

Via the miracle of Facebook direct messaging, the author April Ford shared with me a bit of how the novel and the characters came about:

Carousel was born in November 2010, shortly after my first trip to New York City. I rode the Central Park carousel and visited the Met to see Rosa Bonheur's magnificent, gigantic painting, "The Horse Fair," while I was there, and the confluence of my excitement over visiting NYC for the first time and the stimulation of experiencing the carousel and the painting were enough to launch my creative mind into a whole new space!

Margot and Estelle were, at first, derivatives of this academic couple I knew, who were rather mean-spirited women but really cool dressers. Katy, Marianne, Étienne, Bertrand, Olivier, and the Cotés all came from god knows where, and they were all fun and freeing to write. As I never plan what I'm going to write, I always looked forward to what Katy and Bertrand would say next. These liberated characters were what Margot needed, I think, to get her head out of her ass.

Your writer here has a bit of experience with the art world, and various types of collectors of precious objects, which feature here. Ford's details ring true. Margot also has the requisite unhappy childhood, which makes for compelling reading. Though like most stories, it's much better read about than lived.

April Ford shared with me some of the challenges she encountered creating her story:

I wrote the first chapter of *Carousel* in, like, a few hours. I was high on the adrenaline from

having this whole new world unfolding in my mind, and I was also freaked out; I didn't know much at all about guns, fine art, or the history of carousels.

What I did know was this novel was going to happen no matter what. I had enough experience as a writer to recognize it would be a long-term project. I tested the graduate workshop waters with the first chapter of *Carousel* in January 2011, and my faculty mentor, Pulitzer-prize nominee Jonathan Dee, gave me the advice I needed: Don't get caught up in research (I was quite anxious at the time about not knowing enough). Write the story. The story is the point, after all. In Dee's advice, I found the freedom I needed to let *Carousel* grow and flourish in my mind.

By the time I was ready to return to the novel—a few years later!—I was able to intuit when to pause from the page and learn more about guns, art, carousels, and so forth. I enjoyed these pauses, because I couldn't predict how my findings would influence the next sentence I wrote, the next direction the novel would take. In many ways, the ship steered itself!

It's a steady course that the author steers through the shoals of city life, difficult parents, and the demands of friends, lovers and employers. If this reader had a quibble with the novel, it was that it was too short. Ford creates a world and inhabitants which leave you a little sad towards the end. Because the story was good company.

Jack Ruttan is a Montreal-based writer and illustrator, who has a distant view of La Ronde from his front balcony. Find out more about him at <http://mruttan.ca>.

BOSS BITCH: A SIMPLE 12-STEP PLAN TO TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR CAREER

Nicole Lapin
Toronto: Crown Business, 2017

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH HERMAN

Nicole Lapin's *Boss Bitch: A Simple 12-Step Plan to Take Charge of Your Career* is a refreshing how-to manual for the young and up-and-coming professional woman. Her modus operandi is to provide the financial advice not taught in schools in plain English. Lapin pulls no punches, using pop-cultural references alongside swear words in order to get her voice heard.

Lapin started her career at the age of eighteen on the floor of the Chicago stock exchange before spring-boarding to CNN as its youngest anchor, followed by CNBC and Bloomberg Television. A bit of a media darling, she often works as a correspondent for *The Wendy Williams Show*, *Dr. Oz*, and *The Insider*. She has also hosted *Hatched*, a kid-friendly entrepreneurial pitch show on the CW to rival *Dragons' Den* or *Shark Tank*. She compresses her years of experience into books such as *Rich Bitch: A Simple Twelve Step Plan for Getting Your Financial Life Together... Finally* (2016) and the upcoming *Becoming Superwoman: A Simple Twelve Step Plan to Go from Burnout to Balance* (2019). In her books, she describes herself as "the financial expert you don't need a dictionary to understand."

She does, however, offer a very useful glossary at the back of the book of financial terms with easy-to-understand definitions for the novice reader. She defines the Bottom

Line simply as: “the last line on a balance sheet,” or colloquially, “at the end of the day,” or “when all is said and done.” She uses this insider information to end each chapter with a break down of “conventional wisdom” juxtaposed to the “real deal.” For example, while it’s commonly understood that “the most successful people are self-made,” in fact “no Boss Bitch is an island.” Chapter headings are equally pithy: “Be a Goal Digger,” and “Girls Just Wanna Have Funds,” to name just a few. She tells us to “be am-bitch-ious,” when to “burn your corporate bra,” and how to deal with bullies: “Office politics are like taxes and PMS: they’re gonna happen and they’re gonna be a pain. A boss bitch knows how to throw punches and how to roll with them.”

