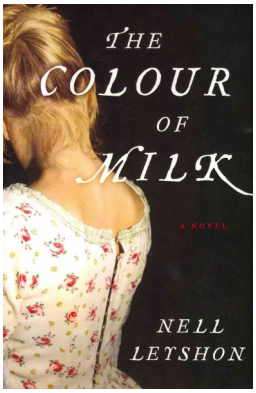
The Colour of Milk



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if missing capitals drive you crazy, this may not be the book for you. however, i hope you will try it because *the colour of milk* brims with a young girl's voice. despite the fact that she lives on an english farm and does back-breaking labor from dawn to dusk under her brutal father's command, mary still possesses a sense of wonder at the world.

the time period covers the years of our lord, 1831 and -32. throughout this compelling novel, mary repeats over and over "this is my book and I am writing it in my own hand". you'll have to finish it to understand why these words resonate.

mary shares the harsh farm work with her mother and three sisters. violet sneaks off at night for sensual adventures in the hay loft. (mary discovers this when she goes out to press her head against the cow she loves dearly and almost the only creature who gives her any comfort). whenever she is not working, beatrice holds a bible in her hand, but when she recites what is inside it, mary notices that she's holding it upside down. hope suffers from the same bad temper as their father and dreams of living in her own house with a rich husband.

mary loves to talk and to question the ways of the world. the only person in the family who is kind to her is her grandfather who is crippled and cannot walk. mary washes him each day, make him tea, feeds him his meager rations of bread, cheese, and sour apple chutney. plus she shares with him news about the farm while he tells her what he knows about life. like grandfather, mary has trouble walking. she was born with a bum leg and must drag it behind her, making each task more difficult.

one spring day, grandfather tells mary that if she wishes upon the sunrise from high on the hill on easter sunday, she will get whatever she wants that year. in the dark, mary sets off and is soon joined by beatrice, and her other two sisters. they race past mary. at the top when she joins them, they ask each other about their dreams, but no one asks mary what hers are. in fact, she says to herself after they have left her her alone that she doesn't know enough about the world to have any. she alone is late for milking, and this earns her another harsh beating by her father.

soon mary's life changes forever. the fact that she is slow in the fields finally helps her when the curate's wife--weak from a bad heart--needs help. The curate asks the girls' father if one of his daughters will move into the rectory to help edna, their cook. he will give room and board and a small wage. father chooses mary, the daughter with hair "the colour of milk" and, of course, keeps her wages.

mary is refreshingly honest, curious, always asking questions. she tells the curate and his wife that she hates being there but because she must stay, she will. edna worries that mary is too

eager and competent a worker. each night in the attic room they share, edna pulls out three shrouds and carefully folds them. she tells mary they are for the husband and child she will never have and one for herself when she needs it. soon, mary has her own special object, given to her by the curate, to examine and hold close.

this is a fine book, one that young adults will enjoy also. it's a quick read that will transport you back nearly two centuries into a fierce and intelligent girl's heart. the character of mary with her haunting voice reminds me of charlotte bronte's *jane eyre* [1]. it is forever imprinted upon my heart.

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Posted by Dory L. on Feb 25, 2013

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