

Author uses Typhoid Mary myth for book

Book Review by Kevin Oursland

"The Ballad of Typhoid Mary" by J. F. Federspiel, E.P. Dutton Inc.

Ours is a mythological land, a land of folklore and tall tales, of ballads without origin, characters greater than life. If you consider that over 300 years ago, when the original boat people first stumbled on the eastern shores, exhausted, bewildered and maniacally religious, to gaze upon a verdant promised land of seemingly endless potential, it is not surprising that myths abound, for nothing produces them with greater fecundity than religion. Our past is colored with the various scalawags and heroes that crowd the corridors of our national imagination.

Time and repeated tellings tend to dissipate the line between myth and reality, until it is no longer possible to tell where the one ends and the other begins. Out of these myths, one endures, that of Typhoid Mary, the cook who was responsible for the deaths of at least twenty-six people in New York City during the early part of this century. The story of Typhoid Mary is the subject of a new book by the Swiss

author J. L. Federspiel.

In 1868 the immigrant ship Liebnitz drifts, crippled and decimated, into New York harbor. Aboard is a young woman named Mary Caduff. One of the few survivors of the voyage, Mary is taken in by a young doctor with a guilt-inducing passion for adolescent women. Mary is able to speak only one three-word sentence, 'I can cook.' And cook she does, with lethal efficiency. For Mary harbors within her youthful body a deadly and contagious disease, which she quickly transmits to the doctor, who promptly, and with little dignity, passes away. Mary herself is immune to the disease. Thus begins the ballad of Typhoid Mary, preparer of meals (German food is her specialty, though she claims to be Irish), angel of death.

It is perhaps significant that the myth of Typhoid Mary has been debunked by a foreign writer. The book is filled with pithy observations of the strange and multi-dimensional land of America by an outsider.

The story is told by a Dr. Howard J. Rageet, a personable and empathetic narrator who suffers from a 'treacherous disease' of his own. The disease is never identified, and one suspects that

it may not be entirely physical in nature. In spare, direct language, the doctor follows the deadly path of Mary as she moves from one employer to another, leaving as soon as the symptoms of the disease become apparent.

The figure that emerges is that of a tormented, driven woman who passionately believes that it is her purpose to cook. Mary is possessed with the idea of cooking. It is her essence, her mission, and it will not let her be. If there is a moral to the story (and all worthy tales, of which this is one, have some moral), it is this: that we alone are responsible for our actions, that we alone must decide when it is right to continue, or when we must call it quits.

The lives of the victims are treated lightly, their deaths flippantly. "Dying," Dr. Rageet writes, "is always a tragic event while it's happening, even an individual's dying — especially an individual's. But given some distance in time, the whole thing flattens out, and what was once a reality gets twisted in time — 'like the image in a funhouse mirror.'"

"The Ballad of Typhoid Mary," as the title suggests, is not a full-blown biography of Mary Caduff. So little is known of her life that it would be impossible to write a full account. According to the author, "Ballad" is "85 percent fiction and 15 percent fact."

But there is more involved in "Ballad" than the tale of Mary. It is a morbidly funny book that haunts the reader. The character of Mary remains obscure throughout the book. We rarely hear her speak, and she is always seen through the eyes of Dr. Rageet. This must have been deliberate on the part of Federspiel, for by keeping Mary twice removed, he was able to focus more clearly on the present.

By concentrating on Mary, who carried her own treacherous disease yet remained aloof from it, Dr. Rageet contrasts his own life of helping others, a life now wracked by a debilitating and ironic disease.

"The Ballad of Typhoid Mary" is, then, a moral tale, and the tragic life of a long-dead woman is used as a springboard by which we might better view our own lives.

Romance author finds success

Last week, the story of Celeste's release of 30 drunken prisoners from Podunk county jail hit the news stands. While America recovers, we turn now to Harley Davidson, budding romance author, as he sits on his front porch typing and sipping martinis.

Mary Louise Knapp

Harley had just sent the manuscript of "WHEN FRONTS COLLIDE" to the publisher, but he was already hard at work on "TORNADO WARNING."

"I think this is gonna be a real success, Otis," he said. Silently he read over the climatic ending of Chapter 3: "Isabella, with a loud cry, rushed to the weather machine. 'You shall not take our meteorological secrets from us, Don Pedro, unless it's over my dead body!'"

"Don Pedro laughed menacingly, and pointed his pistol at Martin. 'First I shall kill you, you degenerate producer of erroneous weather forecasts, and afterwards my unfaithful wife!' He fired a shot into the rococo ceiling."

Martin, whose lips had turned blue with fear, spoke bravely.

"What do you hope to gain from our deaths? The weather secrets are out of my possession. Even if you and your henchmen took over KRAP-TV, the public would turn away from you. They know Isabella and I can never be replaced."

Harley took a drag on his cigar, and began the next chapter. The tele-

phone, which he had reconnected outside, rang.

"Answer it, Otis, will you?" he said. "I'm on a hot streak and can't be disturbed." Otis got to his feet.

"Chapter 4. Thunderclouds Approach." Harley typed. "In the meantime, Mrs. Baxter questioned Linda about Steve 'What does your fiance do, my dear?'"

"He drinks all night and sleeps all day, Mother," Linda, who had been trained to be honest, replied. Mrs. Baxter's smile remained frozen on her face. "I see. And does he plan to get a job any time in the near future?"

"No, Mother, he's waiting until he wins the Montgomery Ward sweepstakes. Then we can buy a small trailer in the Mojave Desert."

Mrs. Baxter silently but devoutly wished that families still arranged marriages for their children. However, Steve was coming to dinner, and she knew she had to welcome him graciously...

"Hey, Harley! It's for you!" Otis shouted, breaking Harley's train of thought. Harley took the receiver from Otis, and listened in wonder.

"Say that again?" he said blankly. "I've what!" He put down the phone and turned to Otis.

"Otis! You'll never believe this, but my book is selling like hotcakes! My publisher has arranged for me to appear on a talk show, as the first successful male romance author! Pack your bags, kid, we're going to New York!"

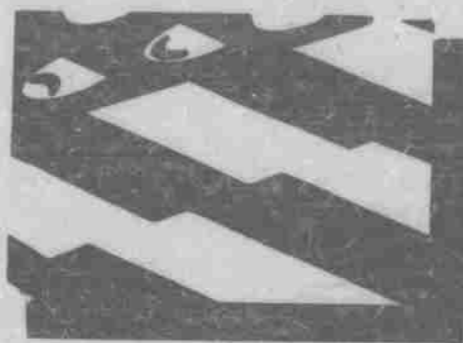
Next week: Harley meets the Big Apple, and Celeste's children come to visit.

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