

Sharing a Secret:

The Enduring Vision of Frances Hodgson Burnett

Adapted from "The Secret Garden: From Page to Stage," by Connie Yeager, Cincinatti Playhouse in the Park



“As long as one has a garden, one has a future; and as long as one has a future one is alive.”

—Frances Hodgson Burnett, shortly before her death in 1924

The enduring popularity of *The Secret Garden*, and its place at the top of the literary legacy of author Frances Hodgson Burnett, might well astonish the prolific writer, most of whose 52 books were written for adult audiences.

Frances Hodgson Burnett was quite the hybrid. Born in 1849 in Manchester, England, she was the third of five children of a middle class merchant who died before she turned four. Her mother stepped in to keep the business afloat, but finally transplanted the family to eastern Tennessee as the Civil War ended in 1865, when Frances was 15. According to a biographer, “She spent her life as neither British nor American but reveled in straddling both countries’ opportunities and attitudes.”

Burnett was driven to write from an early age, but the move to the United States launched her professional writing career at age 17. She discovered that she could earn money by selling her stories to magazines,



The gardens of Maytham Hall in Kent, model for Burnett's Misselthwaite Manor.

and from that point her writing helped support her family throughout her life. Even after her marriage to Swan Burnett, an ophthalmologist and otolaryngologist, her income supported his studies and then provided the niceties of their life when they settled in Washington, DC. The marriage was not a happy one; after the birth of two sons, they spent much time apart as her growing success took her to New York and London (making no fewer than 33 trans-Atlantic crossings over the course of her restless, independent life).

The Secret Garden was written relatively late in Burnett's career, in 1910. By this time, she had divorced her first husband and completed a brief, disastrous second marriage to an English doctor and actor. But the story was most strongly influenced by two more emotionally lingering blows: the death of her 16-year-old son from tuberculosis in 1890, and the sale of Maytham Hall, the English manor house she leased for nearly a decade and loved deeply. Mary's "secret" garden at Misselthwaite Manor is modeled after the garden at Maytham, complete with the actual robin that visited Burnett there, as recounted in her story *My Robin*. *The Secret Garden* also provided a way for Frances to "resurrect" her beloved son Lionel through the ailing character of Colin.

Frances' quintessentially English book was finished in the American house on Long Island that became her final home. It was first serialized in a magazine, then published in book form in 1911.

While Burnett was also a playwright who penned stage versions of more than a dozen of her books and stories (most notably *Little Lord Fauntleroy*), *The Secret Garden* was not among the works she adapted herself. Nevertheless, it has proved popular in numerous adaptations. It made its film debut in a 1919 silent movie, before MGM took it on in a 1949 version starring Margaret O'Brien and Dean Stockwell. Several BBC versions exist, along with a Hallmark Hall of Fame telefilm from the 80s, and Dame Maggie Smith lends her star power to the role of Mrs. Medlock in the 1993 feature film. More recent adaptations include the Broadway musical, an opera, and *The Misselthwaite Archives*, a modern retelling on YouTube.

And so Burnett's treasured garden blooms on, cherished by generations of readers and audiences alike. 🔑



Come to My Garden

Adapted from an original piece by Christa Skiles,
Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park



Playwright Marsha Norman and
Composer Lucy Simon

For more than 100 years, *The Secret Garden* has delighted readers of all ages with its message of faith, renewal, and friendship.

But while we may think of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* as primarily a children's novel, it was originally printed in serial form beginning in 1910 in *The American Magazine*, a publication for adults. Surprisingly, once published in book form, the book was not immediately popular. Upon Burnett's death in 1924, her obituary focused on her other, better-known literary achievements: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *A Little Princess*.

Certainly the very honest portrayal of the story's heroine, complete with both faults and charms, might have unnerved early readers of *The Secret Garden*. Today's fans find Mary decidedly more modern than the Victorian Era from which she was born, and consequently far more interesting. It's perhaps that realism, anchoring a more mystical tale of redemption and hope, that has contributed to the story's endurance. *The Secret Garden* is now considered Burnett's masterpiece and is one of the most popular works of English literature.

Translating that tale to the stage, however, was a daunting prospect for the show's creators, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Marsha Norman, who wrote the book and lyrics, and Lucy Simon (sister of pop star Carly), who made her Broadway musical debut as the show's composer. Through staged readings, a trial production, and further workshops, the team worked to craft—and transform—the original into its new form. Not just a matter of adding songs to the story,

Norman and Simon's work balanced the children's tale with the more mature narrative, while also refocusing centrally on Mary's journey.

As Norman noted in the program for the show's first national tour, "Eventually, we realized there were no rules. There was only the fact that the novel was more than a story—that it was, in fact, a promise. And the promise was that if you are abandoned, as Mary Lennox is, you can find a place where you belong. If you suffer a loss, even as great a one as Mary's, you can survive it. If you can believe—as she does—that you can grow, then you can.

"Our task then became not simply to translate the story of the novel, but to convey the promise of the book," said Norman. "To do that, we would have to dramatize the spiritual forces at work in the world. We would have to speak bravely and directly of the healing power of love, not an easy thing to do in this age of easy cynicism and doubt. In short, we too would have to believe. And that, in addition to working very hard for three and a half years, is what we did."

The Secret Garden premiered on Broadway in 1991 and won three Tony Awards.

Ultimately, *The Secret Garden's* inspiring message is one that spans generations and bears repetition—a celebration of believing. Believing in oneself, in others, in a better future, in the spring to come. "[T]hat is the secret of *The Secret Garden*," Norman wrote, "a secret meant to be told again and again, whenever we have the chance, whether in the sleepy semi-darkness of a child's room at bedtime or the dazzling light of the Broadway stage. Work hard. Be brave. But above all, believe." 