

**LIFESAVING
TALES AN INTRODUCTION
BY REYKA GALCHEN**



When young people decide to quarantine outside Florence. It's 1348, in the time of the bubonic plague. The afflicted develop lumps in their groins or armpits, then dark spots on their limbs. Some appear healthy at breakfast but by dinner are sharing a meal, it is said, with their ancestors in another world. Wild pigs sniff and tear at the rags of corpses, then convulse and die themselves. What do these young people do, after fleeing unspeakable suffering and horror? They eat, sing songs, and take turns telling one another stories. In one story, a nun mistakenly wears her own lover's trousers on her head, as a wimple. In another, a heartbroken woman grows basil in a pot that contains her lover's severed head. Most of the stories are silly, some are sad, and none are focused on the plague. This is the structure of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, a book that has been celebrated now for nearly 700 years.

Boccaccio, himself from Florence, most likely began writing *The Decameron* in 1349, the same year his father died, probably of the plague. He finished the book within a few years. It was first read and loved by the very people who

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watched roughly half their fellow citizens die. The stories in the book are largely not new but are instead reincarnations of old familiar tales. Boccaccio ends *The Decameron* with a joke about how some readers might dismiss him as a lightweight, although, he explains, he weighs a lot. What to make of all his playfulness at such a moment?

Along with many others, in mid-March I watched two rockhopper penguins waddling free at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium. Wellington the penguin took a shine to the belugas. Though at that time I had probably already read dozens of articles about the novel coronavirus, it was those curious, isolated penguins that made the pandemic real for me emotionally, even as the videos also made me smile and were a relief from "the news." In May, three Humboldt penguins visited the uncannily empty halls of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City and lingered at the Caravaggio paintings. Those penguins themselves had something of the startle of art—the reveal of the ever-present real that's hidden, paradoxically, by information.

Reality is easy to miss, maybe because we're looking at it all the time. My daughter, who is six, had little to say and few questions to ask about the pandemic, save for now and again floating a plan: to tear the coronavirus into a million pieces and bury it in the ground. She found it too upsetting a "story" to think about it directly. But when the news was about personal protective equipment, her figurines began to wear armor made out of foil chocolate wrappers, string, and tape. Later they were wrapped in cotton balls. They

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engaged in detailed battles I didn't understand. In quieter reading moments, my daughter became obsessed with the series *Wings of Fire*, in which young dragons work to fulfill a prophecy that they will bring an end to war.

When there's a radical and true and important story happening at every moment, why turn to imagined tales? "Art is what makes life more interesting than art," the French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou noted in one of his works, suggesting that we don't catch sight of life at first glance. As if life were one of those trick images, like the skull in the Hans Holbein the Younger painting *The Ambassadors*, which is noticed only when the viewer stands off to the side—looked at straight on, it might be mistaken for driftwood, or not noticed at all. In the Italian of Boccaccio, the word *novelle* means both news and stories. The tales of *The Decameron* are the news in a form the listeners can follow. (The rule of the young people's quarantine was: No news of Florence!) The first story is a comic account of how to deal with a soon-to-be corpse; the comedy gives cover to the catastrophe too familiar to be understood.

But over the course of *The Decameron*, the tone and content of the stories the young people tell one another shifts. The first few days are mostly jokes and irreverence. Then the fourth day is 10 stories in a row on the theme of tragic love. The fifth: stories of lovers who, after terrible accidents or misfortunes, find happiness. Boccaccio writes that during the Black Death the people of Florence stopped mourning or weeping over the dead. After some days away, the

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young storytellers of his tale are finally able to cry, nominally over imaginary tales of tragic love, but more likely from their own hearts.

The paradox of Boccaccio's escapist stories is that they ultimately return the characters, and readers, to what they have fled. The early stories are set across time and space, while the later stories are often set in Tuscany, or even in Florence specifically. The characters within the stories are in more contemporary and recognizable binds. A corrupt Florentine judge is pantsed by pranksters—everyone laughs. A simpleton called Calandrino is tricked and wronged again and again—should we laugh? By the 10th day, we hear tales of those who behave with nearly unimaginable nobility in the face of a manifestly cruel and unjust world. Under emotional cover—it's only a story—the characters experience hope.

Boccaccio's series of stories told within a frame was itself an old structure made new again. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, the frame is Scheherazade telling stories to her husband, the king. If the king gets bored, he'll kill Scheherazade, as he did his wives before her. The nested stories of the *Panchatantra* show characters—often animals, sometimes people—navigating difficulties, dilemmas, and war. In all these cases, the stories, in one way or another, are lifesaving, even as their being entertaining is one of the main ways they can save a life. Reading stories in difficult times is a way to understand those times, and also a way to persevere through them.

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The young people of *The Decameron* didn't leave their city forever. After two weeks away, they decided to return. They returned not because the plague was over—they had no reason to believe it was. They returned because having laughed and cried and imagined new rules for living altogether, they were then able to finally see the present, and think of the future. The novelle of their days away made the novelle of their world, at least briefly, vivid again. *Memento mori*—remember that you must die—is a worthy and necessary message for ordinary times when you might forget. *Memento vivere*—remember that you must live—is the message of *The Decameron*.