

Mystery, Necromancy, and the Euphonium

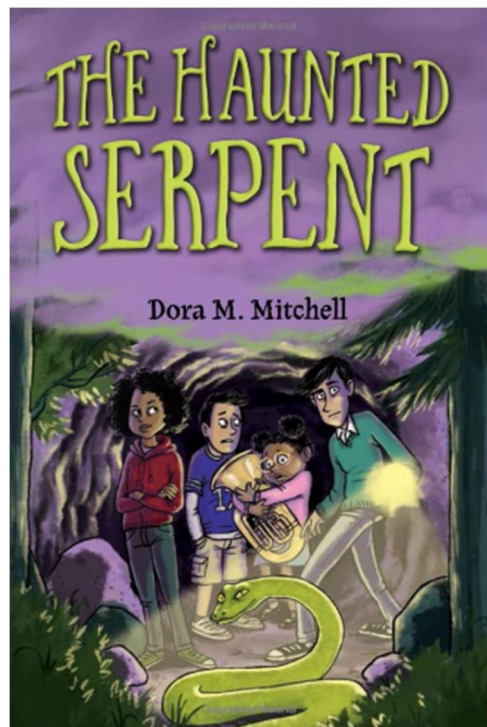
The importance of Daphne, the euphonium in Dora Mitchell’s middle-school fright *The Haunted Serpent* (2018)

By Matthew Nunes

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It’s not often the euphonium is featured outside a performance environment. However, author and illustrator Dora Mitchell’s mysterious book *The Haunted Serpent* (2018) features the euphonium in a crucial role. The book is intended for middle schoolers and may be a useful tool for teachers with young students adjusting to a new, unfamiliar, instrument. The euphonium is even featured on the cover – complete with compensating valve.

I had the good fortune to interview Mitchell about how the euphonium found a starring role in her story.¹ Though she claims she has “absolutely NO ear, very little sense of rhythm, can’t carry a tune in a bucket...” Mitchell is rather musically inclined. She was in local musicals in her early teens, her playlist includes “Radiohead, Smashing Pumpkins, The Verve, Iron and Wine, The Cave Singers, Death Cab, Velvet Underground, Kate Bush, Joanna Newsome, Bon Iver...topped off with random bluegrass groups my dad gets me into”, and she loves listening to classical music when she works. She cites Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) as a favorite: “I’ve always wanted to make an animated sequence set to the fourth movement”. Mitchell idolizes David Bowie, his various creative projects, and how he didn’t let criticisms stop his artistry – the serpent in the story is named David Boa in tribute. Mitchell’s father is now an active musician and even made her a tenor ukulele. “I practice that fairly regularly. You never know – maybe I’ll be torturing people at open mic nights with my tuneless but enthusiastic playing someday!”



Front cover of *The Haunted Serpent* (2018) by Dora Mitchell, published by Sterling Children’s Books.

¹ Dora Mitchell, interviewed by Matthew Nunes via email, July 16th through July 30th.

Originally, Mitchell wanted her musician character, Lucy Bellwood, to carry a tuba but decided that may be too large for a nine-year old. She soon discovered the euphonium and thought its uniqueness fit perfectly with that character. Mitchell noted David Werden's YouTube page as a great resource, specifically citing two performances: Franz Schubert's "Arpeggione"² and Lewis Buckley's arrangement of "I'll Be Seeing You"³. Mitchell writes:

"I was imagining [Lucy's] first day in band, while the other kids are picking instruments that might seem a little more glamorous, or more recognizable...and this, again, is just my non-musician, was-never-in-band, outsider conception...but I knew more than one girl who desperately wanted to play the flute because it seemed delicate and pretty, and I knew kids who went for the sax or the drums because they have that aura of cool..."

Anyway, I envisioned Lucy there with everyone else diving for the popular instruments, while she goes for the tuba-cousin that the other kids are overlooking."

Unfortunately, there's no intentional connection between *The Haunted Serpent* and our instrumental predecessor of the same name.

So, how did Lucy come to be? Who inspired this against-the-grain character? "She's a conglomeration", Mitchell answered, "I had good friends who played sax and clarinet, another friend who played just about everything, like Lucy... I just have this general recollection of beloved, battered instrument cases always being dragged around when we were kids. And I remember my sax-playing friend being *very* particular about how *actually* it's a baritone sax, get it right, please...which obviously showed up in Lucy!" Lucy's euphonium even has a name: Daphne. "Lucy, to me, represents being yourself even if you're seen as a little goofy or weird. I also see her as being someone who sides with the underdog and finds the value in what other people might look down on". These two are not gimmicky characters but are tried and true heroines in this frightening story.



