



About the Author

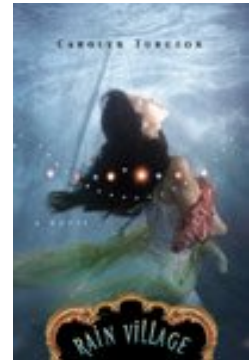
Carolyn Turgeon spent her early childhood years in the Midwest, living in Champaign, IL, summering at her grandparents' home in Mexico, MO, until she was eight. Her family moved around quite a lot as she grew up, but she says the Midwest is in her heart, and has taken on something of a mythic quality for her – the corn fields, fireflies, green fields, the distinct seasons. Another mythic place for Turgeon is Mexico City and its environs, where her mother lived from the age of nine through high school. She was

enchanted by her mother's stories of growing up there, and would pore over her photos and other memorabilia, including her high school year books, studying the faces of her mother's classmates, imagining the lives of people in a far away and exotic place. Before starting college, Turgeon traveled around the country with her sister, ending up in Olympia, Washington, for several months, on the campus of Evergreen College, where the buildings are set apart from one another, connected by paths within a rain forest. She was so taken by the place that she used it in a short story that became the germ of Rain Village.

Turgeon studied English and Italian Literature at Penn State University, and took the Master's in Comparative Literature at UCLA. She has worked as a free lance editor and writer for a number of publications and currently lives in Queens, NY, where she writes for a non-profit organization associated with the New York State Courts system. Rain Village is Carolyn Turgeon's first novel. She is working on a second novel.

About the Book

Influenced in part by Carolyn Turgeon's background in comparative literature, Rain Village went through many versions and revisions in the writing. It started with a short story she wrote in college based on the story of the three rings, from The Decameron. It was set in the Pacific Northwest, in an imaginary town named Rain Village. The novel however is primarily set in two other locations, each of which stands out in rich contrast against the other two: the isolated town of Oakley, Kansas – dry, hot, and dusty -- where the novel's narrator and protagonist, Tessa Riley, grows up; and the lush and fragrant outskirts of Mexico City, winter quarters of the Velasquez Circus and ancestral home of the Ramirez family of high wire artists, reminiscent of the Flying Wallenda's, which Tessa marries into.



The connecting force between these three settings is a larger than life woman named Mary Finn who we learn had run away from Rain Village at the age of 15 from an abusive father and her lover's tragic death to join the Velasquez Circus and become lionized as the much loved trapeze artist, Marionetta. Disappearing from the circus as mysteriously as she had arrived, Mary reappears as the town librarian in Oakley, home to the novel's narrator and protagonist, Tessa Riley. At the age of twelve, Tessa is barely four feet tall, and illiterate. Her father is physically and sexually abusive and doesn't believe in books and learning. Mary teaches Tessa to read and write, and gives her a job at Mercy Library so that she can "make her contributions" to her family, learn essential life skills and, most important, save money to leave Oakley. Under Mary's guidance and tutelage, Tessa thrives in the warmth and magic of Mary's stories, along with the world of books in the library. Finally, she persuades Mary to teach her the trapeze, for which she is remarkably suited, both because of her diminutive size and her strength, developed from hours spent hanging from a curtain rod at home, her mother's attempt to stretch Tessa's body so that she will be strong enough to work the fields of the family farm. After several years, Mary suddenly commits suicide, and Tessa leaves Oakley, for good.

Grounded in these and other realities of Tessa's world, some grim, some grueling, Rain Village has a Once Upon a Time fairy tale quality to it. It is set vaguely in the early 20th century, but the atmosphere is one of timelessness. Literally, it's about a girl who runs away from home to join the circus and finds fame and personal happiness, including a handsome Mexican husband, Mauro Ramirez, one of the family of high wire artists who star in the Velasquez Circus. It is also full of rich and thoroughly researched details of the sociology and politics of circus life, including the daily and painful details of the rigorous and constant training and practice that lie behind the glitter and glamour of the high wire and trapeze. And Tessa's character is loosely based upon Lillian Leitzel, a trapeze artist from the early 20th century who developed the astonishing rope trick that Tessa invents in the novel, and was also married to a famous, trapeze artist.

But Tessa is haunted by Mary's presence, under a spell fed by the circus world apocrypha that has built up about Mary over the years, the persistent demands upon her for stories about her life with Mary which keep her from leaving her past behind and, most of all, the survivor's guilt she feels from Mary's suicide. She becomes obsessed with the need to find out why Mary had herself run away from home to join the circus only to leave it, and finally, after teaching Tessa the trapeze, take her own life. When Mary's mysterious nephew Costas blows in on a dry wind strangely full of Mary's scent of cinnamon and cloves that has made everyone in the circus sick and crazy with fever dreams, Tessa recognizes him as a character in one of the fantastic stories Mary had told her years before. In desperation, she leaves with him to travel to Rain Village, and find out Mary's secret.

What Tessa finds out, however, is the lesson of the story of the three rings. There are some things in this world that are unknowable, that must remain mysteries. And in coming to accept this discovery, what she finds is herself, and what she gains is the true fortune of personal peace and happiness.

Ultimately, Rain Village is a story about the transformative power of storytelling. It is also a heartfelt and genuine tribute to librarians and the world of the American Public Library at its very best.

