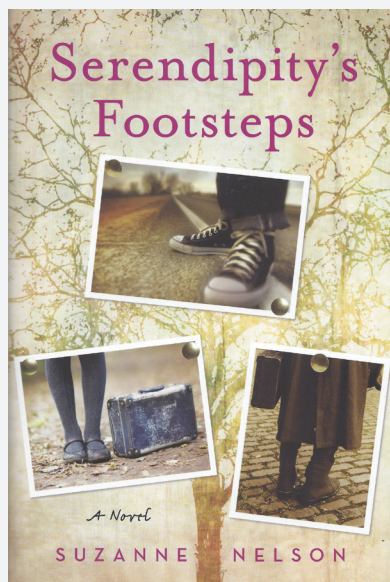


Second Reaction: Second Reactions and Second Readings

Nelson, Suzanne. *Serendipity's Footsteps*. New York: Knopf, 2015. Print.

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My reactions to *Serendipity's Footsteps* by Suzanne Nelson are the catalyst for the title of my article. I have always been a firm believer that if as a reader you struggle with a book, you should give it a second reading. I have found in my own reading that a second reading almost invariably makes the book much better. Such was my experience with *Serendipity's Footsteps*. Therefore, much of what is written here are my second reactions on a book that I struggled with at first blush.

As noted above, I struggled mightily with the text on my first read. *Serendipity's Footsteps* moves rather quickly from one person's perspective, whether it is Dalya, the first major character, or Ray, a young female runaway who enters the story later. I struggled to follow the point of view changes, and that frustrated me. However, on my second reading, having discovered that Dalya's shoes were the focal point, I played "find the shoe." I believe it is Nelson's motive that those champagne- and rose-colored wedding shoes are the ever present string that ties everything together. That was my lightbulb moment and key to truly relishing the book and its characters. However, I was always enamored with the theme of the book. I loved the fact that the focal point of the story was shoes, something simple and yet essential. This pair of wedding shoes made by young Dalya survive the Holocaust, come to the United States as wedding shoes, become a central moment of self-discovery for a young gay man, and are picked

up as cast offs by Ray. Nelson asserts through Orpa, a truck driver, and Pinny, an effervescent young woman with Down syndrome: "It's all in the shoes [and] . . . the people who wear them" (272). That's the key.

There are two points, among many, in which *Serendipity's Footsteps* lends itself to being a well-chosen book for a young reader: (1) the main characters in the book are all young at some point and are easy to identify with for young readers and (2) most children identify with shoes as a focal point of memory. Whether it's the pair of Jordan's they got for Christmas, the prom shoes they spent weeks looking for, or their favorite pair of flip-flops, shoes are a point of connection.

Children can identify with Dalya's indignation when the Nazi officer accuses her father of being an enemy of the state and Dalya defends him, saying "That is ridiculous. . . . My father has done nothing" (Nelson, 12). She spies her moment of retribution and spills glue on the Nazi officer's boots (12). Each of these moments in succession show a child incensed that her father is being attacked, and the clever moment of vindication followed by feigned innocence. Children would relate not only to the need to protect their parent in a moment of crisis, but also to seize upon a small moment of victory and control when everything else is beyond their control.

Adolescents would also identify with shoes as a focal point of memories through all stages of life. Dalya hides the shoes under a floorboard at the height of *Kristallnacht*, only to find them again years later, after meeting Ray and Pinny, in New York. Dalya's memory is reengaged immediately upon seeing the shoes when she states, "Those shoes, my shoes. I left them behind. . . . I was sure they were gone" (310). Dalya's wedding shoes are a focal point of memory for everyone in the story, from Dalya leaving them in a life long ago and rediscovering them, to Danny and the shoes that "gave him a glimpse of who he wanted to be (222)," to Ray finding them in a thrift store and noting that "the shoe was a pillow cradling her foot" (251).

The most significant reasons I wanted to share this book with students include Dalya's time at Sachsenhausen concentration camp and in New York, and the personal "magic" of a seemingly ordinary object. I engaged students with the book by discussing each of my reasons for wanting to share the story and relating them to their current lives. I wanted my students to see in Dalya's story that they have the ability to overcome difficult situations through careful thought followed by quick action. For instance, Dalya plays dead in order to escape Sachsenhausen and then remains unmoving in a coffin in Berlin until she is deposited in a safe house (63, 68). Children often do not give themselves credit for what they might truly be capable of should they take the time. My students would be able to see with these examples ways that they can emulate the quick thought and action of Dalya.

Throughout the book, there are mentions of the poetry and magic of the wedding shoes. In explaining why Pinny is named after a pair of shoes, her mother says of her father and Shakespeare, "they both understood that shoes can write poetry. You remember that" (82).

Thus, shoes are shown here to be a physical expression of deep poetic emotion. Furthermore, Nelson expresses the magic of shoes in Pinny's telling of her mother's story in which a pair of shoes makes an invisible princess appear (122). After discussing this part of the book, students could tell stories of moments in their own lives when a pair of shoes, whether scuffed and mud laden or bright and shiny and ready for the prom, told the story and showcased an almost magical quality better than words could express.

Reading the story a second time was tremendously helpful for me. My overarching observation that the wedding shoes are the string that ties the story and the characters together brought the story to life. Often in reading it is those few details we most identify with that make a story come to life and make us race to the end. It took a second reading, and certainly a second reaction, for me to finally uncover the beauty of *Serendipity's Footsteps*. That beauty comes in those champagne- and rose-colored wedding shoes and their steadiness throughout the story, even as Dalya, Aaron, Henry, Ray, Pinny, and many other characters intertwine around them. As Nelson says, "Every shoe holds a fairy tale of magic and mystery" (33).

About the Author

J. Ryan Moore is a native of Doyline, Louisiana. He has degrees in history and political science, Russian history, and social studies education. He is a world history and civics instructor in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and loves to travel.