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Autobiography & Memoir

The Little Locksmith: A Memoir
Katharine Butler Hathaway
Feminist Press
978-1-55861-238-9
(June 30, 2000)

When she was thirty-four years old, the author bought her first house. The year was 1924, so a lone female purchasing a home was somewhat novel in itself. What made it more remarkable was the fact that Hathaway was someone labeled "disabled." She was no larger than a ten-year-old child—the result of contracting tuberculosis of the spine at age five. Her story—a bestseller in 1943, published shortly after her death—has been reprinted for a new generation.

Because her family had money, Hathaway was able to have a doctor who used the most advanced technology at the time (the mid-1890s). She was strapped to a flat surface for nearly ten years "in the hope of preventing the deformity kyphosis, otherwise known as curvature of the spine or, in less polite terms, hunchback."

The locksmith who came to their home to fix locks had suffered from this illness. "He walked with a sort of bobbing motion. He was more like a gnome than a human being. He acted as if he lived all alone in a very private world of his own."

Despite having her body held immobile, Hathaway describes a happy childhood during those years: drawing, reading, writing, playing with the siblings in her close, but uncommunicative family.

At age fifteen, she was finally able to get up and take a look at herself: "I didn't scream with rage when I saw myself. I just felt numb. That person in the mirror couldn't be me. I felt inside like a healthy, ordinary, lucky person—oh, not like the one in the mirror!"

Like the locksmith, Hathaway felt she was left to live alone in her private word with the torment of her mismatched inside and outside.With family support and money, she was able to pursue education, travel and her writing, but she came to believe that the normal rituals of romance, courtship and intimacy were never to be hers.

Purchasing the house in Castine, Maine, was a departure—not something one expected from someone like her. "Everything I looked at fed my will to do now the things I had always

quietly believed in but had never done. In this divine situation I could begin at last. I could begin to live."

In twenty-nine varying-length chapters, Hathaway—who eventually did marry—offers a provocative glimpse of her life.

Robin Farrell Edmunds