Lapin organizes the book into three sections, but suggests that the reader go about completing the steps at her own pace in the manner of a “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel. After all, “it’s *your* book.” She begins by empowering women to be “the boss of you,” “the boss at work,” and finally, “the boss of your own business.” She advises the reader to go about the job search her own way. “Building a career is like folding a fitted sheet: no one knows how to do it and everyone wants a hack.”

As for being the boss of oneself, she exhorts the reader to be the “she-ro” of her own story by tapping into her “inner Boss Bitch....” This means looking out for number one. Lapin paraphrases the familiar leadership concept of ducks versus eagles (rather than hawks and doves): “Ducks are people who complain about how things are but do nothing to change their situation.... Eagles, on the other hand, soar above the rest of the flock; they are the folks who see a problem and then take it upon themselves to fix it.” She recommends personal branding and looking for mentors in the most surprising of places. She

tells the story of a bathroom attendant in an expensive restaurant who offers monogrammed hand towels to “her girls,” adding personal touches and an upbeat attitude to her work. Despite having a job she wouldn’t have chosen, Doris the bathroom attendant is an “eagle” who differentiates herself from her coworkers by brainstorming ways to stand out; she develops her “schtick” in order to fit into a niche market.

The book provides multiple examples of how to do this, such as nailing the job interview by doing your homework, minding your body language, and being on-point and industry-specific in your answers. Lapin stresses the importance of the head-shot and attending speaking engagements in order to put yourself out there, but she skimps on the finer details about how to “rock your résumé.” She does, however, focus on the all-important “elevator pitch,” a sound-bite introduction that encapsulates what you have to offer the employer or potential investor in the time it takes to travel from the lobby to the tenth floor. She tells women to assert themselves, stop saying “sorry” and being such doormats. “So, by all means, say yes! to projects and committees and other extracurriculars at work, but only when it’s a hell yes or fuck yes. If it’s anything less, it’s a no.” She points out that the gender wage gap is owing to the disheartening fact that only 7 percent of women negotiate for a raise, while 57 percent of men hold no reservations about doing so.

Lapin redefines “boss” with an acronym, demanding that women be *bold, obsessed, self-aware, and strong* in what they do. She quotes Beyoncé: “I’m not bossy, I’m the boss.” She also reclaims “hustler” in favour of developing an entrepreneurial side-gig, as well as the other b-word:

I’ve been called both a boss and

a bitch (and variations of those words) throughout my career in a derogatory way. But I never understood how my ambitions deserved even the slightest insult. I mean, if killing it at work means I’m a bitch, then great, I’m a bitch and I’m owning it! If being on top of my business means I’m bossy, then great, I’ll own that, too. Being a badass in your career is something that should be praised, not put down. So I’m taking back any dumb, offensive, or negative connotations those words have had in the past and, instead, using them in a positive way.

She does ban the qualifiers and fillers that women use to seek affirmation or deflect attention, such as “kind of,” “um,” or “isn’t it?” In this way, she is deeply indebted to Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013). In it, Facebook COO Sandberg points out that assertiveness is rewarded in boys, but in girls it is seen as “bossiness.” She further argues that women shouldn’t be relegated to the back rows at corporate meetings, but should push their way to the front of the class. Lapin cites Sandberg’s organizational skills as an inspiration, but feels that her predecessor falls short: “Ladies, you shouldn’t aspire just to have a seat at the table; you should aspire—no, *demand*—to have a voice at that table, too.”

The author concludes her twelve-step plan with how to turn a hobby into a “jobby” and to literally be the boss. She gives advice on hiring, firing, and building a dream team, coming up with a “sticky” name, a business plan, marketing gimmicks, team-building exercises (“sweatworking!”), proper email etiquette, how to delegate authority and how to balance the books. She breaks down difficult concepts and corporate lingo, such

as “equity,” “traction,” “black swan events,” the “Pareto Principle,” “zombie companies,” telling the difference between “angel investors” and “venture capitalists,” and finally, how to come up with an “exit strategy” if your company goes bust. She remains positive: “After all, if plan A doesn’t work, there are twenty-five more letters in the alphabet.”

