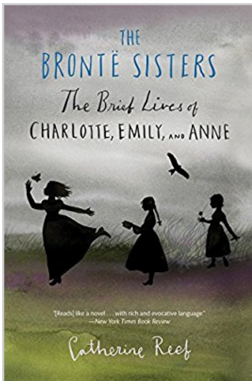

The Brontë Sisters: The Brief Lives of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne

By Catherine Reef

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Editorial Review

Review

"Romance and heartache and doom, oh my! This beautifully written and researched account . . . reads like a novel, with rich and evocative language."
—The New York Times Book Review

"For readers discovering the wonder of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights,* this collective biography of the Brontë family fills in fascinating detail of their personal and public lives . . . [a] stirring biography."
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—*Kirkus,* starred review

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—*Publishers Weekly,* starred review

"For anyone who has ever loved the romantic yet melancholy Heathcliff or the determined Jane Eyre, this book belongs on your shelf."
—The Huffington Post

"This biography for middle-schoolers introduces a fascinating, close-knit family with lively imaginations who liked nothing better than to run free on the moors that surrounded their home and make up stories and poems about imaginary kingdoms."
—Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

"If you're in search of a readable, yet detailed, biography of the Bronte sisters, then look no further than Reef's account, an ideal supplement to any student's reading of the Bronte classics."
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About the Author

Catherine Reef is the author of more than 40 nonfiction books, including many highly acclaimed biographies for young people. She lives in College Park, Maryland.

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One

"Oh God, My Poor Children!"

The cobbled road clung to the steep hill as if holding on for dear life. Its paving stones had been set on end, forming a series of little ledges. The nervous horses felt for these rocky shelves to gain a footing; they feared slipping down as they hauled their heavy load.

It was April 1820, and a new clergyman was coming to Haworth. The Reverend Patrick Brontë surveyed the scene. He told his wife and children that they were all strangers in a strange land.

Life was easy for no one in Haworth—not for horses, and not for people. Haworth, in northern England, was a dirty village of weavers' cottages, where death came early. The soured earth barely fed some stunted bushes that struggled to stay alive. Few trees grew in this bleak place, where a sad wind constantly blew. Beyond Haworth stretched miles and miles of moorland, that bare, hilly country of rough grass, moss, and bracken. The Brontë children would learn to love this strange, wild land.

There were six children when the family moved into the parsonage at the top of the hill. Six-year-old Maria helped care for the younger ones, because their mother was ailing. Mrs. Brontë had yet to recover from the birth of baby Anne, four months earlier, on January 17. The second child, Elizabeth, was five, and Charlotte, born on April 21, 1816, was turning four. Patrick Branwell (called Branwell) was not yet three, and Emily Jane, born on July 30, 1818, would be two in summer.

The children played quietly in an upstairs room while their mother, Maria Branwell Brontë, wasted away. The nature of her ailment remains unclear. She might have had cancer, or she might have acquired a lingering infection after Anne's birth. Antibiotics belonged to the future, so infections in the 1800s were often deadly. Her unmarried sister, Elizabeth Branwell, journeyed to Haworth from Cornwall, in the southwest, to nurse the sick woman.

The children turned to "Aunt" if they needed attention or care. They knew better than to bother their father in his study, where he wrote sermons and poems that taught moral lessons. In one poem, he revealed the dreary thoughts that ran through his head on a winter night.

Where Sin abounds Religion dies,
And Virtue seeks her native skies;
Chaste Conscience, hides for very shame,
And Honour's but an empty name.
Then, like a flood, with fearful din,
A gloomy host, comes pouring in.

This tall, redheaded clergyman was born Patrick Brunty in what is now Northern Ireland. His father was a farm laborer who could barely read, but Patrick wanted more from life. So he read books, taught school at sixteen, and caught the notice of an influential minister. This man saw that with an education, Patrick might become a fine clergyman, so he sent him to college in Cambridge, England. It was rare for an Irishman, especially one with such humble roots, to attend college in nineteenth-century Britain, but Patrick was uncommonly bright and ambitious. He distanced himself from his home and family even more when he changed his surname to Brontë, which sounded like the Greek word for thunder. He earned a degree in theology and was ordained a minister in 1806. He married Maria Branwell from Cornwall in 1812 and made England his home, returning to Ireland just once.

