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Elizabeth Goudge Revisited: The Lost Art of Happily Ever After

by Anne A. Salter

As we grow up and examine our lives, it is truly amazing to think that our parents actually had their own passions outside of their children. My mother's love for reading was a huge part of her world, and she happily shared it with me as I began to expand my reading repertoire. Her favorite author, Elizabeth Goudge, has been described as a writer whose books are really "grown up fairy tales." For most critics of the time, this style of writing and its great appeal seemed quite odd and the object of contempt. Fortunately, this 20th century entity, heavily influenced by her 19th-century upbringing, has made a lasting impression. Her style of "escape" literature has influenced greatly the world of today's readers through a most interesting twist.

The post World War II cynicism of the Western literary world found Goudge's adult fairy tales too sweet for their taste. Their disdain for the remnants of anything Victorian is revealed in their harsh critiques of her works. Yet the public read her books in droves, the titles sold millions and the best seller list was often topped by one of her titles.

Goudge's books entered my life through my mother's influence. I

recall being told frequently that a certain book was "too old" for me. I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but I did know that my older sister was the right age for these titles that included such works as *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *The Group*. Other books were my haven, and I soon began to read the same titles my mother was reading. The authors we enjoyed together included Nora Lofts, Victoria Holt and Elizabeth Goudge. Ms. Goudge was my mother's favorite and with the publication of *The White Witch*, forever mine. Her books were not only hours of enjoyment for us but investments that crowded our bookshelves at home.

In the 1960s, hardbacks were still popular and paperbacks were rare. We had no Amazon, no Barnes & Noble or Borders. The culture of the day was to either go to the library and check out the book you wanted or head to the department store in Atlanta — Rich's or Millers — and purchase it. Thus I was able to see my mother slowly but steadily acquire the hardback copies of Ms. Goudge's works as she read through them all one by one.

I cannot tell you when she began reading Ms. Goudge but it must have been early in this author's career.

My mother, like Ms. Goudge, was a product of the Victorian age, for parents who were from that time raised her. Like Ms. Goudge, my mother's gentle and spiritual character saw and treated her world and its surroundings in a way that has sadly vanished from us. Victorians — the quintessential good soldiers — mustered on through the hard times, quietly and patiently enduring until better times came. Those better times always did arrive no matter how miniscule or unassuming. Optimism and imagination are often happily linked in those end-of-the-19th-century minds, and Ms. Goudge's writing style and personal history reveal nothing less than the unsinkable spirit — a product of her upbringing. Goudge's books helped my mother through some hard times, so much so that my mother corresponded with Goudge to thank her. She received a nice reply.

Elizabeth Goudge was born in 1900, one of the last true Victorians. She was influenced greatly by that age, and her books reflect the passionate link between creation and humanity, a respect for the world and awareness of the infinite links between all creation. The words "gentle spirit" come to mind when I think of her works. During the course

of her writing career, she produced about 17 novels, nine series titles, 17 collections of stories, three anthologies, four works of non-fiction, and one autobiography.

Her literary career was not without reward. Her children's book, *The Little White Horse*, won the Library Associations Carnegie Medal in 1946. Her best-known novel, *Green Dolphin Street*, was made into a film in 1947 with a stellar cast that included Van Heflin, Lana Turner and Donna Reed. Goudge writes of this event in her autobiography as being quite astounding and unexpected.

Her life, as revealed in her autobiography, *Joy of the Snow*, reads like anything but her optimistic and happy-ending novels. Yet through it all, Goudge remains undaunted and accepting of what life measures out. Her parents were her models. Her father, a prominent clergyman of the Anglican Church, moved several times, uprooting the family on each occasion. Her mother, an invalid most of her life, suffered terribly from a back injury. Yet Goudge's life is revealed as that surrounded by a loving family to whom hardships were part of life and the good times found in the source of a sunny day, an abundantly blooming lilac bush and a peaceful walk with the family dog. Goudge seems to have applied her talent in writing at a young age and became a success but not immediately.¹

Her style of writing is a lost art, a style that was vastly popular in its day yet very underrated by critics. She drew characters and settings from those around her. She carefully wove her love for England and its history into charming stories with historic backgrounds and engaging characters. Research and writing were her gift, and she was a master at creating what is now the old-fashioned historical novel. Unlike

some of her contemporaries, her works lack the larger-than-life heroine characters. Instead she uses her knowledge of real people, their relationships and the ways in which they work out those relationships against the backdrop of multiple historical settings.

In her book *The White Witch*, Goudge weaves one of her most intriguing stories. Set against the historical backdrop of the English Civil War, the novel combines history and character with folklore.

This narrative includes research that Goudge conducted on the Gypsy people of England.

Using the works of Charles Leland, she develops sympathy for the Gypsy characters and their culture into the plot.

Leland was one of the first people to study, interview and become accepted in the Gypsy society of Great Britain.²

Today his works are little known and hard to acquire, but Goudge drew heavily from them to create her story and characters. The Gypsy culture is perhaps one of the last left in the 21st century that nourishes that same connection to nature so ingrained in Goudge's stories.

