the children, not disciplining them, but allowing them to learn by doing: "It suddenly occurred to me, as I looked at that quiet, smiling Italian woman, that somehow my own life, for all its full happiness, must lack some element of orderliness, of discipline, of spiritual economy which alone could have put that look of calm certainty on her face."

I first encountered Canfield Fisher through "Understood Betsy," though, as a child, I did not understand that the book's various morals about childhood and learning were tied to a specific educational philosophy. Betsy—Elizabeth Ann—is a thin, unhealthy, nervous, not to say neurotic, orphaned child of nine, who lives in a city with her elderly Great-Aunt Harriet and her nervous—not to say neurotic—"Aunt" Frances. Aunt Frances is bringing the child up lovingly and above all protectively, with careful attention to every aspect of her delicate psyche, and, as a result, the little girl is afraid of everything, from dogs and examinations in school to her own death. In the first chapter of the book, "Aunt Harriet Has a Cough," the exigencies of what is presumably adult tuberculosis lead to Betsy's being sent to live with her "Putney cousins," in Vermont. There, she is matter-of-factly expected to help with chores and housework, and to figure things out on her own. In other words, her Vermont relatives Great-Uncle Henry, Great-Aunt Abigail, and Cousin Ann are natural-born Montessori teachers.

As an adult (and a physician), I now find the first chapter of the book interesting—Great-Aunt Harriet's cough, the TB diagnosis, the immediate rupture of the little family group—but, as a child, I regarded that as mere setup, and I was much more struck by the second chapter, significantly titled "Betsy Holds the Reins." In it, the elderly Uncle Henry picks up the frightened, displaced Betsy, lifts her up onto the high seat of his lumber wagon, and casually hands her the reins, asking her to drive a little: "You pull on the left-hand rein to make 'em go to the left and t'other way for t'other way." Betsy is terrified—especially because she is shaky on left versus right—but she is also profoundly *interested*, perhaps for the first time in her life. She has been set a real-world problem, and she has to solve it.

And then suddenly something inside Elizabeth Ann's head stirred and moved. It came to her, like a clap, that she needn't know which was right or left at all. If she just pulled the way she wanted them to go—the horses would never know whether it was the right or the left rein!

It is possible that what stirred inside her head at that moment was her brain, waking up. She was nine years old, and she was in the third A grade at school, but that was the first time she had ever had a whole thought of her very own. At home, Aunt Frances had always known exactly what she was doing, and had helped her over the hard places before she even knew they were there; and at school her teachers had been carefully trained to think faster than the scholars. Somebody had always been explaining things to Elizabeth Ann so industriously that she had never found out a single thing for herself before. This was a very small discovery, but an original one. Elizabeth Ann was as excited about it as a mother-bird over the first egg that hatches.

I remember thinking, as a child, that this was a thrilling moment, and not one I had encountered before in a story. It's a moment that repeats many times in "Understood Betsy," as Betsy conquers cooking, chores, and even mental arithmetic in the Vermont one-room schoolhouse that replaces the rigidly sorted urban school of the "third A grade" with a system in which you work at each subject on your own level—the teacher is, again, a natural Montessori educator.

In "The Deepening Stream," Canfield Fisher's 1930 novel, which was reissued in 2021 by the British press Persephone Books, Canfield Fisher wrote for adults about these same issues—the profound importance of childhood triumphs and sorrows and memories, the way a child's intellectual, moral, and spiritual character is shaped by the real-world experiences of growing up and the challenges set by the world, from daily family tensions to war, cataclysm, and suffering. This long and complicated book may be the greatest First World War novel you've never heard of, a home-front novel of France and relief work, a novel that combines international relations and domesticity. The first section charts the childhood sensibility and emotional coming of age of the heroine, Matey, who grows up in an American academic family—as did Canfield Fisher herself—with a successful (and self-important and pompous) professor father, who moves the family from one college campus to another as he changes jobs. Early chapters trace Matey's unhappy awareness of the tensions between her parents, whom she comes to perceive as perpetually competing in a hostile struggle for small social and intellectual victories against each other. What might be academic domestic comedy—a mother embarrassed by an imperfect French accent, a father prone to deliver rehearsed and didactic remarks on social occasions—is presented as profoundly traumatic for both Matey and her sister, who tells her, "I'd always taken for granted you and I would never marry."

