

## Reflections on *Miss Bunclé's Book* by D.E. Stevenson

By Eileen Larkin Wilkin

One of my favorite high school teachers had a “Steak Dinner vs. Fast-Food” speech he would give in his English classes. The point of the speech was that a steady diet of steak dinners might be hard on the digestion, and once in a while it’s very satisfying to sink one’s teeth into a fast-food burger.

Over this past year in WRM, we’ve enjoyed many wonderful “steak dinners” of literature – rich, flavorful, nourishing, and satisfying. I feel so blessed to be among the women reading, pondering, and discussing great books. It has helped me to read more deeply and has given me insights and understanding that I would not have come to on my own.

For this summer’s read, I present to you neither steak nor fast-food, but rather a well-made chicken salad on a flaky croissant, along with fruit, a wine cooler, and a sweet dessert. It’s the kind of enjoyment we need occasionally, whether we’re on vacation and need the mind-rest, or we just want a diversion from the stress of life. We still want quality, like that chicken salad – nourishing and filling, but goes down easily.

*Miss Bunclé's Book* does just that from the first pages, when we’re introduced to the provincial English town of Silverstream before the outbreak of World War II. Barbara Bunclé is perhaps the least remarkable character in this town. Most of her neighbors, if they think of her at all, consider her nice at best, but more likely dull and frumpy, unimportant, even an idiot. They don’t say this aloud, but Barbara sees herself much the same way. She does not deem herself at all clever.

When she decides to write a book because she needs money, she uses the people and town she knows for her subject matter, rather than trying to create fiction from her own mind. She gives the characters different names, changes the name of the town to Copperfield, and takes the pen name of John Smith for herself. She submits her manuscript to Abbott & Spicer, not because she wisely spent time researching publishers and recognized them as the best fit, but because they were listed first in the directory.

It’s a hit. Why? Because Barbara is gifted in ways that neither she nor her neighbors recognize. She has an uncanny ability to see deeply into others and to recognize their true character. Like her creator, D.E. Stevenson, Barbara is genuinely interested in people, and perceives how her neighbors’ personalities affect their own lives and the lives of those around them.

When the residents of Silverstream realize that the book is about them, they are determined to figure out who wrote it and to punish *him*. I won’t tell you whether they succeed. I will tell you they know that the author lives among them, for no one else could have written about them with such precision. I will also tell you that Barbara’s “vanilla” exterior and her choice of a male pen name make the detective work of her neighbors difficult. In fact, when she casually suggests herself as being worthy of suspicion, Mrs. Carter laughs. “Oh, you! .... Nobody even thought of you. You could never have written *Disturber of the Peace*.” (p.206)

It’s entertaining and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny as the residents of Silverstream try to determine the author’s identity. Their illustrious self-appointed leader, Mrs.

Featherstone Hogg, intends to have him tarred and feathered, although she doesn't know exactly what that means; it just sounds right to her. Mrs. Featherstone Hogg provides much of the humor in the story. Little gems such as, "Mrs. Featherstone Hogg had marked on her notes, 'Pause for applause.' She paused hopefully." (p.166) and "The meeting is now open for discussion.' There was dead silence." (p.167) are just a couple of examples.

The humor alone is enough to make *Miss Buncle's Book* a good read. But there is depth beneath the lightness, in the same way that there are unseen wonders below the surface of a lake rippling and sparkling on a breezy, sunny day. While D.E. Stevenson's more than forty books have been described as light romantic, there is much to ponder beneath the surface.

The changes that begin to take place among the residents of Silverstream illustrate in highly entertaining fashion a great truth: that the written word truly is a powerful tool. Sally Carter, unaware that she is speaking to the author herself, tells Barbara, "All over the country people are reading his book and leading better and nobler lives because of it." (p.99) For some of them, it is as though they were looking in a mirror for the first time and not liking the reflection. For many of them, it is life-changing. Barbara Buncle's book has compelled each of them to take a pilgrimage they hadn't intended to take. Although Barbara wrote the book for no other reason than she needed money, she comes to realize the effect it has had on her neighbors.