On September 15, 1821, Maria Branwell Brontë uttered her dying words: "Oh God, my poor children!" She became the first Brontë laid to rest under the stone slabs of Haworth's church. "I was left quite alone," her grieving husband wrote, "unless you suppose my six little children and the nurse and servants to have been company." His words implied that he did not. Hoping to marry again, he proposed to three women, one after another, but they all turned him down. None wanted a husband with a small income and a large family. Patrick Brontë remained single, and Elizabeth Branwell stayed on to oversee her late sister's household.

Somber Aunt Branwell dressed in black. Like other country women, Aunt Branwell walked in pattens, or

platforms of wood or metal strapped to her shoes. Most women wore their pattens outdoors, to raise their skirts above the mud and dirt, but Aunt wore hers in the house to keep her feet off the cold stone floors. There were few carpets in the parsonage, and no curtains hung on the windows, because the Reverend Brontë had a great fear of fire. He kept a pail of water on the staircase landing to be ready to douse a flame in a moment.

Aunt Branwell taught the girls to sew while the Reverend Brontë took charge of Branwell's education. The clergyman had high hopes for his only son. He schooled Branwell in Latin and classical Greek, the subjects that formed the basis of a boy's education. Branwell and his sisters read three daily newspapers and their father's copies of *Blackwood's Magazine*. *Blackwood's* printed tales of country life, adventure, and ghosts. Charlotte was thrilled to read stories about Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. This great military leader had led the English forces in the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, in Belgium. England and its allies defeated Napoleon in this historic confrontation, ending decades of armed conflict between the English and French.

The children escaped from the parsonage whenever they could to ramble on the moor. In winter they clambered over hills of snow, and in warmer months they ran through banks of brown and purple heather. They learned the calls of grouse, swallows, and golden plovers, and at a favorite spot they plunged their hands into a cold, clear stream to fish for tadpoles. Anne and Emily named this place "The Meeting of the Waters," after a lyric that Anne loved by Thomas Moore, an Irish poet and songwriter.

Childhood felt as vast as the moor, but the youngsters' father saw its boundary. Patrick Brontë looked ahead to a time when his daughters might need to make their way in the world. Women with money enjoyed an advantage in the marriage market, and the Brontë girls had none. Like other fathers of his time, Patrick hoped to see his daughters marry, but he wanted to equip them for life in case they stayed single. The only profession open to respectable single women was teaching, so in July 1824, he sent the two oldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, northwest of Haworth, to be suitably prepared. Charlotte joined them in August, and Emily followed in November. Someone wrote in the school's register book that Charlotte, age eight, was "altogether clever of her age." Emily, at six, "read prettily." But at Cowan Bridge, the Brontë girls soon learned lessons that were far different from the ones they expected.

Founded as a charity institution for the daughters of poor ministers, the school at Cowan Bridge was a place of suffering and abuse. The school's founder, the Reverend William Carus Wilson, saw sin wherever he looked, even in the faces of children. "Sin, like a full-blown weed, lies all before us, ready for the knife," he wrote. "In childhood, the seeds of inbred corruption spring up like luxuriant vegetation." Carus Wilson believed that the girls in his care would grow up to be sinners unless he intervened. As women, they would tempt men to do evil unless he set them on the right path. He employed cruel methods to teach Christian humility and stifle the students' emerging sexuality. The girls' hair symbolized beauty, so the school's staff cut it short. They kept the damp building cold in winter and fed the pupils small meals of burned porridge, stale bread, and rancid meat that turned even the emptiest stomach.

Any girl who was untidy had to wear a badge of public shame. This proved to be a big problem for Maria Brontë, who never could keep her nails clean or wash her face properly in the few drops of icy water she was given. Because of this shortcoming, a sadistic schoolmistress named Miss Andrews singled her out for punishment. Charlotte never forgot the day when Miss Andrews sent Maria to fetch a bundle of sticks. As Charlotte and the other girls looked on, she ordered the child to loosen the pinafore that covered her thin body. She then whipped Maria fiercely across the back of the neck with one of the sticks.

It soon became clear that Maria was sick, but at Cowan Bridge, illness was no reason for pampering the body. One morning, Miss Andrews yanked the suffering girl from her bed, flung her to the middle of the dormitory, and scolded her for being dirty. Moving slowly and weakly, Maria got dressed, only to have Miss Andrews punish her for tardiness.

Her sister's mistreatment made Charlotte furious, but she had no power to stop it. Maria, however, believed it was her Christian duty to submit. "God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward," she told Charlotte. "Why, then, should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon

over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness?"

