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ENGL 116B

October 30 2012

They Way Things Are;

Leslie Burkes And Accepted Public Norms

In her book *Bridge to Terabithia*, Katherine Paterson explores how a young boy deals with accepted society norms while at the same time remaining a individual with his own interests and choices. Jess Aaron is a boy from a regular country family, from a regular school, and from a regular town where things are done a certain way and anyone who is different really stands out. However, a very unique and different girl, Leslie Burkes, comes in from the city who revolutionizes the way Jess thinks and helps him gain the strength and courage he needs to be himself. Katherine Paterson uses two contrasting characters to illustrate the difference between freedom of choice and trap of social pressure.

Leslie Burkes is different on many levels. First of all she didn't look like the rest of the girls. When Jess first saw her he "couldn't honestly tell whether it was a girl or a boy" (pg. 18). She had short haircut like a boy and didn't bother wearing dresses and girls clothes. On the first day of school when every one was wearing their Sunday Best, Leslie was wearing sneakers without socks and faded cutoffs. During lunch Leslie was eating "yogurt" which was apparently only something the kids saw on T.V. During recess instead of playing hopscotch or some other activity with the rest of the girls Leslie came over to the lower field to play with the boys where

she proved that she could run faster than all the boys in school. Her favorite hobby, scuba diving, a dangerous and unusual hobby for a girl made Jess realize what a coward he was when he got scared just listening to her essay about it.

Leslie's parents are unlike any parents in the town. The reason they move to the country was to reassess their values structure. They thought that they were too hooked on money and success so they bought a farm so that they could think about what's important. Not the common family. Jess commented and said that " You can't make a of of a farm nowadays," to which Leslie replied that "money is not a the problem" (pg. 32). Yet despite all the money they have, they don't have a T.V. in the house. When Jess would come visit Leslie's parents they would talk about French politics and string quartets, something that most of the other parents in the town knew little about. Instead of being called Mr. Burke and Mrs. Burke they insisted that Jess call them by their first names. Leslie herself doesn't call her father "dad" but calls him "Bill".

All these never before seen differences from Leslie and her parents allow Jess to make a lot of discoveries about himself and the world around him. Jess's relationship with his parents is somewhat strained, but Leslie gives him a new perspective of his parents when he sees how Leslie gets along with her parents. Leslie spends time talking and learning to understand her father. This was a revelation to Jess who thought that parents were what they were and they was no need to puzzle them out. Leslie could make magic out of an empty forest and poetry just seems to flow from her mouth. Jess never knows what to come up with while Leslie is just full of ideas and stories. Jess realized how little he knows and how much he still wants to learn. From Leslie's encounter with the evil Janice Avery, Jess realized that the girl he formerly regarded as pure evil was also a girl with normal feelings who could get hurt.

One of the biggest differences between Leslie and Jess concerns religion. On Easter when Jess and Leslie go to church, they experience completely different things. Jess says that church is boring and that he hates it. He doesn't bother singing hymns along with the congregation. He doesn't bother listening to the preacher. Leslie, however, who had never gone to church before, finds it is better than a movie, which is very shocking to Jess. Leslie also remarks about Jess and the bible that "You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it and I think it's beautiful" (pg. 85). Here is one of the most important revelations in the book. Jess has been forced into believing the bible, although it is questionable whether he really believes it or not, and Jess hates it. Leslie is not forced to do anything and she finds beauty and satisfaction in it. The same thing happens with social norms and the way things are done in the community. Jess is often forced to act one way or another because everyone else is acting that way, even though Jess doesn't like being like that. Leslie is different and not forced to act under common norms, and she has the wonderful independence to choose to act in any way she wants.

Although Jess loves to draw and was even plans to draw a whole book, he is ashamed of it and hides his drawings. Jess also initially stays away from Leslie because he doesn't want to be associated with a weird girl. This all points to the social norm that held power over Jess and did not allow him to be himself. Once Jess befriends Leslie and is exposed to a completely different way of thinking, both about the world and about courage and fear, there is a remarkable change about him. Jess himself said that when Leslie died, "she had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world," and it was too late for him to go back to who he was.

Katherine Paterson paints a beautiful picture of a young boy learning to be himself in a world where people try to dictate how he should act. By contrasting the girl vs. boy, where the

girl is braver, smarter, and much more independent, she shows how important it is for individuals to withstand the public pressure and to find their own voices.