The Story of the Three Rings

As recounted by Boccaccio, in *The Decameron* (Novel III of the First Day):

The narrator is Filomena, who tells the story at the Queen's behest. Saying that stories of people falling from good fortune into bad are many, she will tell a story illustrating that good sense may save us from misfortune: The Soldan of Egypt has gone broke from all his excesses in waging wars and celebrating his successes. He knows of an Alexandrian Jew, Melchisedech, who can loan him the money he needs to get out of debt, but who is known as being miserly with his resources. So he decides he will blackmail him, by trying to trick him into compromising himself with his answer to the following question: Which of the three Laws do you hold to be the True Law, the law of the Jews, the law of the Saracens (Muslims), or the law of the Christians? Being no fool, Melchisedech answers as follows with the story of the three rings. Once upon a time, a great and rich man numbered among all his treasures a ring of such beauty and perfection that he decides to use it to designate his favored heir among his sons. And so the ring is passed down in the same way for many generations, until one such heir, a good and kind man, is faced with a dilemma. He has three good and loving sons, whom he loves equally. Each of course begs to be his chosen designate. What he does is have a maker of fine jewelry create two exact replicas of The Ring. He then gives one of the three rings, in private, to each of his three sons. When the old man dies, each produces The Ring, and each contests the inheritance of the other. Since the three Rings are so perfectly alike and thus indistinguishable, the suit to determine the true Heir remains unsettled. And so it is with the question posed by the Soldan, says Melchisedech. Each of these peoples – the Jews, the Saracens, and the Christians – think themselves to have the True Law, as given to them by God the Father. But which of them is justified in thinking so, is a question which must remain unsettled, or unknown. The Soldan is so impressed by Melchisedech's adroitness in avoiding the trap he had set for him that he comes clean on his need for money. In turn, Melchisedech loans him the money, which the Soldan pays back in full. He also rewards him with his lifelong friendship and makes him one of his trusted advisors.

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Book Study Questions:

1. What was your overall response to *Rain Village*? Did you find it at all relevant to your own life experience, or things that matter to you? How would you describe the tone of the novel? Discuss the settings of *Rain Village*. How appropriate, or not, do you think they are to the parts of the story and the characters associated with them? Why?
2. *The Decameron* is one of the inspirations for *Rain Village*. It is a medieval story cycle, set during the time of *The Plague*. Its structure is this: a representative group of citizens – nobility and commoners -- leave the city to escape the plague, having seen friends and family die the horrific Black Death. To comfort one another and take their minds off what they have left behind, they tell each other stories. What parallels to this structure can you find in *Rain Village*?
3. The author tells us that the earliest version of *Rain Village* was a short story based on the Story of the Three Rings from *The Decameron*. How many “rings” do you find in *Rain Village*? How do they function to communicate a theme or illuminate the plot? Think beyond the ring that Mary wears around her neck. How many “threes” do you find in the novel? What do they suggest to you?
4. There are many writers, like Grace Paley and Tobias Wolff, who say they never have a good story in the making until they find a story within a story. Why do you think they might say that? Do you think Carolyn Turgeon, based on *Rain Village*, might agree with them? Why? How many stories within stories can you identify in *Rain Village*? What do they add to your enjoyment or understanding of the novel and its characters?
5. What are your favorite or most memorable fairy tales from childhood? Were they scary? Happy? If most start with “Once Upon a Time,” how do most of them end? If someone says that *Rain Village* has a fairy tale quality to it, what do you think they might mean by that? Consider the plot, the characters and their effects upon others, including the things they do, and the events in the novel. Also consider the setting(s) of the novel.
6. Many fairy tales historically had a basis in social issues of the time and other topical realities, such as political controversies. Sometimes they were written to get a dangerous (to the author) message across in disguise. Why do we not have to know that to enjoy them, or draw a moral, or “lesson” from them? What are some issues that *Rain Village* deals with “in disguise?” Why would the teller of the tale feel the need to hide what they were really talking about? How does the fantastic nature of Mary’s stories about the Ring and about the father who tries to raise his son without Love connect with the reality behind those stories that Tessa discovers in the course of the novel?
7. What are your childhood memories of going to the library? How do they compare to Mercy Library? Does Mary remind you in any ways of librarians from your childhood, or now? Do you see *Rain Village* as a tribute to librarians and the American public library system? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
8. Do you have any personal experience with suicide that you are comfortable talking about? How familiar are you with why a person might choose to take his or her own life? What are your personal opinions or feelings about the rights and wrongs of suicide? How well, or not, do you think Carolyn Turgeon deals with the subject in *Rain Village*? Why do you think Mary takes her own life? What impact does it have on Tessa?

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9. How would you describe the nature of the friendship between Mary and Tessa? How is it different or similar to other kinds of close relationships between people that you have experienced in your own life? Mother daughter? Sisters? Teacher student? Mentor mentored? In your mind, what or who is a true friend? Why have you reached that conclusion?
10. What are some basic differences in how the main characters in *Rain Village* perceive themselves and their lives, versus how others perceive them? Do you think the way Turgeon focuses on these differences in perceptions is important to understanding the themes of the novel? What do you think the theme(s) of the novel are? Why? How would you respond to someone saying that *Rain Village* is a story about the powers of storytelling? What are some of the powers of storytelling that you can identify in this novel?

Suggested reading:

Water for Elephants by Sarah Gruen

The Decameron by Boccaccio

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

Wings of Desire Wim Wenders (film, available on Video)

King of the Gypsies by Peter Maas

Rocket City by Cathryn Alpert

Memoirs of a Sword Swallower by Daniel P. Mannix

Learning to Fly: Reflections on Fear, Trust, and the Joy of Letting Go by Sam Keen

“Conversation with My Father,” by Grace Paley

“The Liar,” by Tobias Wolff