



Classics in Short No.73: The Little White Horse

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Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson on Elizabeth Goudge's **The Little White Horse**.

Brian Alderson

After his many a year at grass there is an empurpled return for?

The Little White Horse

A poet

offers us a helpful observation:

<!--break-->

And that this place may thoroughly be thought

True Paradise, I have the serpent brought...

For paradise, of a kind,

is stamping ground for Elizabeth Goudge's little white horse and is theatre for the historical phantasmagoria that she has prepared for her readers. Orphaned Maria Merryweather, our heroine, Miss Heliotrope, her governess, and Wiggins, her dog, take coach there from London at the start of the story for Maria is to become ward of her second cousin: Sir Benjamin Merryweather of Moonacre Manor in the village of Silverydew and those poetical places somewhere on our Western shores seem to have a paradisaal subsistence and a history all their own.

A tunnel

through a hillside will take you to them ?lying together in a cup in the hills? and an endpaper map by the history?s limner, the late Walter Hodges, sets out their features (although its compass directions are not always strictly adhered to in the narrative). There is the Manor and its Park, the village and its church ? presided over by the violin-playing Old Parson ? and the topographic features of bay and pinewood, with its Norman castle, all overlooked by Paradise Hill.

The date is 1842

and, once through the tunnel, our party find themselves in the midst of a benevolent Victorian squirearchy. The Manor?s accommodation and cuisine are perfectly attuned to the needs of its welcome guests. Animals co-operate ? not least Wrolf the dog (who turns out to be a lion). Shepherd-boy Robin ? naturally with tuneful pipe ? proves to be an emanation of a youth with whom Maria had played, and fallen in love, in the garden of her London square, while his mother is the image of such a one whom motherless Maria would have chosen for her own.

Where then the serpent

in this cosy place ? the needed Aggressor to bring a cutting edge to the drama, a recognition that comfort may be the more valued for being threatened? Inquisitive to know more of what would eventually become her inheritance, Maria institutes searches and discovers not one but two misadventures that have given a darker colour to lives in the happy valley. One, of recent times, was a prenuptial row which led to Sir Benjamin's separation from his chosen bride; the other, of historic dimensions, was a wrong done by his medieval ancestor which has led to the valley and the village being victims of the Men from the Dark Woods, unredeemed thieves and poachers, under the leadership of Monsieur Cocq de Noir in his forest castle.

[image:Classic 174 - Main Pic.jpg:left]

As it turns out though,

these are serpents all-too-easily brought under the sway of Maria, a Moon Princess whom prophecy has declared will end the feud between the dark and the light and whose status is confirmed when she gains the blessing of Moonacre's unicorn, the Little White Horse of the title. As with C S Lewis in his Narnia saga, magic powers and Goodness (along with a useful coincidence or two) can be called upon to resolve even the most fraught situations, although Elizabeth Goudge is too kindly an author to make anything very fraught. How could any frisson of evil be devised by one for whom never a gold or purple crocus but holds up its cup to catch the sun and whose Silverydew is peopled by Prudence Honeybuns and Peterkin Peppers.

First published in 1946

The Little White Horse met with much acclaim both for its text (which gained for it the Library Association's Carnegie Medal) and its pictures by Walter Hodges, who was a favourite illustrator of the author (a later printing was dedicated to him). For all its fairytale qualities ? sometimes reminiscent of the Victorian tales of Mrs Molesworth ? and the joyous resolution of its conclusion, it was not widely regarded as a classic and was hardly in tune with the brassier productions of later times. But it is now revived, thanks to the arrival of ?a major motion picture? under the title of **The Secret of Moonacre**, and eager purchasers may acquire the book in a choice of two forms: a paperback, illustrated only with an eight-page inset of colour-stills from the film, or in a ?Collector's Edition? with all the original colour plates and line drawings, heavily bound in decorated purple cloth, with the picture from the original dust jacket on the front, all stowed away in a purple slip-case.

The illustrations by C Walter Hodges are taken from the 2008 Lion Children's ?Collector's Edition? (978 0 7459 6126 2, £20.00).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.



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