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Elizabeth (Jane) Coatsworth

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About this Person

Born: May 31, 1893 in Buffalo, New York, United States

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WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

Selected Books

- *The Cat and the Captain*, illustrated by Gertrude Kaye (New York: Macmillan, 1927).
- *Toutou in Bondage*, illustrated by Thomas Handforth (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
- *The Sun's Diary: A Book of Days for Any Year* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
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Periodical Publication

- "Upon Writing for Children," *Horn Book Magazine*, 24 (September 1948).

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Elizabeth Coatsworth has written over ninety books, her productive years spanning the period from 1927 to 1976. She has written over eighty story-books and five volumes of poetry for children; her other works are directed toward adult readers of prose and poetry. Although Coatsworth's work ranges from realistic and historical fiction to legends and fantasies, when her name is mentioned, most readers think of her fourth children's book, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* (1930), Newbery Medal winner in 1931.

Buffalo, New York, the place of Coatsworth's birth on 31 May 1893, was then a large, friendly town with elm-lined streets and horse-drawn carriages. As Coatsworth herself describes her childhood, she went to a school modeled on the English educational system of long hours and severe discipline. "Living as I did two miles away I was seldom home before dusk," but summer took the family, including her parents, Ida Reid and William T. Coatsworth, to a house in a group strung along a wooded ridge overlooking a bay on the Canadian shore of Lake Erie. Sandy beaches for canoeing and swimming, comfortable farms, and dense woods all invited children to enjoy themselves. Mennonite women in black clothing sold chickens and eggs door-to-door, and mysterious Indian burial grounds as well as stories of hidden treasure were part of the atmosphere that surrounded the family. Coatsworth's interest in the outdoors and in Indian life originated in those early days.

Travel was part of the family's life, and as an infant Coatsworth took her first transcontinental trip, stopping off, as she later said, to take "the stage to Santa Fe where we visited the pueblos and my unwinking baby eyes first stared solemnly at Indians and their way of life." At five she visited the Alps and also rode a donkey across the deserts of Egypt. At twelve she first glimpsed Mexico and the ruins of Aztec civilization. From these experiences have come her stories of Indians and Europeans of former days.

Coatsworth's education continued during her years at Vassar, which granted her a B.A. in 1915, and at Columbia University, where in 1916 she received a master's degree. But travels then took her to the Orient. There, she says, she "went on horseback through the Philippine head-hunting country, explored little known temples in Java, saw the early spring come over beautiful ruinous China, and slept in Buddhist monasteries of the Korean Diamond Mountains, where we were sometimes the first white women the people had ever seen."

Coatsworth's first children's book resulted from a discussion with a college friend, Louise Seaman, who was just starting the first department of children's books in the country at Macmillan. Composed while Coatsworth was posing for a young artist, this book was called *The Cat and the Captain* (1927) and told how Cat apprehended a burglar. The book's amusing gaiety made it an early success, but succeeding books, presumably inspired by her travels, were less popular: *Toutou in Bondage* (1929), about a small dog and his Arab master; *The Sun's Diary* (1929), an almanac of quotations and practical ideas taking the reader around the world in one year; and *The Boy with the Parrot* (1930), about a modern Indian boy in Guatemala.

In 1929, at about the time Coatsworth was writing her award-winning story, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, she married Henry Beston, a writer interested in the New England life and countryside. Their family of two daughters, Margaret and Catherine, grew up in the Maine woodlands and in Hingham, Massachusetts, south of Boston. These New England family experiences find their outlet in Coatsworth's later stories about Sally, one of three children of pioneer parents who live after the American Revolution and know well the lives of the Indians. Other books about a similar but modern family of three children also grew from Coatsworth's living in the Northeast: *Alice-All-by-Herself* (1937), *Here I Stay* (1938), *Houseboat Summer* (1942), *Thief Island* (1943), and *Trudy and the Tree House* (1944). Coatsworth's old house above the Hingham harbor, the hayfields and wild woodlands of Maine provided a setting for life and creativity. As Coatsworth says, describing herself and Beston, any fine day might find "two tall dark-haired people ... the wife in a brown gingham dress, strolling towards the trees that fringe the lake, their morning writing done, and picnic baskets covered with red fringed napkins in their hands."

Coatsworth is described by associates as a woman of strength and warmth, one with insatiable curiosity who stores away and brings out facts from her daily life and her travels to intrigue friends and fill her books. An outdoor person, she lives close to the land, picnicking, hiking, observing. These experiences show in the descriptions of each region she chooses for a story; her warmth, too, is clear in her stories, as she frequently explores the growth of friendship and the importance of human relationships.