Her wit combined with charm and a desire to make a happy ending were a recipe for success. Readers adored her. Her titles were on the best seller list more than once, and many of her novels were Literary Guild choices. In her own words Goudge admits:

"I know that happy endings are sometimes inartistic, and certainly not always true to life but I can't write any other kind. I am not a serious chronicler of the very terrible contemporary scene but just a storyteller, and there is so much tragedy about us everywhere today that we surely don't want it in the storybooks to which we turn when we are ill or unhappy... We must escape somewhere."³

Most of her works were critiqued in the *Saturday Review of Literature and Time*. The review of *Pilgrim's Inn* (also known as *The Herb of Grace*) provides an illustration of the rather sarcastic and cynical view critics held toward Goudge and similar authors. The review in *Time* in 1941 includes Goudge's work and that of Hiram Haydn's

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— Elizabeth Goudge

The Time Is Noon, a popular title that concerned life in America in 1929. Using a rather unfortunate metaphor of the "hatched chick" to describe the authors' new titles, the review is not overly flattering to either author, but most pointedly unkind to Goudge. The reviewer depicts her as "a happy ever after" lightweight and adds that Hollywood likes her just the way she is. Times have indeed changed. However, the underlying tone of the review is how can such a piece of fluff be taken seriously?⁴

Green Dolphin Street was reviewed in *Time* in much the same air of amazement as *Pilgrim's Inn*. First the writer derides Louis B. Mayer for

paying \$125,000 for what is termed a "Technicolor marshmallow," or the screen rights to *Green Dolphin Street*. According to Goudge's biography, she was amazed at the sum as well but received less than the full amount once everyone involved had their part. The review tells the plot in great detail and reserves comment except to say that critic Harry Hansen sees her books as suited to readers who want a "decorative style free from profanity and coarse express."⁵

The *Saturday Review of Literature* of 1948 reviewed *Pilgrim's Inn* in quite striking contrast to the sarcastic tone of *Time's* review. The review by Rosemary Carr Benet acknowledges the Pollyanna sweetness of the novels, referring to them as grown up fairy tales, yet admits they are popular reading and the public likes them. All this is done in a respectable format that leaves off the cynicism of the 1941 review. "What this really is, is escape reading certainly, escape to unreality and sylvan enchantment. Like the Eliots, most readers need to escape from something now — if only the newspaper headlines — and Miss Goudge's pleasant flowering countryside may appeal to them as a refuge."⁶

One critic in particular, Josephine Lawrence of the *Saturday Review*, begins to discover what it is about Goudge that makes her popular. Lawrence's 1948 review of *Gentian Hill* remarks that "it is completely incredible, even when accepted in the spirit of far-away and long ago, but it is also rich in legend and love and a beautiful passion for setting

things right." She is now discovering what makes the novels so appealing, and it is that Victorian side of Goudge that is suddenly apparent. Lawrence doesn't stop there but actually remarks on what other critics dared not mention: "I have never been able to understand why it is so often severely criticized. Miss Goudge, who may or may not be lonely and afraid, manages through her books to speak directly to many readers who are both fearful and alone; if for only a few hours she can quiet their panic with dreams, surely she has reason to be proud."⁷

Bring on again that cynical and sarcastic *Time* review and suddenly there appears to be a note of finding the Victorian as well. Could it be that someone read Ms. Lawrence's review? *Gentian Hill* is suddenly seen as yet another book by Miss Goudge that amazes the reviewer in its popularity. "It is a minor literary phenomenon of the mid-20th century that novels in the style of the mid-19th century should still be hugely popular. And it is plainly uncanny that such a writer as novelist Goudge, with almost nothing to say, and small style to say it with, should be the one to write them."⁸ The critic mentions that Goudge's books have sold more than a million copies each and have been Literary Guild picks, yet she is still judged as a "middle-aged Victorian lady with genteel literary inclinations." Likewise *Time* provides very short treatment of *The Heart of the Family*. Goudge's work is dismissed as "a cozy novel with a basically predictable outcome."⁹

Goudge has left us a legacy of good old-fashioned storytelling and appreciation for those simple things in life that collectively make up happiness. Deep within, she has concocted characters based in reality, flavored by historical research, and tempered with the current-day need to escape from the present. Her deep seated "Victorianism" with its optimistic joy in the small things of life and its ability to shoulder burdens until the sun shines again, makes her characters appealing, especially to readers with similar trials.

Her style is not lost to the ages nor is her ability to inspire. Take for example the unprecedented rise to fame and popularity of the *Harry Potter* books. It is perhaps the most singular event of the century which has inspired readers of all ages to leave their laptops and pick up that thing called a "book." It is that "good story," filled to the brim with imagination, fairy-tale-like surroundings and characters who solve their problems in most creative ways that keep readers standing in line in bookstores to be the first to get their next installment.

Once again the recipe is imagination, good will, the desire to entertain and to provide escape from the cares of the world. It is no coincidence that J. K. Rowling's favorite children's book was the *Little White Horse* by Elizabeth Goudge.¹⁰ ►►

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⁴ "A Pot in Every Chicken," *Time* (April 5, 1948): 100.

⁵ Books, "Tycoon Mayer & Tycoon Nobel," *Time* (September 4, 1944): 95.

⁶ Benet, "Grown Up Fairy Tale," 19.

⁷ Josephine Lawrence, "Magic in Devonshire," *Saturday Review of Literature* (December 31, 1949): 16.

⁸ Books, *Time* (January 2, 1950): 66.

⁹ Books, *Time* (September 21, 1953): 114.

¹⁰ "Magic, Mystery, and Mayhem: An Interview with J.K. Rowling," Amazon.com (UK): <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/6230/104-9170968-9498314>.