Sara Press //

In 1347, a plague descended upon Italy on the backs of rats dismounting ships at the Sicilian Port of Messina. The Bubonic Plague, better known as the "Black Death," tore through Europe and the Middle East over the following years, leaving millions of civilians dead in its wake. In 1348, a group of seven young women and three young men fled Florence to take shelter in a countryside villa in the neighboring town of Fiesole. To pass their time in quarantine, each person told a story every night: of love and lust, trickery and treason, sex and betrayal. Told over the course of ten nights, these one hundred stories comprise Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*.[1]

While historians and literary scholars have spent centuries poring over the stories told by the fictional men and women of Boccaccio's frame narrative, in the current Covid climate, we have even more to learn about the act and intimacy of storytelling in isolation. Boccaccio published *The Decameron* in 1353, two years after the first major plague outbreak slowed to a halt. *The Decameron* thus encapsulates yet another frame narrative: Boccaccio's own experience of storytelling in quarantine.

Academics have recently turned a great deal of attention to the canonical stories of plague fiction and histories of past outbreaks, but it is also worthwhile to consider other stories born out of confinement that have shaped our cultural imagination. In 1816, the Year Without a Summer, Mary Shelley took a trip to Switzerland in the company of literary luminaries Percy Bysshe Shelley (her lover), Lord Byron, and Byron's doctor, John Polidori.[2]Despite being beautifully situated on Lake Geneva, the group was mostly kept indoors by the dreadful weather.

Much like the men and women of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Shelley and company passed their time at the Villa Diodati by storytelling. One night during a violent thunderstorm, Lord Byron

proposed a challenge: each person was to write a ghost story. Inspired by one of Byron's stories at the villa, Polidori wrote a novella called "The Vampyre." Published in 1819, this story went on to influence Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and an entire genre of vampire fiction. After a brief period of writer's block, Mary Shelley, too, found great satisfaction with her rendering of *Frankenstein*.

A recent Twitter post by Johnny Cash's daughter, Rosanne Cash, reminds us that when Shakespeare was quarantined during the plague, he wrote *King Lear*.[3]"Fair point," responded Canadian novelist Emily St. John Mandel in a Tweet. "I'll bet he had childcare."[4]Of course, not everyone has the privilege of spending hours writing literary masterpieces in countryside villas or comfortable quarantines. Much of the world is struggling with shifting work routines, unemployment, mental health, caregiving, chronic illness, limited healthcare infrastructures, and securing enough income to pay next month's rent. However, many of us do have access to novel modes of storytelling that we have been afforded by twentieth- and twenty-first century technology—namely, the internet.

Those of us who have the means to reconnect with friends and family over the phone and online have continued storytelling across the globe. Over the past month, my parents have been sending me voice recordings of stories from their childhoods in South Africa and Zimbabwe; of my grandfather being attacked by a man-eating lion, and of a poisonous snake emerging from my uncle's bathroom sink. These stories are my inheritance, but they are also part of my Covid-19 canon, the stories I carry with me through this pandemic.

A few weeks ago, my family joined millions around the world who signed into their Skype and Zoom accounts to celebrate the Jews' exodus from Egypt over Passover, just like the millions of Christians who logged in to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday and the millions of Muslims who will observe a month of fasting, prayer, and reflection for Ramadan in the coming weeks. These religious customs and stories are foundational to peoples' lives and imaginations. How people celebrated and will continue to celebrate high holidays during this pandemic will also yield stories we remember in years to come.

With any world-changing event, the quintessential questions will surely be asked: *Where were you during Covid-19? Who were you with?* These questions draw us inwards into personal narratives that have been disrupted. Weddings have been cancelled, conferences postponed, family members born and lost in quarantine. Storytelling is the reminder that we are in this moment together. While the spatial and economic politics of our quarantines will inevitably differ, this isolation should also give us pause to consider those who are unable to leave their circumstances: victims of domestic violence, refugees, prison inmates, and political prisoners, among others. Many of us will have the pleasure and privilege of leaving our homes freely in the future.

In the meantime, as the world and our stories go online, we must be careful that this new storytelling economy does not forget those who remain offline: the children without internet access, who are being left out of school; the elderly and disabled, who may be unable to use these technologies; and the homeless, whose stories and suffering rarely leave the streets. Storytelling is a way of sharing our lives and imaginations, but it is also a way of thinking and feeling beyond

ourselves. Although we are all the protagonists of our own stories, we must remember that we are also characters in a much larger narrative.

Featured Image: *A Tale from the Decameron* (1916). John William Waterhouse, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Works Cited

[1]Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. New York: Norton, 1983.

[2]In 1815, centuries after Boccaccio published *The Black Death*, a volcano erupted at Mount Tambora in Indonesia. The brief, but significant period of climate change that followed saw years of devastating crop failures, famines, and political unrest. For privileged artists, however, this period of darkness brought great creativity.

[3]https://lithub.com/shakespeare-wrote-king-lear-during-a-plague-well-good-for-him-say-all-the-writers/

[4]Ibid.