That same academic childhood includes sabbaticals in France, where Matey is welcomed into a truly happy—and truly intellectual and truly musical—family, the Vinets. When Matey marries and brings her husband, Adrian, to visit the Vinets, it is 1908, and the reader can't help thinking of how the First World War is approaching. When war does break out, Matey and her husband agonize over what is happening in Europe—and Matey, in particular, worries about the danger to her French “foster” family, their gentle, musically talented son sent to the front, one of their daughters lost in the chaos of the German invasion of Belgium, their gracious cultured life completely destroyed.

Matey's husband, whose dear friend in France has also been sent to the front, is distressed. “It makes a man feel like a *dog* to be wallowing here in comfort and safety, while...other men, old friends, old comrades...” Matey angrily turns that back on him: “How do you think it makes a woman feel? You think it's perfectly all right and natural, I suppose, for a woman to be in a position that makes a man feel like a dog?”

And then comes an entirely unexpected plot twist: Matey and Adrian get on a ship with their two very young children to make the dangerous crossing to France. Adrian does hesitate to bring the children, but Matey is insistent. “I learned when I was a little girl that *anything* is better than letting a barrier grow up between parents and children,” she says, and her father-in-law, a profoundly moral Quaker, approves: “It will be a sorry day . . . when getting married and becoming a parent puts an end to being a member of humanity!”

Soon, the family is sailing through submarine-infested waters to do their part as members of humanity. Adrian has signed up with an ambulance service, and Matey moves in with the Vinet family. They shelter men on furlough and write letters home to soldiers' families, collect clothing for refugees, send parcels of chocolate and cigarettes to the front, all as they endure air raids and wait anxiously for their own men to come home on leave. Matey cares for injured soldiers and orphaned children in the “never-ending work of trying to restore to life those mutilated human organisms . . . all to the tune, perhaps, of an air raid overhead, or news of a great German offensive which might sweep them all into the ranks of refugees.”

In 1917, after the U.S. joins the war, Paris welcomes the American troops. Finally, as the war ends, more American “relief workers” swoop in to “relieve” war-torn Europe. Matey's slick brother, Francis, who had seen the war from the beginning as a grand business opportunity, appears in Paris with the diplomats, and proudly shows his sister

off at an elegant hotel dinner party: “My sister and her husband have been in France in relief work *since the spring of 1915*. She has given her entire fortune to help the cause of the Allies.” As the peace conference approaches, Matey feels the hopes of all the French women around her vested in Woodrow Wilson: “Every woman Matey knew stood beside a newly made grave. . . . Of all the rulers of the world the American President seemed the only one capable of understanding that to kill the hope that those deaths had advanced the cause of all humanity was to kill the dead men over again.” But she has fewer illusions about American politicians, and about the motives of the people in power, and Matey foresees that all promises will be dashed in the failure of the Wilsonian ideal of a better world, in the triumphant ascendance of the cynics and profiteers, her brother and his circle.

Canfield made a strong marriage, to John Fisher, in 1907, and like Betsy they settled in Vermont; their daughter, Sally, was born in 1909, and their son, Jimmy, four years later. During the First World War, Canfield Fisher, like Matey, took her two young children and sailed for France, where John was an ambulance driver with the American Hospital Corps. For the remainder of the war, she sent home long, detailed, “round-robin” letters to her friends and family, and later published a collection of stories about France, about the war, and about life as lived by the women and children waiting for men to come home from the front. Dorothy and John returned to Vermont with their children, in 1918, and lived there for many years. They had both intended to pursue writing, but, eventually, he assumed a managerial role in her career.

