

Turner Buckminster: The Backbone of a Truly Good Story

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29 March 2012

Characters bring a story to life; they are the storytellers. The multiple experiences and interactions that take place within a character move the story along and make it complex and layered; *good*. Characters are vital to the development and complexity of a good story. They are the backbone of the story because they narrate the story. Each character perspective and interaction brings depth to the story, making it intriguing to readers. James Jacobs and Michael Tunnell write, “Books of lasting value are multifaceted and re-create the very texture of life. They are not repositories of information or containers for stories, but they are experiences to be lived by the reader” (1996, p. 14). Turner Buckminster, the main character in the historical fiction novel by Gary Schmidt, *Lizzie Bright and The Buckminster Boy* provides readers with a new experience through his deeply layered personality and fresh point of view. Readers follow Turner defy the racial norms and standards present in his 1912 Maine town through his inter-dialogue and by being a fly on the wall during his interactions with other characters in the story. Turner’s perspective provides the audience with a wise, but innocent narrator whose interactions with other characters in the story provide a well-rounded and trusted voice throughout the story, giving readers a chance to participate in something truly *good*.

Turner’s voice is greatly influenced by the fact that he is a minister’s son. His father, Reverend Buckminster has moved his family from Boston to Phippsburg, Maine to take a job at First Congregation. Turner deeply despises the expectations set forth upon him by his father’s title and throughout the book he wrestles with the expectations the title brings and who he must

be as the minister's son. Most times Turner rejects the expectations. He says at the start of the book, "...being a minister's son mattered a whole lot, and pretending it didn't matter to him was starting to peck at his soul" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 1). He rejects the way he is expected to act, to an extent, but is aware of the expectations other inflict on him and at times wonders if he should indeed act in that manner. Turner is cynical and closed to anything that has to do with The Church. He is not hateful, but simply resentful of the burden of rigid expectations of a minister's son. He is bored with the life laid out for him by his father and often mocks the congregation and uses biblical references in a joking matter. He says on page three that, "Deacon Hurd had prayed long enough to aggravate the prophet Elijah" (Schmidt, 2004). Also, during a congregational baseball game Turner thinks he can show his new neighbors his baseball skills, but is immediately seen as an outcast because of his lack of performance. He is especially harassed by Willis Hurd, who Turner says the following about, "...[he] wondered what Willis's smile would look like if the ball went crashing back into his face," but follows it with this thought, "Maybe that wasn't something a minister's son should want to see—but he did want to see it. (Schmidt, 2004, p. 5). Turner is constantly at battle in his mind between who he wants to be and what others think and expect of him. Turner's inner battle gives him depth. It shows a process of self-discovery and growing up. The fact that Turner constantly denies his identity as a minister's son, but also confirms it and asks himself "how should I act?" gives the readers a realistic and relatable character to identify with. Turner's character and his search for identity as a minister's son gives the readers a new insight, rather than a retelling. By creating Turner on this process of self-discovery, readers can gain new meaning and experience from his character. As James Jacobs and Michael Tunnell say, "When we read what we consider a really good book, we have

participated in a new experience and are never quite the same again” (1996, p. 14). Turner’s character does just that. He opens a new world to readers that is full of lessons and experiences that change them forever.

Another aspect of Turner’s character that submerges readers into a new experience is Turner’s desire to escape. He dreams about leaving Phippsburg from the moment he arrives and continues throughout the book. Embedded in his character is an urge to escape in order to create a new identity separate from his family’s. Just in the first five pages of the book, Turner mentions “lighting out for the territories” three times. Throughout the book, Turner is constantly searching for something larger. Larger than his father. Larger than Phippsburg. Larger than himself. When Turner is in great panic and trouble trying to get injured Lizzie Bright back to shore, he finds himself in the midst of whales and knew that, “...he was in the middle of something much larger than himself, and not just larger in size” (Schmidt, 2004, 79). Turner’s journey of self-discovery is not only internal, but external as well. Turner wants to be part of something unknown and new. He thinks the following when looking into the eye of the whale, “...[he] wished with a desire greater than anything he had ever desired that he might understand what it was in the eye of the whale that shivered his soul” (Schmidt, 2004, p. 80). Turner is curious about the world around him and is thrilled by the unknown that was present within the eye of the whale. Turner’s curiosity creates many opportunities for Turner to meet new people and create meaningful interactions and relationships that add to the development and complexity of Turner’s character.

