Sidelights --from "Something About the Author"

Karen Kenyon's first book offers a personal narrative that details the gradual recovery of her family from the death of Kenyon's husband by suicide. This shock followed the death of their infant daughter, eight years earlier, who was born with Down's Syndrome. Reeling with pain, Kenyon examines her nearly twenty-year relationship with her husband for clues to his suicidal impulse and concludes that he was not a man who could express his deepest feelings of sadness or despair. She sought the comfort of family, close friends, and writing. Kenyon titled her book *Sunshower* to accentuate the idea that the darkness of her grieving had also brought enlightenment, about the nature of love and family, especially. Priscilla Johnson called *Sunshower* "an honest and courageous book" in her *School Library Journal* review. For critic Tom Streissguth, writing in the Torrance, California, *South Bay Breeze,* Kenyon's story is ultimately about "how the human spirit can move out from the shadow of death and despair." "*Sunshower* is touching, affecting . . . and painfully valid," Streissguth concluded.

A freelance writer and college instructor, Kenyon penned hundreds of poems, essays, and articles in between the time her first and second books appeared in print. On her many trips to England, Kenyon became fascinated by the lives of the Brontës, a family of artists and writers whose short, often sad lives, produced work that continues to be appreciated more than a hundred years later. Out of this interest came Kenyon's young-adult biography *The Brontë Family: Passionate Literary Geniuses,* which begins with the early life of Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell Brontë, who lost their mother and two siblings to illness early in life. Growing up, the children nurtured each other's earliest artistic endeavors. The three sisters were writers, the brother a writer and painter. All died fairly young and tragically, though Charlotte lived to thirty eight, dying from complications of pregnancy. Critics of Kenyon's biography made much of the author's account of the necessity for Charlotte, Emily, and Anne to take on male pseudonyms in order for their writings to be taken seriously by publishers and critics in nineteenth-century England, and the literary furore caused by their unveiling. The Brontës' works were firmly rooted in their native Yorkshire,

whose windswept heaths and moors they each memorably captured for generations to come. "Kenyon knows her subject well and draws readers into the Brontës' world," remarked Kathleen A. Nester in *School Library Journal,* praising the author's scrupulous research and fine writing style. The Brontës are often required reading for young adults, and the use of numerous illustrations in Kenyon's biography, as well as reference to contemporary film and television adaptations of their most famous works, should expand the book's interest for its intended audience, conjectured Mary Arnold in *Voice of Youth Advocates.* Arnold concluded: "The warm, accessible tone and format [of *The Brontë Family*] show how these women and their lives created 'classics' whose characters resonate with universal human emotions that are truly timeless."

"I am one of those people who have always liked to express myself in some creative way," Kenyon told *CA*. "My mother was a pianist and was often playing the piano and singing. As a child, I loved to sit next to her on the piano bench and experience the beauty and wonder of her playing, and the rapture of music. My father appreciated literature, and often quoted epic poems as we went for long car drives.

"When I was a child, I took dance lessons--tap and beginning ballet, piano lessons, and I was a very bad clarinetist in the junior high band! When I discovered art, I felt at home, and so in college at the University of New Mexico, I studied art for three years until I married. All during my life though, I had also been writing stories, poems, and once a little play. But I did not think of myself as a writer until, as happens with many people, I had something happen in my life which I felt drawn, almost compelled, to write about.

"In my case, it was the birth of a second child, seven years into my marriage. Our baby girl, Johanna, was a Down Syndrome baby. Her condition was a shock, as is always the case when your child is not healthy. We loved her, and cared for her, but suddenly, at six months of age, she died. I began to want to tell people about her and how she had changed our lives. The result is that I wrote 'Johanna Was a Sunshower,' an essay for *Redbook* (March, 1973).

"This article changed my life and set me on the path to writing. I

started writing articles--on artists, and other interesting people. And I started going back to college, to finish my degree in writing. But a year after graduating, another difficult period of my life began. My husband, who was only thirty-eight years old, took his own life. There was no indication something like this might occur, except for what seemed to be some mild depression, which he had assured me he could handle.

"Our son was only twelve years old, and this event completely shocked us and altered our lives drastically. I thought I would never write about such a horrible, tragic, and difficult event. But my old friend writing was waiting for me, and in time, I started writing in my journal.

"Then one day I received a phone call from the husband of a woman acquaintance of mine. This woman was a writer, and she had had a baby boy around the time Johanna was born who was also a Down Syndrome baby. I had had lunch with her, and we spoke on the phone several times. She appeared to be a strong woman, in control of her life.

"Her husband had called me just four months after my husband's death to tell me that she too had taken her own life. I was stunned. Until my husband's death, I'd never known a person who had committed suicide.