Canfield Fisher wrote about topics and experiences that don't regularly turn up in fiction, and not only the decision to take her young children into a war. Her focus on children's inner lives, and on the intensity and sometimes ferocity of family life, was distinctly her own. There's a great scene in “The Home-Maker” in which Lester, seeing that his son Stephen is frustrated and building toward a tantrum, offers the child a chance to whip a “pretend egg”—that is, a basin of soapy water—with the eggbeater that Stephen has always wanted to handle, but which his mother never let him touch. What ensues is pure Montessori. Stephen's father “did not offer to show him how it worked.” Instead, he observes with Wordsworthian awe the child's struggle to figure it out, quoting Wordsworth's “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” and imagining himself a spectator at a prizefight as he watches his son fight to master his eggbeater: “Stephen could feel the thinking place in his head draw together *hard*—and command his hand to turn regularly. How

it hated to, that old hand! And how Stephen loved the feeling of bossing it around!” And his father reflects that watching his son has been like reading Emerson, but “lots better.” “How the afternoon had flown! It was hard to put your mind on anything but the absorbing spectacle of Stephen’s advance into life.”

Canfield Fisher was also interested in the more adult side of family life, and her writing about sex—especially marital sex and marital passion—is unexpectedly frank and intense. Her 1933 novel, “Bonfire,” set in the fictional town of Clifford, Vermont, in the shadow of Hemlock Mountain, begins with the community welcoming home the young Anna Craft, who has spent the past two years working in Paris and is now coming back to take up her job as a district nurse and to partner with her brother, Anson, who is finishing his training to practice as a doctor. The book is a portrait of the town, told from alternating points of view that include multiple townspeople and even a cat, and everyone’s sexual activity is tracked (including the cat’s).

We learn a good deal of local sociology by watching Anna on her rounds, as she treats impetigo (with calomel, that is, with mercury) and septicemia, and watches her brother Anson try to relieve the tedium of a rural medical practice by collecting notes on how heart disease plays out in the lives of his patients. But what the novel is really about is sex—that’s the bonfire of the title, and it centers on a mysterious young woman, Lixlee, who comes out of the poor part of town: “What a girl! She made a bonfire of a man and touched him off with a look,” reflects the doctor, who falls under her spell and marries her. And then he exults, to his sister, a spinster who has yet to touch that bonfire:

Why do we hide from young people what the love of man and woman can be—how magnificently more it is than magnificent physical gratification! We tell them, right enough, that sharing life with someone else takes the poison from your wounds and makes life a glory. But we never give them a hint that nothing but love, violent love that tramples your self-control to bits, can work the miracle of making you *able* to share life with another.

The problem, of course, is that, as with the bonfires that the men of Clifford set to clear out the brush on their property, the flames cannot always be controlled, and sometimes they destroy what is most valuable. Even reciprocated passion, within the legal bonds of matrimony, can be dangerous and destructive, but Canfield Fisher also looks rather unflinchingly at abusive relationships, and even marital rape. She strongly suggests that Lixlee’s mysterious personal history, which has left her using her sexuality to get what she wants, includes being sexually exploited from an early age. And there’s a heartrending scene in which a poor woman, abandoned by her husband,

comes to Anna for help, bringing along her two small daughters. She is visibly pregnant, and this is what she has to say about that: “What’d he have to go and get me this way for? He hadn’t no use for me any more. He did it just to be mean!”

Canfield Fisher and what remains of her legacy (in particular as an author of children’s books) have come under attack in recent years. She has been accused of connections to the eugenics movement, which has an ugly history in Vermont, as in many other states. Canfield Fisher worked with an organization, the Vermont Commission on Country Life, which had ties to the Eugenics Survey of Vermont—Canfield Fisher served on the Committee for the Preservation of Vermont Literature and Ideals. In 2018, the Vermont Board of Libraries voted unanimously in favor of renaming the children’s literary prize that had been named in her honor.