Before long, she passed through that entrance. In February 1825, the school's managers sent Maria home with an advanced case of the "graveyard cough": tuberculosis. This fearsome disease usually attacked the lungs, but it could spread to other organs as well. It was passed along when an infected person sneezed or coughed and sent tiny droplets into the air for someone else to inhale. People who contracted tuberculosis wasted away and died. They coughed up blood and soaked their bedding in perspiration. They ran a fever and exhausted themselves gasping for breath. They lost so much weight that the illness seemed to be eating up their bodies. This is why tuberculosis had another name: consumption. It was a relentless disease that would be blamed for a third of all deaths among English laborers in the 1830s.

All her siblings grieved when the eleven-year-old died in May, but Branwell and Charlotte felt the loss profoundly. Seven-year-old Branwell pored over lines in Blackwood's Magazine that mirrored his own sorrow:

Long, long, long ago, the time when we danced along, hand in hand with our golden-haired sister, whom all who looked on loved!—long, long, long ago, the day on which she died—the hour, so far more dismal than any hour that can now darken us on earth, when she—her coffin—and that velvet pall descended—and descended—slowly, slowly into the horrid clay, and we were borne deathlike, and wishing to die, out of the churchyard, that, from that moment, we thought we could enter never more!

Branwell read this passage so many times that he could repeat it nearly word for word ten years later. As a teenager and young adult, Charlotte would tell her new friends about Maria's mistreatment, illness, and death.

Barely a month had passed since Maria's burial when a carriage pulled up to the Haworth parsonage. A servant from Cowan Bridge was bringing Elizabeth home because she, too, had advanced tuberculosis. Seeing Elizabeth's wasted condition, her frightened father removed Charlotte and Emily from the Clergy Daughters' School immediately, possibly saving their lives. The change came too late for Elizabeth, though. She died in June, at age ten. The family grieved, and Aunt Branwell drew close to little Anne.

The surviving girls continued their learning in the safety of home. Under their father's direction, they memorized passages from the Bible and studied grammar, geography, and history. The Reverend Brontë offered them classics from the past, like Shakespeare's plays and *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's epic poem on the story of Adam and Eve. His shelves also held works by the Romantic poets of his own time, writers like William Wordsworth and George Gordon, Lord Byron. These poets let nature ignite their imaginations, and they valued feeling over logic and reasoning. When the Romantic poets spoke, the Brontë girls understood. Children who had known so much loss felt comforted thinking of nature as a steadfast friend.

"Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her," wrote Wordsworth, who lived in the scenic Lake District of northwest England:

tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy. . . .

The girls also enjoyed the verses of handsome Lord Byron, who died in 1824, having lived life to its fullest. He had traveled widely, had many love affairs, and fought in wars in Italy and Greece. In nature, he wrote, a person could "mingle with the Universe":

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar.

None of the children loved nature more than tall, quiet, independent Emily. On the moor, with a dog at her side, she found greater beauty and freedom than the others could see or feel. For Emily alone, "Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath," Charlotte said. "She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights." At home, Emily felt drawn to the kitchen, where she helped Tabby Aykroyd, the paid housekeeper, cook meals and bake bread.

Some of Lord Byron's poems told stories of moody, brooding young men, characters like the world-weary Childe Harold, who travels in foreign lands. Misunderstood, these figures live in exile from their homes, sometimes growing cynical and self-destructive. These Byronic heroes appealed to Branwell, who liked to imagine himself as a long-suffering outcast.
Diligent Charlotte was often reading, but she held books close to her face to aid her weak eyes. Charlotte was small for her age and had brown hair, like her sisters. A large forehead and a crooked mouth made her plain rather than pretty. Smart but not a showoff, Charlotte said "very little about herself" and was "averse from making any display of what she knew," her father noted. A passionate heart beat in Charlotte's chest, but she kept that hidden, too. She wanted to be a writer.
Tender Anne, the youngest, was Aunt Branwell's darling. She was petite like Charlotte and the only one with curls. She was a delicate child who suffered from asthma. As an adult, Anne described herself in childhood, in a poem titled "Self-Communion":
I see, far back, a helpless child,
Feeble and full of causeless fears,
. . . .
More timid than the wild wood-dove
Yet trusting to another's care,
And finding in protecting love
Its only refuge from despair.

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