Boss Bitch leaves the reader with sage, albeit brutally honest advice. Lapin argues first and foremost that a competent and assertive woman should be tough and resilient. She takes inspiration from Eleanor Roosevelt: “A woman is like a teabag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water.”

Deborah Herman earned her PhD from York University in 2013. She specializes in gender, history, myth, and folktale. She has also taught economics and philosophy at Humber College. She is currently working on a side-project that examines how neurology affects artistic inspiration.

THE BLUE CASTLE

L.M. Montgomery
Toronto: Tundra Books, reprint 2019

REVIEWED BY LESLEY STRUTT

Most well-read Canadians are familiar with Lucy Maud Montgomery. Her *Anne of Green Gables* series was a phenomenal success and gave Montgomery fame beyond her wildest dreams. However, until *CWS* offered me *The Blue Castle* to review I had never thought of L.M. Montgomery as a feminist writer.

The Blue Castle is a well-crafted and wholly delightful book. Montgomery’s descriptions of setting are vivid and poetic. Her character develop-

ment propels the story forward and her control of mood and pace is exceptional. *The Blue Castle* is a romance with a hard-won happy-ever-after ending. After an extraordinary event that shakes Valency Stirling’s world, she breaks all the rules and dares to become herself.

However, *The Blue Castle* offers the reader much more than just good writing. From the first page, *The Blue Castle* tackles a central theme of early feminism—women are not as treated equal to men. Valency Stirling is born into an upper middle-class family and has no need to work; in fact, she would never have been allowed to work. Having a purposeful life for most women of that era meant being married and having children. At twenty-nine, Valency is facing “hopeless old maidenhood” in a community “where the unmarried [women] are simply those who have failed to get a man.” She is a spinster with little to do to give herself purpose and meaning other than to look after her mother in her old age. Valency is trapped by what society considers acceptable behaviour for a woman, and she can’t bear it. Every moment of her future life, in her estimation, is horrid and dismal.

This definition of a woman’s worth may seem tinged with an outmoded kind of victimhood, but “*you’re nothing without a man*” is a theme that played out well into the 1960s in Canada. The setting for *The Blue Castle* is Ontario in the 1920’s. Full suffrage was not granted in Canada until 1918, and a woman still could not own property in some provinces. (Quebec only gave women the right to own property in 1964.)

Nevertheless, it’s important to ask what does a book written in the 1920s have to offer feminists in the twenty-first century? The answer lies in Valency’s courage to stand up for herself, to be true to who she really is, and to break out from the stifling

environment in which she is living.

In contemporary life, a woman’s sense of self worth depends not so much on society’s judgement or rules around success as it does on her fulfilled personhood. *The Blue Castle* illustrates this theme extremely well. In the last pages of the book, the conventionally successful Olive writes to her fiancé, “It’s really disgusting that Doss’s (Valency’s childhood nickname) crazy adventures should have turned out like this. It makes one feel there is no use in behaving properly.” Until the very end of the story, Valency’s family has deemed her mad in the sense of *out of her mind*, and they wonder at one point if they should have her committed, all because she broke out of the acceptable mold. What Olive fails to understand is that even after the crisis that knocks Valency’s world sideways, it takes all her courage to become herself, fully expressed, empowered and alive.

Women today still must summon their courage to go against society’s norms, whether this be in a developed or a developing country. To know one’s own worth and to live accordingly often requires being willing to face exclusion and discrimination by one’s peers and even one’s own family.

On a final note, I’d like to propose that Montgomery’s romantic conclusion to *The Blue Castle* is also relevant for contemporary feminists. She portrays Valency as truly happy in her life. *The Blue Castle* offers readers the hope that a woman can experience full partnership in an honest relationship based on self respect, respect for each other, and the enjoyment of living the adventure of life together however it shows up. It’s a message that is as valuable today as it was when *The Blue Castle* was written.

I would recommend *The Blue Castle* to any reader who enjoys a tale with social commentary without sacrificing any of the pleasure of a good story.