

The Thanksgiving Visitor and A Christmas Memory Program Article –Tom Key

In Praise of Miss Sook and In Memory of Mary Alice Key

In 1975, I volunteered to read a Christmas story for a celebration at the downtown YMCA in Knoxville where I was attending graduate school at The University of Tennessee. Finding suitable material was tough. In the holiday section, there were plenty of sentimental, archaic or kindergarten books on the shelves. Then I came across Truman Capote's literature.

This writing captured the south and the sacred feast day like no other story I had read. The power is in the character of "Miss Sook". She is a kind of person, it seems, we all need to make it to adulthood—an enlivening feminine "Other". In Capote's case, she was his maiden aunt. In my life, she was my mother. In either person the driving force was a relentlessly fierce imagination. A child can't be in the company of such a spiritual dynamic without being forever changed.

Twenty-six years later, preparing to read these stories for an audience again, I am struck by several virtues they possess. One is that the reading of them has never grown old. As my son, Stephen, says, "Every year, when the dog dies, that's when they start to lose it". So do I—every year. The hilarity of Miss Sook and Buddy asking bootlegger Ha Ha Jones for a quart of whiskey; the power of Odd's confession at the Thanksgiving dinner before all the assembled and wealthier hosts and hostesses; and the sheer beauty of the kite metaphor, literally take my breath away. These moments are so well crafted by Capote that it takes an exercise of diaphragm, vocal chord and tongue control to speak through the emotion they evoke.

The virtue of Miss Sook is what also grows richer to me over the decades. She had no education, home, employment, spouse or children, and yet of all the graduates, home-owners, professionals, or married parents I've known, she, and all like her, was most happy. To the government she was disenfranchised, to the merchant she was penniless, to the religious she was foolish and to her siblings she was embarrassing. Yet, before another panel, to the reader, or, in this case, to the listener, enabled by the act of literary skill, observing the evidence of Miss Sook's daily morality, she was free, rich, wise and a miracle of love.

Finally, I think if it is the depth and breadth of Miss Sook's imagination that constitutes the content of these stories, then, that is why they are so ignited by the form of dramatic reading with its ability to trigger thoughts, images and feelings. I'm glad when people tell me they have read these stories, but hearing them, with the rest of the audience, makes it "so real".

Miss Sook wasn't Buddy's birth mother, but certainly she was a mother to him of another sort. Perhaps it always takes craft, virtue and imagination to make the presence of that kind of woman "real". Aren't these the practices by which we have always understood, in part, another woman, who, over two thousand years ago, and halfway around the world, when faced with the Mystery of Experience, said "Yes" and created the possible season, generations later, for such a plot of grace in rural depression Alabama?