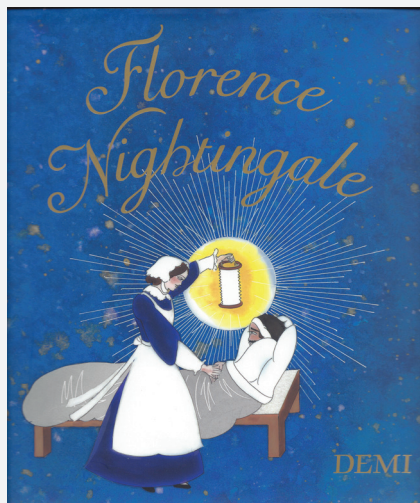


Second Reaction: Lady with a Lamp

Demi. *Florence Nightingale*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014. Print.

M. Jane Packard



Demi, the author of *Florence Nightingale*, has portrayed the characteristics of an English nurse who brought the attention of the world to the problems inherent in the health systems of the early 1800s, and particularly the problems of hospitals. The woman whom sick and wounded British soldiers in the military hospital in Scutari, Turkey, nicknamed the Lady with the Lamp applied the knowledge gained through both her intense study of needed changes in the education of nurses and her own experience at her first (unpaid) job as the superintendent of London's Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances.

Born in Florence, Italy, on May 12, 1820, Florence was the second daughter of William and Fanny Nightingale. The extremely wealthy English family moved back to England when Florence was just a year old. Since their large home in Derbyshire was too small for the entertainment of the most famous artists, writers, and politicians of early nineteenth century, the Nightingales bought another estate near London.

Demi tells the reader that the very young Florence did not like her family's parties, and she preferred playing by herself. Evidently at some time she had visited or had been a hospital patient, because in her daydreams she imagined running a hospital, making lists and charts of all the medicines, equipment, and expenses inherent in the managing of such an establishment. When ill with whooping cough, she made her own doll hospital. She placed all the beds in a long line as she had observed the arrangement of beds in a real hospital. Around the neck

of each doll she placed a scarf, again a custom in hospitals of that era. Young girls today can relate, as they continue to play with dolls in the same imaginative ways.

Though Demi does not dwell on the young girl's interest in hospitals and their organization, she does relate that Florence was very religious, and that she felt that "God wanted her to help people" (unpaged). She decided that the way to do this was to become a nurse, an idea that horrified her parents: studying nursing was improper for a lady!

Opportunity for Florence to further her interest in nursing occurred when at the age of twenty-seven she traveled with friends of her parents, first to Italy and later to Egypt and Germany. These friends permitted her to visit a German orphanage for two weeks, and there she learned about hygiene and the practice of nursing. Florence was now convinced that she was meant to be a nurse. Though her parents were still adamantly opposed to the idea, they finally realized their daughter's determination to chart her own future and acquiesced to her wishes.

Unlike the path taken by today's young women who have chosen the nursing profession and follow up by enrolling in an institution for instruction in the art of medicine and the opportunity to practice the knowledge gained, Florence set her own study procedure. First she went to Paris where she visited both hospitals and poorhouses. She watched the work of doctors and surgeons. To learn the procedures followed by hospitals elsewhere, she sent questions to hospitals in England, Germany, and elsewhere in France. Like a true scientist, she studied the different answers, compared them, and then used her own judgment to conclude which procedure was best. Thus Florence prepared herself for that first job in London.

Hospitals—whether in cities, in military camps, or in war zones—held needs that were the same to Florence. She taught nurses that hospitals must be clean and organized so that the women can provide patients with the best care. When a commission was formed to investigate how the British army cared for their wounded and ill soldiers, Florence was the best resource for their information. She told them of her experiences during the Crimean War; she reported how improvements like a clean environment and healthy meals could save lives. She explained that many illnesses in army hospitals could actually be prevented: with better basic care, much sickness could be stopped before it became rampant, as was the cholera during the Crimean War, when the contributing factor was discovered to be the germs that grew in backed up sewer lines. Not all the men on the commission agreed with her explanation.

As in her pleading for her parents' permission for her to become a nurse, in her efforts to turn around the growing numbers of sick soldiers in Turkey during the war, in her work to make conditions better in all hospitals rather than in just in one type of hospital—in all she did, Florence worked so hard that she collapsed. Believing that her mission in life was to help people, she never gave up a cause, whether it was the question of how to organize and manage hospitals for more effective health care or the question of providing good health care for sick poor people in workhouses. The Lady of the Lamp "believed that no problem, however big it seemed, was ever too big for her to solve" (unpaged). When founding the International Red

Cross, Henri Dunant said that he was inspired by Florence Nightingale's work in the Crimea. The International Committee of the Red Cross in 1912, two years after her death, established the Florence Nightingale Medal to honor outstanding nurses.

Lily, my great-granddaughter, is the fourth-grader who read this book to me. She effectively used her work-attack skills to pronounce the many words strange to her, but when asked if she would like to read the book again, she replied "yes," but she would like first to have explanations of the many vocabulary words with which she was unfamiliar. Some she listed were as follows: *poorhouses, gentlewomen, workhouses, innovations, relevant, revolutionized, distressed circumstances*. One more to add to the list, a surprise to me, was "*surgeons*" (and I was reminded once again that every reader brings one's own singular experiences to the printed page).

She and I discussed whether Florence should have been able to choose her future work and whether women in today's world should be able to make their own choices of careers. We did not discuss that in addition to the reluctance of Florence's parents to grant their daughter's permission to select an unfit career for a woman, the military men doubted Florence's answers both to the causes of the increasing cases of cholera in the Crimea war hospital and her advice that proper care in hospitals would not only help patients to heal faster but also aid in preventing future illnesses. Was this because she was a woman?

Having been retired from teaching for so many years, I hesitate to suggest topics for class discussion of some of the problems faced by Florence Nightingale. However, I should certainly enjoy being a mouse surreptitiously listening in to a fifth-grade class of girls and boys discussing the pros and cons of a girl working at whatever job she chooses.

Works Cited

Demi. *Florence Nightingale*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014. Print.

About the Author

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