Most of Coatsworth's stories are quiet tales, some of them disappointingly flat to today's children, and others are filled with mystery and a sense of mythic time. Her prizewinning story, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, captures the mystery and the compassion of the Buddha--a figure being painted by the artist in the book. As the artist recalls traditional Buddhist stories about the sacrifices of the snail and the elephant, the heroism of the horse, the dreamlike beauty of the swan, the honesty and dignity of the buffalo, the compassion of the monkey, and the petitions for mercy spoken by the doe, he paints them all into his picture. Because, of all the animals, the cat had refused homage to Buddha, tradition requires the artist to omit the cat. However, since the artist had so often seen his cat praying to Buddha, he violates this tradition. Offended by the presence of the cat in the picture, the priests take the artist's picture to burn it. Overnight, however, a miraculous change in the picture occurs: "the Buddha whom he had painted ... had stretched out an arm in blessing, and under the holy hand-knelt the figure of a tiny cat, with pretty white head bowed in adoration." The interweaving of Buddhist myth and legend with observations of the cat and the artist creates a story with mystery and reverence for all life. The story's strength lies in its economy and its mythic power.

One of the most intriguing of all Coatsworth's stories is *The Enchanted* (1951), the story of David Ross and a family called the

Perdrys, whose behavior hints they are not always human but are sometimes wild creatures; they do not care for a home or provide for their futures or eat as ordinary people do. We see young David's love for his strange new wife, Molly Perdry, wild Molly's struggle to adjust to homemaking, to become less of a forest creature like her family, and to be contented as a farm wife. The mystery of the Perdrys, who change from people to wild creatures and back again, is solved at the end of the story, and Molly's final transformation into a loving young woman is convincing.

Another highly successful book is *Jock's Island* (1963), a story about a sheep dog named Jock, who zealously cares for the sheep even when his master and all the villagers disappear in haste, fleeing the eruption of a volcano. Jock is a believable dog, and the changing relationship between him and his master's pet cat, Missy, who becomes scavenger, then competitor, then aggressor in search of scarce food, is particularly convincing. Jock's growing trust in Lars, the Norwegian sailor who finds the dog, is slow to develop and well portrayed in the incidents in which Lars returns to the deserted village and carefully salvages what he can from the ruins of the village. Coatsworth knows her animals, and this sheep dog becomes a three-dimensional friend.

Pure Magic (1973) has an intriguing idea as its basis: a werefox child, Giles, who is the descendant of a 400-year-old line of creatures able to change their forms. Against a French Canadian setting, a boy named Dave meets Giles, who lives on a rundown farm, and, according to Dave's father, is from a shiftless family. Dave wonders at the ways of Giles and his mother, who seem to enjoy only wildness--wild food, flowers, and land gone back to wilderness. Eventually Dave learns Giles's secret, and the two become friends. This story has one of Coatsworth's best, most suspenseful plots, enriched by foreshadowing, building to an exciting climax, and concluding with a brief denouement.

Setting is always clear and significant in Coatsworth's stories. Five of her early novels are stories about Sally, historical fiction about early New England. *Away Goes Sally* (1934), *Five Bushel Farm* (1939), *The Fair American* (1940), *The White Horse* (1942), and *The Wonderful Day* (1946) all show a remarkably good, placid, unexcitable little girl who in the last book shows courage when in Africa she saves a pet lion or overhears and attempts to thwart the sultan's threat to kill her uncle. Such passages as the following from *Away Goes Sally* have merit for their description of the Massachusetts forests as Sally and her family are pulled by oxen in their little house constructed to protect them on the journey and to be their first home in the new land. "Up the road they [Sally and Aunt Esther] walked, crossed the brook at the stepping-stones, and turned off at the hill road. The trees grew close on either side and the ruts were deep and muddy. The woods were full of crows flying from tree to tree, black and cawing. For a mile they passed nothing but tumbled stone walls and a clearing where a blackened chimney stood above a cellar hole, and the young pines were growing up among forgotten apple trees."

Equally explicit are the depictions of nature in *Indian Mound Farm* (1969), a story in which conflict, however, is disappointing. "The thunder came nearer. The sun shone very brightly in the clouds, and the great cornfields stretched green against the sunlit blackness. Everything was touched by a momentary beauty. As Pamela ... stood at the top of the path, the clouds overtook the fleeing sun, and almost immediately a flicker of lightning and a crash showed that the storm had begun. Where had all this water come from.... perhaps from the Gulf of Mexico. It had washed the sides of giant tortoises and sharks. Maybe the Great Lakes were in it. It felt like Niagara Falls; it felt like the breaking waves of the Pacific. These pelting, pouring, lightning-silvered drops of water might once have been spray along the beaches of the South Sea islands."

Because Coatsworth has produced so many volumes of fiction and verse, it is not surprising that some of her works are better than others. Many of her books seem born of an imaginary experience--a flight of fanciful "what if?"--and written in that flurry of imagination but without the careful reworking that a less prolific artist might give. Plot seems the strongest element in some of her short books; the setting seems the most important in others. Character portrayal frequently seems unimportant.

When the story has the qualities of a folktale or legend, this shallowness of character portrayal does not trouble the reader. But we miss the depth and breadth of real people in some of Coatsworth's books. *Ronnie and the Chief's Son* (1962), set in Africa and relying upon a mystical union of a white child with the bullocks and antelopes, seems a story without proper suspense because we never know of Ronnie's wish to go home to his family from whom he has been kidnapped by a hostile tribe. When Ronnie, who escapes with the help of an antelope, returns home, he calls his captivity under the threat of being sacrificed a "dangerous but beautiful wayfaring." Had we known about Ronnie's yearning for his family or his fears about his fate in the tribe, we might have been more concerned about his survival; he would be less shadow and more substance. The book, at times a realistic story and at others a symbolic portrayal of the unity of human and beast, lacks a believable character and is therefore closer to legend.