*Barbara was absolutely dumb – she had no idea that she had written such a marvelous book, nor that its effects upon Silverstream were so far-reaching. She was much too honest to credit herself with all those noble motives. She had written Disturber of the Peace to make a little money for herself, because she needed money very badly, but it was pleasant to think that more had gone into it than she had intended. If all that Sally said were true she was a public benefactor, and not – as she had been led to believe – a criminal of the deepest dye. (pp.98-99)*

D.E. Stevenson herself, born into a family known for the establishment of lighthouses along the northern coasts of the UK, and whose father's cousin was the famous Robert Louis Stevenson, hoped that her books would be like lighthouses for her readers. I like that image. There are books in my life - historical, fictional, and spiritual - that have served each in their own way as lighthouses for me, helping me to navigate treacherous waters, to avoid unseen rocky shallows.

Without preaching, author D.E. Stevenson demonstrates through Barbara Buncle how God can and will use our gifts and even our weaknesses for good. When I consider the great works of authors like Tolkien, Lewis, and many others, I believe part of the greatness in their writing came from who they were as persons. God gave them incredible gifts, and because they were fundamentally good people, that talent manifested itself in stories that were not just good but great, and that impacted not just a few readers but millions. On the other hand, it strikes me as sad and disappointing when an artist chooses to squander his gift by creating material that is tasteless and even scandalous. I don't think Barbara Buncle could have written a scandalous novel (although some of the residents of Silverstream think it just that, primarily the ones who

didn't like what they saw regarding themselves), because she herself was a humble, good, honest, decent, Christian.

There are also elements in *Miss Buncle's Book* that I find appealing simply because they speak to me.

Of late I have pondered my own self-image, not only now, but throughout my junior-high and high school years. I think that I, too, was often thought of as "nice" if I was thought of at all. I was in no way the popular girl or part of the popular crowd. While I was comfortable with who I was for the most part, I felt myself unremarkable in the eyes of others – a vanilla sort of person, a wallflower – like Barbara Buncle. Friends knew there was more to me, but I was shy and quiet until I reached a certain level of comfort with the people around me.

That Barbara struggles to be eloquent in everyday speech gives me comfort, even though I know she is a fictional character. "It was curious, Mr. Abbott thought, that a woman who could write good English should be unable to speak it." (p.61) He concludes that in speech she is "either monosyllabic and completely inarticulate, or else overpowered by a stream of words which forced themselves between her lips like water bursting from a dam." (p.62) While I am able to speak English, I sometimes feel inept at doing so eloquently – often at a loss for finding a word I know exists but isn't coming to me, or failing to express myself quite the way I want to. What business do I have trying to be a writer when I can barely speak? Well, if Barbara Buncle can do it, so can I.

I, like Barbara Buncle, have little to no skill in clothes shopping. "The only bother is I never seem to be able to get nice ones. I always feel an absolute guy in new clothes." (p.140) I can relate. I think I'm getting better because I'm trying to pay attention to what other women are wearing, but it does not come naturally to me. Like Barbara, it's sometimes thanks to the help of friends that I've managed to choose an outfit or dress that makes me feel pretty.

It is in part because of the encouragement and bold suggestions of Dorothea and Sally, and in part thanks to the success of Barbara's book and the income it provides, that she can have some "Elizabeth Wade" moments – when, like her fictional counterpart in her book, she looks good and knows it, feels confident and poised, and speaks freely and eloquently.

*"In Copperfield [the fictional version of Silverstream] Barbara herself was just as she wanted to be; she was younger, and prettier, and more attractive. People looked at her as she passed, not because she was a "sight," but because she was pleasant to behold.... -in fact she was not Barbara Buncle anymore, she was Elizabeth Wade."* (p.183)

*"She was Elizabeth of course; that was the reason for it. Elizabeth Wade always knew what to do and say on every occasion – how unlike Barbara Buncle!"* (pp.186-187)

I can relate to that, too. Despite my general lack of adeptness in the fashion world, and my lack of eloquence in conversation, I sometimes have "Elizabeth Wade" moments, when I feel that I'm not a vanilla, wallflower girl, but one who is attractive and pleasant to behold and talk to.

*Miss Buncler's Book* has become one of my go-to reads when I'm in the mood for something well-written but light and fun, something that is nourishing but goes down easily, like that chicken salad lunch. I hope you enjoy *Miss Buncler's Book* as much as I have, that you find it both pleasant and nourishing. I hope you also enjoy exploring its depths beneath the sparkly surface!

*Eileen Larkin Wilkin writes from Mendota Heights, MN, where she homeschools the youngest of her five children, the rest having "graduated" after sixth grade. Although she holds a master's degree in piano performance and pedagogy from the University of Oklahoma, loves music, and spent years teaching piano, she finally realized that writing is her true love, and hopes to make a career of it.*