Finding My Own Blue Castle

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I came to *The Blue Castle* past the midpoint of my life, thrilled when it was recommended to me by a fellow-writer friend. I only wish I had read it sooner. What could be more empowering than to watch repressed, blighted Valancy Stirling, butt of unfunny family jokes for her old-maid status, rebuked by her overbearing relatives even for daring to sneeze out loud, come into her own so gloriously?

She has nothing to lose. That brings with it the freedom to do anything and everything she has ever secretly dreamed of, from refusing to tolerate unkind witticisms to asking a man she barely knows, widely regarded as wild and disreputable, to marry her—which he does.

When I first read Valancy's story, I started to yearn for my *own* terminal diagnosis (mistaken or not) that would give me permission to live life so fiercely and freely. It wasn't that I had a host of unfulfilled dreams to pursue. But it was hard not to wonder what I might have done differently if I had felt myself free to thumb my nose at the world in such a spectacular way.

On rereading the book, however, I realized that the text explicitly says that it is *not* Dr. Trent's death sentence (mistakenly mailed to the wrong person) that empowers Valancy to change her life completely. It is first and foremost having her eyes fall upon these lines from a book written by her favourite author, John Foster: "Fear is the original sin. Almost all the evil in the world has its origin in the fact that someone is afraid of something" (Montgomery 59). Those words give Valancy the courage to consult Dr. Trent in the first place, in defiance of her mother. It is the memory of those words that later gives her the strength to resist the Svengali-like exhortations of her pastor to return home and "be the cowed, futile creature she had always been" (Montgomery 139). It is a favourite author's words, even more than the liberating medical diagnosis, that make all the difference.

So I don't have to sit around hoping for a death sentence to free me from living with fear, because I have these same words that inspired Valancy, as well as her daring example.

Looking back at my pre–*Blue-Castle* life: if Valancy could inform her obnoxious uncle that he's told the same shopworn riddles "at least fifty times" and "It is such a fatal mistake to try to be funny if you don't succeed" (Montgomery 95), maybe I could have spoken up when male colleagues made sexist jokes. If she could find the courage to propose to village reprobate Barney Snaith and enter into marriage with him, maybe I could have summoned the courage to exit my own long, difficult marriage sooner.

It has been noted by others, including Mary Rubio and Liz Rosenberg, that L.M. Montgomery, creator of Valancy's story, wasn't herself able to leave her own wretchedly unhappy marriage or live her own life as fully and joyfully as Valancy learns to do. But Montgomery's constraints were vastly greater than mine, and the liberation I now seek is on a smaller and more manageable scale. What might I do in the remaining years of my

life if I don’t allow fear to hold me back?

The introduction by Collett Tracey to the Voyageur Classics edition of *The Blue Castle* notes two possible failings in the novel: “the way in which Valancy changes her personality so suddenly when she discovers the terminal nature of her illness, and the way in which all the pieces of the novel are so neatly resolved at the end” (Tracey 10). Neither is a failing, in my view.

The narrative voice explicitly tells us how Valancy’s abrupt transformation is not only possible, but likely: “It was so easy to defy once you got started,” Valancy muses. “The first step was the only one that really counted” (Montgomery 111). With every fear-defying risk we take, every subsequent exposure of our fears as groundless, it becomes that much easier to defy the next time.

As for the second charge, yes, Valancy’s happiest of all happy endings is indeed over the top, by any measure. It would have been more than enough just to have Valancy find love with Barney and savour the quiet joys of their “blue castle” retreat. There was no need for her new husband to turn out to be none other than her favourite author John Foster (of the life-changing comment), who is not only one of Canada’s leading literary lights but also heir to a millionaire’s fortune. Yes, that is a bit much! But as a reader, I don’t mind this one bit. I love that Montgomery heaped every conceivable reward upon a woman who as a child had only dreamed of having a *dust pile* of her own. It is extravagantly satisfying to see her once tyrannical relatives kowtowing to *her*. Merely by insisting on living life on her own terms, caring little about the word’s judgment, she ends up with freedom, love, and joy, *plus* all the world’s most coveted goods.

How wonderful is that? And maybe it isn’t unrealistic, after all. For who knows what might happen if we took that first small step toward refusing fear? The novelist Alice Walker is widely quoted as saying, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” *The Blue Castle* is the story of Valancy realizing the power she has had all along: the power to repudiate fear. Every time I reread *The Blue Castle*, I become a little more fearless myself, with the world less able to stop me from finding my own blue castle and living in it happily ever after.

Bio: Claudia Mills is Associate Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a faculty member in the graduate programs in children’s literature at Hollins University. The author of over sixty books for young readers, including *The Last Apple Tree*, *The Lost Language*, and *Zero Tolerance*, and the chapter books series *After-School Superstars*, she has published numerous children’s literature articles, including work on Louisa May Alcott, Maud Hart Lovelace, Betty MacDonald, Rosamond du Jardin, and Eleanor Estes. Her book *Ethics and Children’s Literature* won the 2016 Edited Book Award from the Children’s Literature Association.

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