Author and illustrator Dora Mitchell with her dog, Twiggy

The Haunted Serpent is set in Thedgeroot, a fictional town based on Mitchell's home of Quincy,

California. The main character is Spaulding Meriwether, a kid trying to fit into his new middle school. He gives himself his own nickname, gets laughed at for various reasons, and keeps trying to prove himself to his peers. His parents are supernatural investigators whose advice consists of "salt in your pocket will ward off evil" and "many a malevolent spirit can be banished to the

² Werden, David. "David Werden, Euphonium – Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata, 1". *YouTube* video, 9:15. July 29, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQgnN0_YOD0&list=PLF399089175A859C1&index=167. This is an arrangement by David Werden of Schubert's *Sonata in A minor for Arpeggione and Piano*, D. 821 (1824).

³ Werden, David. "Dave Werden, Euphonium Solo: I'll Be Seeing You". *YouTube* video, 4:30. September 19, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-wELYuNRMA&list=PLF399089175A859C1&index=154>. This is an arrangement by Lewis Buckley of the 1938 song with lyrics by Irving Kahal and music by Sammy Fain.



Lucy Bellwood and Daphne (p. 38)

Shadow Realms with nothing but a little soothing music". (p. 33) Because of their active careers, Spaulding lives with his aunt who, too, doesn't have time for him. But when Spaulding comes across an odd man in a suit by the pond at midnight, everything changes.

Spaulding meets Marietta Bellwood, who tells him if he wants to be "cool" he must stop being himself. There are great moments of tension between the two as they struggle to fit in. "A lot of the story revolves around the idea of being yourself, and how kids navigate that in various ways," Mitchell writes. Her little sister, Lucy, is "a dedicated euphonium player who insists on bringing her instrument, Daphne, with her everywhere"⁴. Lucy also plays piano, earning herself the nickname "Ludwig", and takes music lessons. This nine-year old elementary schooler is a model musician!

Completing the cast are Spaulding's neighbor, the ghost Mr. Radzinsky, whose snake, named David Boa (a tribute to David Bowie), ate him. Mr. Radzinsky becomes a powerful ally, despite being betrayed so Spaulding can prove to his friends there are supernatural forces in town. There's Mr. Von Slecht, the businessman running Slecht-Tech, a factory that still operates despite being closed for years. Slecht is joined by Dr. Desdemona Darke, a vicious villainess with an uncanny ability to control the undead. Finally, there's Mrs. Welliphant, the old-timey teacher who is not so innocent, and classmates Katrina and Kenny.

As the story unravels, we learn Mr. Von Slecht is using hordes of the undead (revenants) to run his factory. But why? Did David Boa really eat Mr. Radzinsky? Why won't Mrs. Welliphant let Spaulding read books on necromancy in the library? Dora Mitchell does a fantastic job spinning her story, with clues to the answers of these questions hidden throughout.

But Lucy Bellwood, the dedicated euphonium player, is the focus here. We first meet Lucy on page 38, in an illustration (top left). Lucy later becomes Spaulding's go-to sidekick, but their initial meeting is full of the usual tuba-euphonium assumptions:

"A girl had appeared at the side-yard fence. She looked about eight or nine, and she had a tuba case slung over her back that was nearly as tall as she was....She put down her tuba case and hooked her arms over the fence.

"I'm Lucy Bellwood, Marietta's sister. We live down the street. Hang on, let me just get Daphne over the fence, and I'll be right up."

"No! Why are you coming up? Why are you putting your tuba over the fence? And who's Daphne? Wait – is that what you call your tuba? That's a terrible name for a tuba."

⁴ Christina Pulles, Senior Editor at Sterling Children's Books. Letter from the Editor, front matter.

She paused, the big black instrument case teetering atop the fence. “I’m coming to help you! And where I go, Daphne goes. She’s not a tuba, she is a *euphonium*. Anyway, I hate stereotypes about tubas, even if she *was* a tuba. Which she isn’t.”” (p. 38-39)

Throughout the story she refers to her euphonium as Daphne, and holds her ground when people question her. In an earlier interview, Dora Mitchell said that Lucy “was one of my examples, to me, of somebody, you know, being themselves to whatever extent they want and not worrying what anyone thinks, of her dragging this, her best friend euphonium, with her everywhere.”⁵ In this regard, she is a polar opposite to her older sister and a positive role model for Spaulding and the reader.

