

Kaye Batts Gibbons '84

Maybe it was the only time that it ever happened under a tobacco shelter in Nash County, North Carolina. Standing on a wooden crate, the slender young girl recited from memory the nineteenth century *Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)* / *Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace.*

When Kaye Gibbons looks back 20 years later, she recognizes in that young girl a burning need for attention. "A child in an alcoholic home is not listened to. I grew up demanding that somebody listen to me."

We are not intruders when we think about that girl on the wooden crate, the girl whose mother—afflicted with unbearable chronic depression—committed suicide, whose father—abusive, neglectful—drank himself to death soon after; the girl who was passed from household to household, claiming for herself only the right to work hard in school, yearning only to be listened to, to be free to speak the truth. We have been invited in.

Kaye invited us in when, in 1978, she published *Ellen Foster*, though she would not really admit us at first. No, she said, the story of this abandoned, neglected girl who struggles by force of character to thrive, is fiction only. It is not related to my life. But we who read it knew that that could not be. And Kaye was able openly to acknowledge that *Ellen Foster*'s story was largely her own only after the novel's critical acclaim (praise from Eudora Welty, Walker Percy), literary endorsement (the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a special citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, a PEN/Revson Foundation Fiction Fellowship), and financial success (Viking Penguin published the paperback in its prestigious Contemporary American Author series, and Paramount purchased the movie rights).

Now, she says, with a confidence that success of this sort brings, she can, "by remaining true to myself and honest with myself," admit us to these dark passages, and bring us along to sunnier climes.

A Virtuous Woman, Kaye's second novel, was a greater writing challenge. With *Ellen Foster*, the task was to keep the cow in the road, Kaye says, to let the story that had been steeping inside tell itself. With the new book, the task was to push the ox up the hill. A greater challenge, but an equal success. *Le Figaro Littéraire* (Paris) said of the French-language edition: "One comes away with a mixture of emotion and of regret; and the conviction, too, that in Kaye Gibbons one has encountered an honest woman."

And then the third, in 1991, *A Cure for Dreams*, also universally acclaimed.

It was in class at Carolina, as Professor Louis Rubin explained why *Huckleberry Finn* was the first great American work of art, that Kaye realized that the words inside her—that she had been casually committing to paper—could make her a writer. "I felt moved, almost spiritually, right then. This was what I had been trying to figure out all my life." So she wrote 30 pages of *Ellen Foster* and asked Rubin to read them. As soon as he finished he signed Kaye to a contract with his company, Algonquin Books, publisher of Jill McCorkle, Clyde Edgerton, and others.

Now comes Kaye's fourth, *Charms for the Easy Life*, from New York publisher G.P. Putnam. *Time* magazine's review of the book begins, "Some people might give up their second-born to write as well as Kaye Gibbons, so graceful and spirited are her fictional histories of North Carolina women." A review in *Time* doesn't get more positive than this.

Four novels in six years, international acclaim, financial reward. It's a long way from that tobacco shelter. "I grew up demanding that somebody listen to me. Now for the most part, people will listen to me. They pay \$13.95 for the book, and for the time they are reading it, they are listening to me."

Kaye, thank you for speaking. We are listening, and we will continue.