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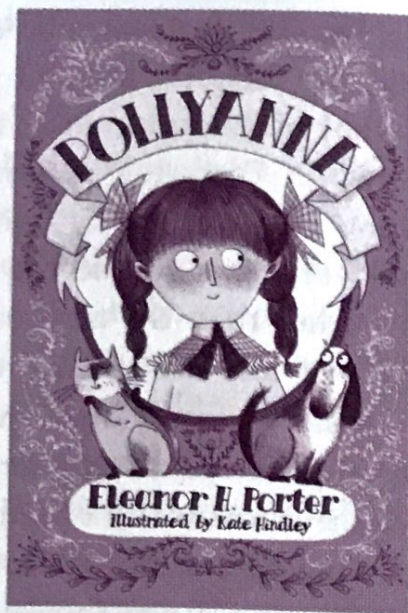
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## ON ELEANOR H. PORTER'S *Pollyanna*

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In the nightmare days following the 2016 presidential election, when the world seemed to hurtle toward darkness, it was the rare pundit who could lift my despondency. “I don’t want to be a Pollyanna,” said a senator on CNN before expressing somewhat tempered #hope. “I don’t want to be Pollyanna-ish,” said another progressive commentator before declaring that yes, we would and should #resist. To invoke Pollyanna thusly is a familiar linguistic device, and a cute way to preemptively apologize for the self-aware naïveté to follow. Pollyanna is embedded in our lexicon (and iconography) as the high priestess of blind positivity. In dire, dystopian 2016 America, I found I really needed a dose of both. So I turned to one of literature’s holiest orphan-prophets.

Between the ages of six and twelve, each time I finished a book, I stamped my name

in blue ink with a personalized gadget I’d pulled out of my Christmas stocking one year. The seal on the title page is proof that I read the 1960 Wonder Books edition of *Pollyanna*, Eleanor H. Porter’s 1913 children’s classic manifesto of delusional idealism. I also saw the movie when the local theater served it up alongside *The Parent Trap* for the annual Hayley Mills double feature. (I loved the sister she played in the latter, with the same god-awful cropped haircut my mother saddled on me, especially when she takes a pair of scissors to her twin’s blonde curls in order to trick their unwitting parents.)

Even as a sixth grader, I found *Pollyanna* to be tough medicine. I was a white girl in an upper-middle-class suburb, with no excuse for ennui, let alone cynicism—except I already grasped that the world was on fire and President Nixon was throwing gas on it. Without knowing so at the time, I inclined toward a less sanguine, Voltairean realism. There is too much suffering on earth for anyone to incline toward optimism—boilerplate or otherwise—and really, who among us today feels any quantifiable hope? But as Tracy Kidder wrote, “Among a coward’s weapons, cynicism is the nastiest of all.” And despair gets downright exhausting.

The premise of *Pollyanna* is quite simple. Just-orphaned Pollyanna Whittier is sent to live with her seminamesake, wealthy spinster Aunt Polly Harrington in Vermont. When faced with the high ratio of dispirited folks and sociophobic eccentrics in town, she sets to work engaging all in the Glad Game, a

mental exercise that predated Norman Vincent Peale's teachings by almost half a century. Whatever ill you are dwelling on, the rules say, whatever misfortune befalls, there is always some inverse to celebrate. Pollyanna's late father had been an impoverished minister and the family depended on donations for their household. Longing for a doll, Pollyanna was crushed when the do-good ladies gave her crutches instead. But wait, her father pointed out, directing her toward the silver lining: she didn't actually need the crutches at all, and how great was that! And so the Glad Game was born.

Pollyanna sprinkles the town of Beldingville with pixie dust and demonstrates Christlike powers of transformation. The sad discover joy, the sick become well, depressives overcome their funk and reconnect with the human race. Even grouchy Aunt Polly's bitterness at life vanishes through her niece's example, as her heart softens once again for the dashing doctor who years ago caused it to fossilize. She releases her severe hairdo, allowing the curls to cascade over her shoulders, making me understand for the first time the meaning of the word *uptight*.