Just how close Canfield Fisher came to the eugenics movement was an active subject of discussion during the controversy about the literary prize. In her fiction, at least, she sometimes mocks eugenic ideas, as in “Bonfire,” where a literal-minded insistence on the importance of heredity is portrayed as narrow-minded Vermont prejudice, which infuriates the young doctor: “ ‘Good *God!*’ exploded Anson, ‘. . . these heredity hounds! As if there weren’t enough bars in the New England prison without that!’ ” The Progressive movement in the early part of the twentieth century did overlap in discomfiting ways with eugenic thinking, from Margaret Sanger to some of the early leaders of the battle against infant mortality. According to the *Bennington Banner*, Canfield Fisher’s granddaughter Vivian Hixon has suggested that her grandmother had, in fact, been briefly sympathetic to some eugenic ideas, pulled toward them through her involvement in the movement to make contraception available to women, but had been quickly talked out of them in the early nineteen-thirties, when her son-in-law, a geneticist, convinced her that they had no scientific validity.

But Canfield Fisher’s great theme is nurture, not nature. Children are malleable—in negative ways as well as positive ones—and education is all. “A Montessori Mother” begins with the following assertion:

The tremendous importance of primary teachers is ridiculously underestimated. The success or failure of the teachers of little children may not perhaps determine the amount of information acquired later in its educative career by each generation, but no one can deny that it determines to a considerable extent the character of the next generation, and character determines practically everything worth considering in the world of men.

The author also takes trouble to point out that the children in the Casa dei Bambini room she observed were “mostly children of very poor, ignorant, and utterly untrained parents,” and that, under the influence of the Montessori system, they were so much better behaved, more polite, and more intellectually involved than American children of her own privileged contemporaries. In “Understood Betsy,” we are left in no doubt that the entire trajectory of Betsy’s life has been changed by the combined forces of a Vermont home and a Vermont one-room school: the scrawny, terrified city-Elizabeth Ann gives way to the physically strong, self-confident Vermont-Betsy, who turns ten toward the end of the book, triumphantly solving one problem after another, caring for herself and a younger child, and earning the respect of her relatives. And the answer for that poor woman in “Bonfire,” left with an unwanted pregnancy by an abusive husband, is a reformer’s solution, not a eugenicist’s: she needs a safe place to live and a job that will allow her to support her children and care for them properly, as she is anxious to do.

Family life can stunt you and corrupt you, family life can be brutal, and family life can also be glorious and even redemptive. The stakes are high. There is a deeply affecting moment in “The Home-Maker” when Lester realizes his complete power over little Stephen, who allows himself to confess the darkest, deepest fear that has been torturing him: that his mother will insist on laundering his Teddy bear.

“Don’t let him be washed, Father! *Don’t* let him!” He raised his streaming eyes agonizingly towards his father, his whole face quivering.

Lester was so horrified that for a moment he could not speak. He was horrified to see Stephen reduced so low. He was more horrified at the position in which he found himself, absolute arbiter over another human being, a being who had no recourse, no appeal from his decisions. It was indecent, he thought; it sinned against human dignity, both his and the child’s.

Looking at his son, Lester reflects, “What a ghastly thing to have sensitive, helpless human beings absolutely in the power of other human beings! . . . In the silent room he heard it echoing solemnly, ‘That’s what it is to be a parent.’ He had been a parent for thirteen years before he thought of it.”

Canfield Fisher lived her life in the spiritual place where Montessori thinking met American transcendentalism and the famous Quaker injunction to do God’s work in the world: “All He has is thee.” In the spirit of William Blake, she saw the world in an eggbeater, and heaven in a Teddy bear. Canfield Fisher took the moral choices of everyday life as seriously as she took the literary choices of what would be widely read.

Most of all, she took family life and child development seriously, glorying in the daily accumulation of small insights and struggles for mastery, like Betsy learning to guide a horse. What made Betsy “understood” was that she had been allowed—and encouraged—to engage the world around her; it had become her classroom, complete with poverty and danger, cruelty and abuse. Canfield Fisher celebrated that engagement as she attempted it in her life. She believed that it was all her job—educating children, exposing them to the real challenges of the warlike world, and also taking on those challenges herself. Her fiction remains absorbingly interesting almost a century later—sometimes for reasons of historical curiosity, but more often for that alchemy of plot and character and sensibility which turns family power struggles and international power struggles into the stuff of the novel. ♦

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