



The Lie Tree

Written by Frances Hardinge

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In *The Lie Tree*, author Frances Hardinge explores the feminist struggles of fourteen-year-old Faith Sunderly. The Victorian Era provides a perfect context for this captivating murder mystery. During this time period, the scientific community was coming to terms with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and society treated women as second-class citizens. Belief in phantoms, ghosts, and superstitions abounded and the line between scientific fact and fantastical discoveries was blurred in the minds of scientists and laypeople alike. The historical elements heighten the tension between the fantasy aspect of the story, the tree that lives on lies, and the courageous and bold curiosity of a scientific-minded young woman ahead of her time.

When Faith's naturalist father discovers the so-called Mendacity Tree, or Lie Tree, in China, he learns that it grows in dark or muted light and bears citrus-like fruit with extraordinary properties if fed lies. Mr. Sunderly makes a promise that "in the interests of Truth" he will feed the tree with lies to deceive the world and bring back knowledge that could benefit all mankind. This discovery, his secrecy, and his lies create a scandal and lead to his murder. Her family, her father's colleagues, the servants, and everyone in the small English community of Vane underestimate Faith. Her curious mind leads her to question her father's fatal "accident" and drives her to learn more about the mysteries he was in the process of studying. As Faith negotiates the gulf between the decorum expected of her, including inferiority to all males, and her determination to be recognized for her intelligence, Faith's character shows readers a young woman who is determined and goes to great lengths to learn about her father's discoveries and to solve the mystery of his death.

During this historical time period, the social classes in England were especially distinct. The gossip, rumors, and lies that weave throughout this story are perpetuated by servants and social class "betters" to frighten or seek revenge on members of other social classes. Faith's mother teaches her daughter how to talk to and manipulate servants and then Faith herself takes advantage of the "servants' invisible world" to spread the lies that feed the Lie Tree.

The fantasy aspect of the novel spotlights the disruption in scientific thought that resulted from Darwin's publication of *The Origin of the Species* in 1859. Darwin's work called into question many long-held beliefs and theories about life. Faith's connection to the natural world is one exciting aspect of this story. For example, when Faith and her brother are lowered into a dig at an excavation site, Hardinge writes: "The past was all around her. She could smell it. It did not feel dead. It felt alive, and as curious about her as she was about it" (p. 48).

In her effort to understand the Lie Tree, Faith feeds it lies and overcomes her fear of eating its fruit. “She was a scientist, she reminded herself. Scientists did not give in to awe and superstition. Scientists asked questions, and answered them through observation and logic” (p. 208). Faith learns that ingesting the fruit gives her visions of truth but at a great cost. “A lie was like a fire, Faith was discovering. At first it needed to be nursed and fed, but carefully and gently. A slight breath would fan the newborn flames, but too vigorous a huff would blow it out. Some lies took hold and spread, crackling with excitement, and no longer needed to be fed. But then these were no longer your lies. They had a life and shape of their own, and there was no controlling them” (p. 255).

Hardinge’s use of language is one of the compelling aspects of *The Lie Tree*. In writing about Faith’s love for her father, Hardinge writes: “But she had loved him. She had loved him too hard and too long to lose her hold even now. She had nailed her very heart and soul to his mast” (p. 160). Lying in bed one night, Faith imagines “her lie spreading silently like dark green smoke, filling the air around the house like a haze, spilling from the mouths of those who whispered and wondered and feared. She imagined it soaking like mist into waiting leaves, seeping like sap down gnarled slender stems, and forcing itself out into a small, white spearhead of a bud” (p. 193).

Issues surrounding feminism, truth-telling, family loyalty, self-respect, justice and revenge are themes that run throughout the novel. This book could be paired with similarly themed titles. *Code Name Verity: Courage, Friendship, and Betrayal in World War II* by Elizabeth Wein (2012) is an historical “feminist” novel that would make a compelling companion to *The Lie Tree*. Two titles in the WOW Review Volume 9, Issue 2 (<http://wowlit.org/volume-ix-issue-2/>) focused on disrupting the status quo would also make thoughtful companion titles: *The Other Boy* by M.G. Hennessy (2016), illustrated by Sfé R. Monster and *Soldier Sister, Fly Home* by Nancy Bo Flood (2016), illustrated by Shonto Begay.

Frances Hardinge was born in Kent and lives in the United Kingdom. According to the biography on her Web site, she has always enjoyed “dark” stories. “When she was six, she wrote a short story that included an attempted poisoning, a faked death and a villain being thrown off a cliff – all in just one page!” (<http://www.franceshardinge.com/>). Hardinge’s other books include *Cuckoo’s Song*, *Face in the Glass*, *Fly by Night*, *Fly Trap*, and more. All feature strong female protagonists. *The Lie Tree* has earned many recognitions. It is on the USBBY 2017 Outstanding International Book List and is an ALA Notable Book 2017, Costa Book of the Year, Costa Children’s Book Award, and Horn Book-Boston Globe Award winner.

Reading this novel made me wonder about female scientists during the Victorian Era. I learned that a few Victorian women managed to push against boundaries by contributing to the scientific research of the day. To my surprise, one of them was Beatrix Potter, who I know as a celebrated British author-illustrator of whimsical children’s books. Potter’s careful observation and detailed drawings of animals and plants led her to a deep interest in mycology. She conducted experiments on how

fungi reproduced and germinated. Potter wrote her first and only scientific paper on her findings, which was introduced by a male friend because women were not allowed to attend scholarly proceedings or present papers themselves. In 1997, the Linnaean Society issued an apology for the sexism they displayed.

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