

Excerpt from The Hired Girl

Sunday, June the fourth, 1911

Today Miss Chandler gave me this beautiful book. I vow that I will never forget her kindness to me, and I will use this book as she told me to — I will write in it with *truth* and *refinement*.

“I’m so sorry you won’t be coming back to school,” Miss Chandler said to me, and at those words, the floodgates opened, and I wept most bitterly. I’ve been crying off and on ever since Father told me that from now on I have to stay at home and won’t get any more education.

Dear Miss Chandler made soft murmurings of pity and offered me her handkerchief, which was perfectly laundered, with three violets embroidered in one corner. I never saw a prettier handkerchief. It seemed terrible to cry all over it, but I did. While I was collecting myself, Miss Chandler spoke to me about the special happiness that comes of doing one’s duty at home, but I didn’t pay much heed, because when I wiped my eyes, I saw smears on the cloth. I knew my face was dirty, and I was awful mortified.

And then, all at once, she said something that rang out like a peal of church bells. “You must remember,” she said, “that dear Charlotte Brontë didn’t have a superior education. And yet she wrote *Jane Eyre*. I believe you have a talent for composition, dear Joan. Indeed, when I would read student essays, I used to put yours at the back of the pile, so that I could look forward to reading them. You express yourself with vigor and originality, but you must strive for truth and refinement.”

I stopped crying then because I thought of myself writing a book as good as *Jane Eyre*, and being famous, and getting away from Steeple Farm and being so rich I could go to Europe and see castles along the Rhine, or Notre Dame in Paris, France.

So after Miss Chandler left, I vowed that I will always remember her as an inspiration, and that I will write in this book in my best handwriting, with TRUTH and REFINEMENT. Which last I think I lack the worst, because who could be refined living at Steeple Farm?

Sunday, June the eleventh, 1911

Today I thought I might go up to the Presbyterian — mercy, what a word to spell! — church and return Miss Chandler's handkerchief. It has been a bad week for writing because of the sheepshearing and having to stitch up summer overalls for the men.

I washed Miss Chandler's handkerchief very carefully and pressed it and wrapped it in brown paper so my hands wouldn't dirty it. I'm always washing my hands, but I can't keep them clean. Sometimes it seems to me that everything in this house is stuffed to the seams with the dirt that the men track in. Even though I clean the surfaces of things, underneath is all that filth, aching to get loose. It sweats out the minute I turn my back. I scrub and sweep the floors, but the men's boots keep bringing in the barnyard, day after day, year after year. Luke is the worst because he never uses the scraper, and when I look at him fierce, he smiles. He knows I hate to sweep up after him. Father and Matthew never think about it one way or the other. Mark is my favorite brother because he wipes his feet sometimes, and when he doesn't, he looks sorry.

But it isn't just the men. They bring in the smells from the cowshed and the pigsty, but I'm the one who has to clean out the chicken house and scrub the privy. My hands are always dirty from blacking the stove and hauling out the ashes. They're as rough as the hands of an old woman.

But this kind of writing is not refined.

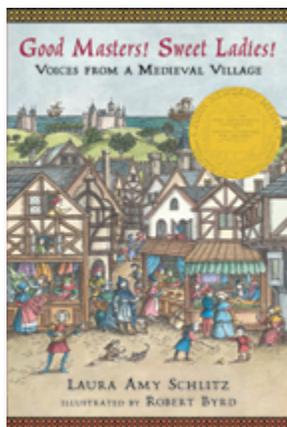


About Laura Amy Schlitz

Lauded as a “master of children’s literature” by the *New York Times Book Review*, Laura Amy Schlitz is the author of the Newbery Medal winner and *New York Times* bestseller *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village*, illustrated by Robert Byrd; *Splendors and Glooms*, a Newbery Honor Book and *New York Times* bestseller; *A Drowned Maiden’s Hair: A Melodrama*, the recipient of the inaugural Cybils Award for middle-grade fiction; *The Hero Schliemann: The Dreamer Who Dug for Troy*, illustrated by Robert Byrd; *The Bearskin*, illustrated by Max Grafe; and *The Night Fairy*, illustrated by Angela Barrett.

Laura Amy Schlitz has spent most of her life working as a librarian and professional storyteller. She has also written plays for young people that have been performed in professional theaters across the country. She lives in Baltimore, where she is currently lower-school librarian at the Park School.

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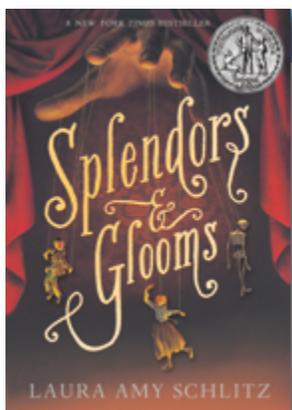
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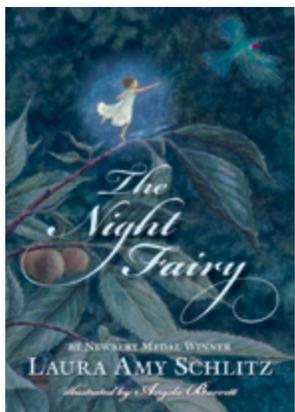
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