Far more successful in character portrayal is *Jon the Unlucky* (1964), the story of a boy lost in the snows of Greenland and found by a remnant tribe of Vikings hiding in a verdant valley at the center of the icy island. Here Jon's friendship with the Viking Thorvald is strong enough to convince the reader that Jon will stay and join them in their retreat, never reveal their presence, and never try to flee. Plotting problems are significant, but character carries the story. That, however, is not always the case. By contrast, *George and Red* (1969), is the story of two boys on opposing sides in the American Revolution who remain friends. Although the war setting suggests a basis for strong conflict, the conflict here is indistinguishable from any normally experienced in childhood.

Stories of other lands are natural outgrowths of Coatsworth's extensive travels in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Orient, demonstrating her interest in legends as well as terrain. Out of interest in the Orient grew *Cricket and the Emperor's Son* (1932), a series of tales with folk quality, using the long, cadenced line of oral prose narration and dependent upon conflict rather than character. The structure resembles that of *The Thousand and One Nights* with the little boy Cricket reading one story after another from a magic paper which produces new stories nightly, so delighting the sick child of the emperor that he is made well.

Coatsworth has written not only of the past in America and in other lands but also of contemporary times. *Grandmother Cat and the Hermit* (1970) is excellent in the portrayal of the cat that a small boy follows to the hermit's house and in the description of setting in the California mountains. The boy's wisdom solves the problem of piping water for the hermit's garden and convinces him of need for

human contact; here the story is once again unconvincing because of flat characterization.

Within her fiction, Coatsworth often uses short verses to capture the feeling or sense of the chapter. In *Jon the Unlucky* and *The Littlest House* (1940), as well as *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, these verses act as foreshadowing; when reread after the chapter, they seem to summarize. The grace and imagination Coatsworth uses to their fullest in her descriptions of setting are here used to best advantage in her verse. In the preface to *The Sparrow Bush* (1966), she says, "One doesn't look for beauty in rhymes, though sometimes one may find a little. One may even find a sudden shaft of strangeness. But mostly what one will find are playfulness and good humor. Rhyme is poetry in petticoats."

One of Coatsworth's most quoted and anthologized poems is "Swift Things Are Beautiful" from *Away Goes Sally*; like so many others it has the quality of appreciation for the natural world, for animals, and for the seasons. Often she traces the tracks of animals in the snow or marvels at the butterflies' knowing that summer is over. She writes of ducks, seals, fish, dolphin, deer, hawks, cattle, horses; her favorite subject is cats. Often she uses vivid and apt metaphor, as for example when she paints a "Portrait of a Young Cat."

If you would know my cat: he moves like the wind in the reeds;
black as spilled ink and paper-white are his furs;
when he shakes his head, his eyes make a bright half-circle of beads.

At a touch, he explodes like a snapdragon into loud purrs.

The candy-cane icicles of "Candy House" provide a basis for comparing a New England house in winter to the witch's house so tempting to Hansel and Gretel:

The icicles beneath our eaves
Hang down like candy canes,
Rock-candy canes as clear as glass,
And I can hear them when I pass
Playing small tunes with icy beads
That drip on what was grass.

They melt in sun and bend in wind,
And cling to window panes.
The roof is frosted deep with snow
And with the icicles in a row
Our house looks like a candy house
In tales of long ago.

Coatsworth combines imagery and onomatopoeia with metaphor to describe the storm in "When the Wind and Rain," making the reader feel the security of a warm house and a good book. She speaks of the wind and rain "with a rattle and flapping, / Like canvas sails snapping, / In the wet, driving mist," and is glad she is not on the sea "In this shaking and prowling, / This quaking and howling, / This fury and fog, / When the fields are all bog, / And the sky is all ocean, / And the air all commotion." Highly effective rhythm and rhyme also combine with imagery and metaphor to create a vivid contrast between the storm and the security inside.

Critics of Coatsworth's fiction frequently praise the quietness of a story and the simplicity of its telling although they also comment upon her occasional didacticism and unexplored motivation of characters. The critics seem unanimous, however, in their praise of Coatsworth's ability to evoke sensory pictures that place readers clearly within the settings of her stories, expressing--in the words of one--a "unity through such universal qualities as strength and joy in life and nature." "Grace, delicacy, restraint, humor" are qualities that "plunge us, our very selves, within the scene so that we are a part of it."

Elizabeth Coatsworth, who lives at Chimney Farm, Nobleboro, Maine, has said about writing for children that she tries to catch "a little of life for the time being into a book, as one fills for a moment the palms of one's hands with water from the stream which endlessly flows onward and out of sight." She does just this.

Papers:

Coatsworth's papers are housed in the Kerlan Collection, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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