Turner’s curiosity brought him to Malaga Island. Some may say the coastal Maine winds aided in that effort, but in turn, Malaga Island brought Turner to Lizzie Bright. On page 43 Turner says, “...it was as if God had just remade the world for him, and he was Adam waking up,

an entire globe to explore” (Schmidt, 2004). Exploration is the prelude of Lizzie and Turner meeting and it is exploration that proves to be the foundation of their relationship. Lizzie Bright is a black girl in a conservative, white town. She lives outside of Phippsburg on Malaga Island with her grandfather (who happens to be a Reverend) and another black family. Turner is curious about Lizzie, not because she is black, but because she is kind and witty. He asks Lizzie on page 49, “Lizzie Bright Griffin, do you ever wish the world would just go ahead and swallow you whole?” Lizzie replies, “Sometimes I do.” Turner’s response, “And for a moment, Turner had no doubt that she could” (Schmidt, 2004). Lizzie gives Turner peace. He learns from her nature and she helps his innocence grow to wisdom. Turner and Lizzie’s relationship is not accepted outside of Malaga Island, especially because of the fact that Turner is the minister’s son and again Turner faces the conflict of what others want him to be and who he wants to be and he rebels, naturally. He becomes invested in Lizzie, in her family, and Phippsburg’s cruel efforts to remove her community from Malaga Island. He stirs things up in his conservative, white town because of his perfect mix of innocence and wisdom and rebellion and acceptance. He stirs things up because of his vast curiosity to learn and grow about the unknown; which happens to be Lizzie.

Turner and Lizzie’s relationship tell the readers a lot about Turner’s character and add another complexity to who he is. Turner’s acceptance of Lizzie when all of Phippsburg rejects her is noble and mature. He is wise to see past what people in Phippsburg see and brave to stand up for her and their friendship. This aspect is important to point out because it helps readers, especially young readers for whom this story is written for. Stephanie Feeney and Eva Moravcik write in *YC Young Children*,

“Educators work hard in programs to help children learn to understand the feelings and viewpoints of others, to move from being egocentric-seeing the world only from their own perspective-to having the ability to take on the perspective of others” (2005, p. 21).

Turner’s character helps students identify with the racial tensions in the community at the time. His character also helps them empathize and see a different perspective; that of a child instead of an adult. Turner and Lizzie’s relationship add to the complexity of Turner’s character as a whole as Turner is driven by curiosity and finds a beautiful friendship in the end.

Turner’s relationship with Mrs. Cobb is has a similar ending, but a very different beginning. Turner is forced to play the organ for Mrs. Cobb in the summer as punishment for going to Malaga Island. In the beginning of their time together, Turner sees Mrs. Cobb as a poor, lonely woman, but as they spend more time together, he gains respect for her and they become close friends. Turner’s relationship with Mrs. Cobb shows his respect for his elders. He is never brash or rude to her, but instead pleasant and kind. He also demonstrates this kind demeanor to Mrs. Hurd and on page 96 he says, “I don’t think you could be wicked if you tried, Mrs. Hurd” (Schmidt, 2004). Turner respects each woman and obeys his orders to play organ for Mrs. Cobb until she slips away in her chair listening to Turner play hymns.

One last relationship we must look at is between Turner and his father. Throughout the majority of the book, Turner resents his father. He resents him for inflicting certain expectations and standards upon Turner. As discussed before, Turner rebels to most of these expectations and standards in intentional and unintentional ways. Finally, when school starts in the fall and Turner’s father is instructing him Latin, Turner’s father has a slight change of heart. He has Turner read Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, which is rebellious in the nature that his

father is a Reverend and believes in one Truth and that Truth being very opposite of what Darwin presents. He tells Turner that, “Books can ignite fires in your mind, because they carry ideas for kindling, and art for matches” (Schmidt, 2004, p. 129). For the first time in Turner’s life, his father gives him a sense of freedom. A freedom to be someone other than the minister’s son. His father says, “...maybe First Congregational doesn’t need to know everything we’re thinking (Schmidt, 2004, p. 129), showing Turner that he is allowed to think in other ways. He is allowed to be curious and adventurous, not rigid and boring. This action sets Turner free in many ways. Two pages later in the book, Mrs. Cobb tells Turner, “...you don’t have to be a minister’s son all the time.” Hearing this, Turner has a revelation, “Turner had never thought he could ever, at any time, be anything else. The thought shivered him—as if he had almost touched a whale” (Schmidt, 2004, p. 131). With this revelation, Turner’s initial feelings and thoughts about himself and who he wants to be are solidified.

Turner Buckminster is a wonderfully developed character that aids in the unfolding the story of *Lizzie Bright and The Buckminster Boy*. From the restrictions he feels as a minister’s son, to the longings he has to “light out to the territories,” he is set free through his interactions and relationships with Lizzie Bright, Mrs. Cobb, Mrs. Hurd, and finally his father. He comes to realize his true identity does not rest on what others expect of him, but the creation of the person he wants to be. Turner provides readers with a timeless story of growing up while facing adversity, but gives readers a new experience that can never be forgotten.

References

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