Like many orphan-savants in Western literature, Pollyanna's past is marked by tragedy, which underscores her bravery and constitutional strength. It also gives her street cred as the stranger-magician whose powers for good originate in a deep well of sadness. Her affect is described in various ways by those she changes. She is human Prozac: "I wish I could prescribe her—and buy her—as I would a box of

pills," says Dr. Chilton. She is an evangelizing angel, a "helpful, hopeful character . . . [who] may revolutionize a whole town," says Mr. Ford, the pastor, whose congregation she rescues by convincing him to build sermons around the "rejoicing texts" rather than the ominous ones. Village hermit and cheapskate millionaire Mr. Pendleton finally busts out of his self-imposed prison and compares her to the prisms she discovers on chandeliers in his home while admonishing him to buck the hell up: "Little girl, you danced into my life and flecked my dreary old world with dashes of the purple and gold and scarlet of your own bright cheeriness."

It's true, her saccharine bromides still make my teeth feel rotten decades later, and her positivity is tiresome and predictable. "I was being glad that the bureau didn't have a looking glass, because it *didn't* show my freckles; and there couldn't be a nicer picture than the one out my window there," she tells Aunt Polly, who has exiled her to sleep in a hot and dusty attic equipped with no mirror and about which Pollyanna is characteristically unable to whinge. She cannot (or will not) read social cues when people are inclined to shoo away her feel-goodisms. She responds to her aunt's many scoldings with hugs and kisses. By the time an accident temporarily paralyzes her, wipes out her sunny outlook and generous smile, the reader dreads the inevitability of a cathartic round of the Glad Game. When Aunt Polly tells her niece all the ways she has made the town "wonderfully happier," Pollyanna, laid out

flat and immobile in bed, says, "I can be glad I've *had* my legs, anyway—else I couldn't have done—that!"

Of all the metaphors in *Pollyanna*, the girl's paralysis seems to be the most apt for both the book's message and our current moment. What the condition embraces—stagnation, resignation, immobility, and hopelessness—could well describe the state of my heart, and that of most like-minded sentient forms of life in Trump's America. This global pessimism sits adjacent to the personal one: the frightening reality of aging, financial woes, health scares, concern for my family's well-being. It seems that these days, if one isn't actively hand-wringing or sleepless with anxiety about the future, one is not alive. The many positivity movements in pop culture—the books, talk shows, crystals, cleansing yogic breaths on behalf of humanity's pain—are perhaps palliatives at best, and they are not saving the planet, health care, or our national dignity.

When I finished *Pollyanna* this time, I harrumphed for a while over its cheap, 1913 message. Didn't Voltaire scorn optimism as hopelessly out of touch? Now *that's* a philosopher. Strangely, though, the book persisted in my mind, and its aftermath mellowed into something almost instructive. It could be that its power lies in its whack-me-over-the-head-with-a-snow-shovel lack of subtlety. But skip past the syrup, discard some of the sentimental pabulum, and pay attention to what remains. Ponder every human's potential for good, because it is easy to overlook.

Cynicism is a way to relinquish power and agency, and that helps no one, least of all our own weary selves. *Pollyanna* can be read as a trusty handbook of the world's most obvious clichés, the ones that exist in every language about small changes and big ones, about rising tides and all boats, about a single person and the difference they can make. For me, this message resonated in middle age more than adolescence. Back then, I never thought of enlightenment, or of opening myself to another person's approach, or how desperate an effort the search for contentment can be.

Kids learn soon enough the bad news about the human race, and perhaps this is why the author took no pains to dose her optimism with realism in what was written as a book for children. But the adult reader knows that a truly clinically depressed person is unlikely to get up and bask in the sunlight, regardless of a young girl's encouragement. A middle-aged pastor like Mr. Ford is unlikely to abruptly alter his world view and the tenor of his homilies on the suggestion of an eleven-year-old, no matter how guileless the messenger. In real terms, there is no upside at all to the disasters, tragedies, and injustices that plague this earth or the existential threat we feel as citizens.

Except what we each can do to alleviate someone else's suffering. The warnings *Pollyanna* implies are as clear as the action steps she spells out. Without hope, we are doomed. Without positive and deliberate action, we leave our destiny to chance. Without optimism, we cannot heal and

without belief in humankind's ultimate goodness, we are compelled to lose our souls in solitude. Above all, the collective wallow and the singular dwell are both wastes of precious time. We are all of us cranks and malcontents until we rise from

our sickbeds and start walking. It is something to consider as the world goes to hell. The Glad Game reminds us that simply accepting our fate is not an option. There is much to do, and people depend on us.

Who's in? 