

Counselor's Corner

'tis the Month

Have you ever seen a Claddagh ring? This lovely piece of jewelry was designed to symbolize love, loyalty, and friendship with a heart, a crown, and a pair of hands. It is a cherished possession by many Irish people. In the book, *The Orphan Train*, an elderly woman locates her Claddagh ring in a trunk in the attic. It brings back memories of her heritage and her fight to survive as an orphan during the Depression Era. Horrible economic conditions prevailed, and the average person barely had food on the table. Sacrifice was key and survival was difficult.

Times were very hard, but they were worse for children who were orphaned and dangerously lived off the streets. A well-meaning group sought to help the large population of children who had been left to fend for themselves. They believed in a train system that had begun in 1854. Children were transported from the east coast to the Midwest with hopes of finding parents at various stops along the way. Although the people in charge had religion and schooling as top priorities, the reality was that many children barely survived in their new surroundings. Conditions were often deplorable, education and religion slipped through the cracks, and many adults cared only about free labor. Vivian, one of the main characters, uses her ring and other possessions as a springboard to recall her past. This process helps her to learn much about herself while she teaches her audience valuable lessons.

In addition to the history of this train (previously unknown to me), there is an outstanding lesson that we need to teach ourselves and our children. We need to look beyond appearances. When Vivian is introduced we see a woman we can easily stereotype by age. She is 92, her husband has died, she has never raised any children, and no one is lovingly calling her granny. Her age may loom above all else, and we might be duped into thinking that who she is now is what she has always been. We may not realize that she had a life far more interesting and challenging than many. Vivian appears to be wealthy, living in a lovely home with a housekeeper. No one dreams that she had been abandoned and destitute at one point in her life, and that her life holds many secrets.

The other main character is a foster child with a Goth look that includes piercings and an attitude that is not endearing. She has been in multiple homes, and the endings at each were less than desirable. Her current situation is a bit tenuous. She appears to be hard and uncaring. We might walk the other way if she were to cross our paths, missing her sensitivity and secret passion for reading. We may never guess that she and the woman above could have anything in common, and could love and accept each while traveling through self-discovery.

How often do we let our stereotyping act as a wedge between us and others? Perhaps we should take the advice of the two characters above, open our hearts, and find out who we can be as a result of our relationships with the most unlikely people. Perhaps we should ask our elderly about their past. Maybe our children could benefit by interviewing grandparents and making videos to record their comments.

The Orphan Train, by Christina Baker Kline, is perfect, **adult** reading for March. The heart, the crown, and the hands are not just symbols on a character's Irish ring. They are a reflection of friendship, love, and loyalty between two unlikely people from different generations. Look around. Discover.

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