"When I hung up the phone, a feeling which I could not dismiss filled me. I had to write about my husband's death. Because suicide happens, and no one ever says anything about it, I had to speak out. That night I wrote an essay which I called 'A Survivor's Notes,' which I sent to *Newsweek*. It was a magazine I always read, and I was familiar with their 'My Turn' column. The essay was published a mere ten days later. I received hundreds of wonderful letters from others who'd lost loved ones to suicide or other causes; from those who'd attempted taking their own lives, and then backed away from it; from doctors, psychiatrists; from a nun; from a prisoner. These letters overwhelmed me. I thought of Emily Dickinson's poem, 'This is my letter to the world, that never wrote to me. . . .' I too had written a letter to the world. But the world had answered my letter.

"Some of the letters asked if I planned to write a book. But at first I thought, 'How can I? It would be too painful.' But as I looked for books to help me, and found very few, and virtually no first-person account of a loss from suicide, I began to think I would begin such a book.

"That is how I came to write *Sunshower,* a personal narrative telling the story of my husband's and my marriage, our son, Richard, the loss of Johanna, and my husband's death, and how my son and I made it through this difficult journey. The book was published in 1981 by Richard Marek, through G. P. Putnam's Sons, in New York.

"During this time, also I finished my master's degree in English, with an emphasis in creative writing at San Diego State University. In addition, I started going to England after the loss of my husband, and with each trip have written articles on interesting sites--for example, Stonehenge and even on Liverpool and the Beatles; and also I began writing about visiting famous writers' homes--Charles Dickens, John Keats, Beatrix Potter. And then I visited the Brontë Parsonage in Northern England, the home of the Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne). I saw not only the home where they lived but many of their belongings--Charlotte's wedding bonnet, the comb Emily is said to have dropped in the fire the day she died, a cross-stitch sampler made by their sister, Elizabeth, who died at age eleven, their father's desk, their brother Branwell's bed and his paintings. I walked out on the moors, the expanse of nature like a broken, angled meadow, where they roamed and played each day, where Catherine and Heathcliff lived out their dramatic and romantic fictional lives.

"When I came home, I wrote an article, and in 1994 when I returned, another. But I didn't feel finished with this amazing family of writers. I felt that in a way they had come home with me. I began to write a young-adult biography, because I realized that the teen years are when most people become acquainted with *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* (still considered *the* coming-of-age story for girls).

"I used my first-person experience in and around their home, plus several years of reading almost every biography written about the Brontës, using the wonderful collection at the University of

California--San Diego. When I found conflicting facts in different biographies, I always consulted the assistant curator and librarian at the Brontë Parsonage Museum to clear it up. The high point of my later research was a trip to the Huntington Library in San Marino, where I was allowed to hold and read some of Charlotte Brontë's original letters. This book was published in 2003 by Lerner Publications Company, in Minneapolis.

"Today, I am beginning work on a new, long young-adult biography on Charles Dickens, for Lerner Publications, and am working on another book about how healing writing can be. The working title is *Writing by Heart: Healing Our Lives with Our Pens.*

"I believe there is a theme of creativity in my books and in my articles as well. I can't imagine life without writing, doing some art, and listening to music, going to plays. I hope to convey this enthusiasm to readers.

"I do not always write for a specific length of time every day, but try to make some progress, perhaps doing a little research, editing and retyping a chapter, contacting a publisher, doing an interview.

"I've been influenced by certain authors. Shakespeare probably comes first. No one else has so thoroughly covered the entire range of human emotion. On another level, of course, the Brontës, also Charles Dickens, contemporary poets, like Robert Bly, Mary Oliver, Jane Hirshfield, novelists John Fowles, Michael Ondaatje, Milan Kundera. Jane Yolen is an inspiring and incredible children's book author.

"My advice to aspiring authors is to follow your heart. Never write anything that you can turn away from. If you don't have to write it, you shouldn't, because passion must be part of it--as important as your pen. The ideas that call and beckon to us, that lure us, are showing us our path."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PERIODICALS

- *Chicago Tribune,* October 30, 1981, Otto Scott, review of

Sunshower.

- *Kirkus Reviews,* August 1, 1981, review of *Sunshower.*
- *San Diego Union-Tribune,* August 25, 2002, review of *The Brontë Family: Passionate Literary Geniuses.*
- *School Library Journal,* December, 1981, Priscilla Johnson, review of *Sunshower,* p. 89; January, 2003, Kathleen A. Nester, review of *The Brontë Family,* p. 163.
- *South Bay Breeze* (Torrance, CA), September 18, 1981, Tom Streissguth, review of *Sunshower.*
- *Voice of Youth Advocates,* February, 2003, Mary Arnold, review of *The Brontë Family.*