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Winesburg, Indiana: "The Librarian" and "Professor Helen C. Andersen"

Abstract
A pair of stories about the librarian and her mother, the professor.

Keywords
library, secret, mentor, mirror, problem

Cover Page Footnote
Note: "This story is exclusively available in the anthology, *Winesburg, Indiana*, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry."

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BOOTH
A JOURNAL

Winesburg, Indiana: "The Librarian" and "Professor Helen C. Andersen"

by Kate Bernheimer

1."The Librarian"

As the town librarian, I don't have many opportunities for social contact. That suits me fine. I live in a secret compartment behind the front desk. If you pull out the first volume of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series, the entire wall of shelves swings open—and there you are, in my apartment. It's not as small as you might think. It has just enough room for just what I need: a wooden table with one wooden chair, a single mattress with a white coverlet, and a one-burner stove for my teakettle. I don't need much food; what I need I store in the crate on the front stoop of the library. It used to be for returned books, but since no one comes to the library any more, I tuck my bread and cheese inside it, wrapped in a kerchief. Sometimes, I will leave a jar of water in there, covered of course, and the night air cools it quite nicely. I will go out on the stoop in the morning to sip it in as I watch the sun come up in the sky—over the church across the road—over the small hill. Then I take the skeleton key, and I open the library door. This last gesture's for show, in case anyone driving by sees me go in—they will think that I am just then arriving. No one knows that I sleep in the library, not even my mother, Helen C. Andersen, who lives down the road. She thinks I live all the way over the hill toward the next town, in a small trailer she purchased on a small piece of land for me and my sister and goats. It is not that I don't like the trailer: I love it! It's a wonderful trailer. Metal, with a canopy and the sweetest casement windows you ever did see. No, it's just that

when sister died, I felt sorry for those poor little goats. They missed her so—she really loved them. It is not that I didn't love the goats, but they were so needy. I let them move into the trailer and then there was less room for me. They began to nibble at the curtains—who could blame them as the curtains had pictures of carrots on them, and embroidered images of parseley—I go back to freshen their water and give them some time out of doors, in the goat run. Then I go back to the library. I don't understand why no one ever comes in . . . the books are so lonely. I sit at the front desk all day. Nothing. No one comes in. As I said, this suits me fine, of course, though I pity the books. Lately I have been reading The Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti, and my dreams have become cat-like and rat-like back there in my secret compartment. "Come buy, come buy" I am lately tempted to plead in the morning, at the top of the stairs, as cars whisk themselves by with nary a glance to the library, or to me. This change—I think it has to do with the weather. Autumn is so sad. It is good that behind the shelf, in my secret compartment, I have a small fire to keep me warm. And I have all of the books I would ever need to keep me company here—it's true, though, I worry about the goats and my dead sister. I should visit them all more often, I guess. Perhaps next week, after I finish repairing the fairy-tale books. They're so . . . frayed . . . so . . . misunderstood. I neglect everything. I can't stop myself.

2. "Professor Helen C. Andersen"

The new fabulist moved into her office this week. It is next to my office. I asked my chair to assign her an office on the other end of the building, because I am a very private person, but he assigned her the office next to mine. My chair claims I will be a good mentor for her. He put in a one-way mirror between us so she could observe me. But why would I be a good mentor for her? She has streaky blonde hair with pale pink highlights; she wears three-inch heels and straight-legged jeans. Why would she need mentoring from me? Let's be realistic here. I have lived in this town for my entire forty-three years and wear my grandmother's clothes. I am not a good mentor for her. I can see that she judges my outfits by the way she watches me through her side of the mirror. My life was nice before. It was quiet. I did all my research at the town library, where my daughter is the librarian. There is a desk in the children's room always waiting for me. But then I was asked to keep watch over her. Why? She showed up in town with her pink and blonde hair and her new collection of stories about flying ponies, and everyone loved her on sight. But I'm dutiful. I know my place. I started going to my office at school more often—in order to mentor her of course. If I am asked to do something I do it. I am a realist that way. And one must help the town's newest women fit in . . . it isn't easy. The women in this town can be cold. My other daughter was a real victim of them. How do you stay so thin, I asked the new one over lunch just today, in an effort to mentor her. Is it natural, or do you have a problem? I asked her. People in town may start to think you have a problem, I told her, if you do not gain weight. As for me, I have problems. (This is just between us.) One of my problems, it seems, is that when I sit down to write, I do not write about flying pink ponies. My

stories do not come to me through telepathy, as the new fabulist says her stories do come to her. They appear on my forehead and I read them in the mirror, she told me, her eyes brimming with tears in an effort to manipulate me. As for me, I have a very large forehead and I fear it makes me look like a man. My new project is to find things out about her to expose her as the fraud that she really is. For example, did you know that she was once hospitalized for attempted suicide? If nothing else, I will always have that. I mean who does she think she is? I've had enough of that with my daughters. And pink ponies. Pink hair. This town was a lot nicer before her arrival, before she came here. Now, when I look in the mirror, there is a terrible glare. She's on the other side of it—always—I fear.

Kate Bernheimer is the author of three novels, The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold (2001), The Complete Tales of Merry Gold (2006) and The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold (forthcoming 2011), all with FC2. Her first short story collection, Horse, Flower, Bird, is forthcoming (Coffee House 2010). She has edited three fairy-tale anthologies, including My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales (forthcoming Penguin Books 2010), and founded and edits the journal Fairy Tale Review (University of Nebraska Press). She is Associate Professor and Writer-in-Residence at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, where she teaches each spring. She is also the author of children's books, including The Girl in The Castle Inside The Museum (Random House), a Publishers Weekly "Best Book of 2008." She lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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