And, thank goodness, Lucy always has Daphne. In the heart-pounding finale the revenants surround a truck Spaulding and Lucy are near. Spaulding suggests they seek shelter inside, “but Daphne was slowing Lucy down. She was still several steps behind. As she reached for the back seat to haul herself up, one of the faster corpses leaped forward. Its bony fingers snagged the euphonium’s valves. Lucy stumbled, and the revenant pounced.” (p. 215) The tension mounts as the undead gnash their teeth, claw at the vehicle, and greatly outnumber our heroes. But Spaulding remembers the advice his parents gave him:

“Spaulding’s breath caught in his throat. What if it *could* protect her? It was a long shot – a *huge* long shot, since it depended on his parents being right about something for once – but it was worth a try.

He grabbed Lucy’s arm and pointed to a wide, double-trunked oak a few strides ahead. “When we get to that big tree, duck behind it.” They couldn’t keep running if his idea was going to have a chance of working – Lucy would have to catch her breath.

An instant later, they crouched down on the far side of the broad tree. The noise of the undead thrashing through the brush sounded nearby, but the revenants were too clumsy to move fast through the thick undergrowth.

“Play something,” Spaulding ordered.

Lucy gaped at him. “What? *Now*? Have you gone crazy?”

“Just do it, Lucy!”



⁵ Mitchell, Dora “Nancy’s Bookshelf: Dora Mitchell and Robyn Engel”. Interview by Nancy Wiegman. North State Public Radio, October 31, 2018. <https://www.myspr.org/post/nancys-bookshelf-dora-mitchell-and-robyn-engel#stream/0>

“Oh, fine,” she sighed, “What would you like to hear? I don’t know what’s appropriate for ten seconds before being torn apart.”

“Funeral music,” Mr. Radzinsky suggested.

Lucy rolled her eyes and took a deep breath.

The first notes spilled forth. Spaulding didn’t recognize the piece, but it was soft and mournful. And Daphne didn’t sound silly and *oompa-oompa* like he had imagined. She sounded sweet and gentle, like a sad woman singing about something lost forever.⁶

The sounds of the undead crashing through the woods slowed. Cautiously, Spaulding peered around the side of the oak as the melody continued.

Everywhere Spaulding looked, other revenants were tumbling and sinking to the ground. As the music swelled to a crescendo, the last stragglers laid themselves down.

“It worked,” Spaulding said, eyes wide. “My parents were actually right about something! Music really *does* banish spirits to the Shadow Realms!” (p. 218-219)

The euphonium saves the day! Lucy and her euphonium are the unlikely heroines of this book. It is a surprise ending, but one that emphasizes the importance of spending quality time with your instrument. You may never know when a life-or-death situation depends on a fine solo performance.

Some of the remaining plotlines are quickly resolved, but Mitchell leaves others open for a possible continuation. “I do have a sequel planned,” Mitchell states, “. . . it all depends on my publisher and whether they decide to move forward with that at some point”. What would this mean for Lucy and her euphonium? We can only wait, and hope Lucy has been practicing.

Mitchell included two nods to supernatural horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) in the middle of the book. Lovecraft’s writing advanced the genre by introducing powerful monsters from the cosmos that defy man’s place in the universe, featured a focus on dream worlds, and suggested that true horror lies in a loss of sanity. Lovecraft continued the American horror tradition, providing a link after Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) and before Stephen King (b. 1947). Mitchell has plans for more Lovecraft references in the potential sequel, and many of her other projects. Her weekly webcomic *The Curse of Crooked Mile* is set in the same county as *Serpent* but over one-hundred years earlier, and there’s an in-progress young-adult graphic novel on the way. Mitchell’s other literary idols include Joan Aiken (*The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962)), Lloyd Alexander (*The Chronicles of Prydain* (1964-1968)), John Bellairs (*The House with a Clock in Its Walls* (1973)), Ambrose Bierce (*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890)), author/illustrator Edward Gorey (*The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963)), illustrator Trina Schart Hyman (*Saint George and the Dragon* (1984)), Tove Jansson (*Moomins* (1945-1993)), Robert Peck (*A Day No Pigs Would Die* (1972)), and William Sleator (*House of Stairs* (1974)).

⁶ Though Mitchell told me she didn’t have a specific piece in mind for this moment, she mentioned “the euphonium also sounds really lovely and poignant in [David Werden’s] version of “I’ll Be Seeing You,” and I know I listened to that—it probably had a lot to do with that description. . . .”

I hope this article will lead teachers of younger students to *The Haunted Serpent* as a supplement to lessons. It may help these students adjust to the unfamiliar instrument at a time when they are figuring out their place among their peers. Lucy is a fine example of a musician with a positive relationship to her instrument, and the visibility of the euphonium outside the band room may help inspire our youngest students in their years ahead.