

Lillian Bursey. *Amy's Journey: A Young Girl's Struggle with TB.*

Nacy Pedri

Volume 27, Number 2, Fall 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds27_2rv03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pedri, N. (2012). Review of [Lillian Bursey. *Amy's Journey: A Young Girl's Struggle with TB.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 27(2), 298–300.

Lillian Bursey. *Amy's Journey: A Young Girl's Struggle with TB*. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1897317631

A fictionalized autobiographical account of the author's struggle with tuberculosis, *Amy's Journey* is the story of a teenage girl who was forced to cope with this contagious disease that is wrongly "believed to stem from poverty, malnutrition, lack of hygiene" (132). The book's 15 chapters detail young Amy's four-year experience with TB and life in two different sanatoriums. It focuses on physical pain and mental anguish, but also comments on different pleasures, such as reading many books made available to patients from the mobile library, and the special bonds of friendship created throughout the years. Details of the protagonist's journey towards physical recovery are coupled with her ongoing introspections about her having been "born as an unwanted child" (106). Throughout the story, Amy reflects on her own struggles with being an illegitimate child, and frequently imagines the shame her biological mother, referred to as Aunt Barbara, feels. These reflections often give way to questions of belonging, but they neither dominate the narrative nor imbue it with a dark, sinister tone. Instead, they are presented in a straightforward fashion, as the concerns of a young girl maturing and discovering self under extraordinary circumstances.

Amy's ongoing dialogue with self adds a strong emotional dimension to the otherwise sombre, matter-of-fact voice through which the story is told. Bursey's unique narrative style — reserved and emotionally charged, at once autobiographical and fictional — engages readers in young Amy's journey towards recovery and self-knowledge. In the opening chapter, she is introduced as a young illegitimate girl from British Harbour who at the age of 12 was diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to the St. John's Sanatorium. Here begin the long years of treatments under the careful care of nurses and doctors and the watchful eyes of relatives and friends. Here, too, begins Amy's exploration of self. Her initiation into a world where loneliness is coupled with fear, perseverance, and faith thrusts her into a sustained search for belonging. And, finally, here begins the reader's journey through a fictional yet not-so-fictional world of human suffering, resilience, and growth.

Amy's Journey presents a cast of strong, round characters — Mom (Amy's grandmother), Aunt May, uncles, friends, nurses, and doctors — who support and provide guidance to Amy. All of these characters gain in significance through their relationship with Amy, who grows from a frightened, bored, and slightly aloof patient into one who learns how to fight her bouts of depression and adopt strategies to block pain, discomfort, and anxiety. By the end of *Amy's Journey*, Amy is a determined young lady who comes to appreciate that "[l]ife is what you make it" (145), a formula passed on to her by her grandmother and by which she has actually been living for years.

Like much autobiographical writing, *Amy's Journey* reproduces a number of photographs, mostly portraits and landscapes. They are collected in two separate sections of the book. The first, shorter section, which spans pages 17-20, includes 10 photographic images portraying people at the St. John's Sanatorium and scenes of British Harbour. The second section of 28 pages is comprised of 82 photographs portraying life at the West Coast Sanatorium over the three years Bursey resided there. Both photographic sections introduce a break in the verbal narrative, thus demarcating events that have a significant impact on Amy's life. The first not only announces the beginning of Amy's stay at the St. John's Sanatorium but also marks her definite move away from British Harbour, for once she is well enough to go home she does not return to her hometown but unites with Mom in her new home in Corner Brook. The second photographic section immediately follows a chapter entitled "Separated Again," which ends with Mom's unexpected death and Amy's struggle to adjust to losing the person she loves most and who loved her most. Mom is a kind, courageous, and sensitive woman who has raised Amy as her own daughter. Amy's grief at her grandmother's death brings with it emotions of abandonment, anger towards God, and a decline in physical health.

Apart from serving as visual markers that announce significant changes in Amy's life, the photographs concretely introduce the author, Lillian Bursey, and her true-life experience with tuberculosis into the text. They provide a visual narrative of the author's life story that closely parallels that of the young protagonist, Amy. The lengthy captions, usually a sentence or two long, inform readers of the location and the year, and guide them through the details of what is imaged. If *Amy's Journey* is the author's story filtered through the fictional character Amy's perspective, then the photographic sections are the author's story filtered through the real-life author's perspective. The selection of images as well as their framing through captions creates a second story that

runs parallel to that of Amy. Hence, they stand not so much as a corroboration of Amy's telling, but rather as another layer of telling.

Amy's Journey is a complex little book that would appeal to anyone interested in experimental uses of photography in fiction, especially life-writing genres, and to students of literary representations of disease.

Nancy Pedri

Memorial University of Newfoundland