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Luan Scrivner

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There is Magic and There is Madness: A Look Inside Karen Russell's *St. Luchy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*

By: Luan Scrivner

There are many writers in this world. We can see this in the colorful shelves in bookstores, all packed with titles such as: *The Hunger Games*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *War and Peace*, *The Audacity of Hope*. But let us really dive into the subject: what makes a great story? Some may argue that a great hero makes the story exceptional while others would decide that the story is great because of how much action is shoved into the story. Not many people give attention to the mastermind behind the scenes, the true genius of the story who deserves as much if not more of the attention the fictional character is getting: the writer. What makes a great writer? Vladimir Nabokov strongly voices an opinion. "There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter," states Nabokov. While our bookshelves are colorful, not many, by Nabokov's standards, fit the criteria.

Of the many stories that circulate our culture, the one that is worthy of joining the cannon of short stories is *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. The story is a complex and elaborate world created by the brilliant mind of Karen Russell. *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* is both a thrilling and subtle

narrative worthy of applause from the respected Vladimir Nabokov. Russell combines logic and fantasy to create a story that leaves you haunted and with questions.

In *Good Readers, Good Writers*, Nabokov states that “one should notice and fondle details.” Russell, in short, concise, and detailed sentences paints an image of detail that is frighteningly realistic. “...at first, our pack was all hair and snarl and floor-thumping joy. We forgot the barked cautions of our mothers and fathers, all the promises we’d made to be civilized and ladylike, couth and kempt. We tore through the austere rooms, overturning dresser drawers, pawing through the neat piles of the Stage 3 girls’ starched underwear, smashing lightbulbs with our bare fists. Things felt less foreign in the dark.” It is interesting that Russell categorizes her characters from Stage 1 to Stage 5. To break apart her chapters, Russell includes a small definition of what the new stage indicates and implies so that the meaning of each stage is not lost to the reader.

Nabokov begins to explain that a book is a work of art. Therefore, it is the creation of a new world, a new perspective. Nabokov argues that one must approach it as this new world, full of new life, unforeseen possibilities, and see it without any obvious tie to the world one left in order to get to this new world. Russell’s title, seemingly innocent, jars the mind of the reader within heartbeats. And the deeper the reader delves inside this world, the more one must realize that this is no ordinary girls home. In the first paragraph, Russell writes: “The dim bedroom was windowless and odorless. We remedied this by spraying exuberant yellow streams all over the bunks. We jumped from bunk to bunk,

spraying." Russell makes the reader think, she helps the reader make connections. In this part of the story, she notes that wolves mark their territory by spraying the boundaries. In human society, it seems that people feel more comfortable with boundaries because all that they know is in these boundaries; what they know is safe and reliable, not faulted and uncertain. Quite vividly, she makes the reader realize this correlation to the natural world.

Nabokov argues that to begin a book with a ready made generalization, the reader has already decided what to expect and what should happen. Nabokov warns against this saying, "Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie." To Russell's credit, she leaves little time for the reader to assume something of the story. She has, in this piece mastered the art of captivating using just the title: *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Perhaps Russell intended for there to be slight interpretation of her story, for the reader can glean a slight amount of information, enough in fact to create a small assumption. But whatever assumption is made, will quickly dissipate from just the first sentence alone.

Perhaps Nabokov's most interesting point is that a writer must be a storyteller, a teacher, and an enchanter. Magic, story, and lesson. There must be magic in this story for once the reader starts, it quickly becomes a world which accepts the reader more than it accepts its own characters. There is magic and there is madness. There is such logic to *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* and yet there is a lack of logic that somehow makes sense. To create such a world where sanity and madness coexist and even

make sense together, and to have a struggle of sanity and madness within the character that you take this journey with... that to me is a true enchanter.

Russell has a stylistic writing that is simple. But the details that she is able to bring forth are not. To be able to enchant people as well as birth such an unique world is what a true storyteller is able to do. Russell pokes subtle hints with irony and at absurdity. At one part of the story, one of the girls is being frightened into behaving. "Do you want to be shunned from both species?" The projected message is shown to the girl. The fact that the two groups are considered species in it of itself is ridiculous. But given the context it makes so much sense that the reader doesn't even question it.

Nabokov states that the third facet of a great writer is lesson: to be able to teach. Russell, through the eyes of wolf-girl Claudette, is able to voice a quiet opinion of modern society. She writes, "The main commandment of wolf life is Know Your Place." Russell then goes on to open the reader's mind to this thought. "Being around humans had awakened a slavish-dog affection in us," Russell writes. "An abasing, belly-to-the-ground desire to please." Russell almost insists the reader to think about this and how it translates into our society. Is this what school does? She seems to ask. Is this what society tries to do?

Being able to provoke such thoughts and questions is what I think a great writer should be able to do. To be able to break the glass ceiling, to see something that others don't is what great authors can do. To state that Karen Russell is a good writer is almost an understatement. I believe that Karen Russell is an

excellent if not perfect vessel upon which Vladimir Nabokov's thoughts on great writers can rest upon.