



Obituary: Judith Kerr 1923-2019

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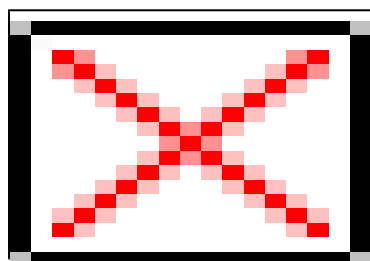
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Nicholas Tucker remembers the extraordinary **Judith Kerr**.

Judith Kerr 1923-2019



Petite in frame, indomitable by nature and with a never ending enthusiasm for life, Judith Kerr was extraordinary both as a person and as an author-illustrator. Fleeing with her family from Nazi Germany in 1933 aged nine, she managed later on to turn even that into a positive experience. Travelling to the UK via Switzerland and France, she insisted that the chance to learn new languages and experience different countries still made it all worthwhile. Her justly celebrated account of this time, **When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit**, is now a set book in many German schools. Two further books, **Bombs on Aunt Dainty** and **A Small Person Far Away** complete the story.

Once in Britain Judith attended school. Four years after that she worked with wounded soldiers for the Red Cross before winning a scholarship to London's Central School of Art - the best thing, as she later put it, that ever happened to her. Teaching art after that at a technical school she met the playwright Nigel Kneale who was working across the road at the BBC's television studio. Their marriage was supremely happy, with Judith moving to the BBC herself as reader and scriptwriter. Two children were born, daughter Tacy, an artist and designer, and Matthew Kneale, a well-known writer.

Her first picture book, **The Tiger who Came to Tea**, was written in 1968 and is still her best-loved work. Based on a story told to young Tacy, the idea of a huge and potentially rampant tiger intruding uninvited into an otherwise cosy suburban house could have been terrifying. But while greedy he remains basically loveable, leaving the family in good order even if stripped of food. Daddy happily restores the status quo on his return by taking everyone out for a nice supper, prudently buying some tiger food on the way home should their high-spirited guest ever visit again. A parable of the Nazi take-over in pre-war Germany? No, Judith always insisted, just a fun story.

Two years after that the first of her many [Mog](#) [3] picture books, based on the family cat, was another great success. An amiable but basically lazy animal, Mog never preaches by example to young readers and is all the more popular for that. Sixteen books and thirty-two years later Judith gently killed off this favourite character in [Goodbye Mog](#) [4]. But given that this great character still survives albeit as a somewhat short-tempered ghost tutoring her ginger kitten successor Rumpus, small readers do not seem to have been unduly upset.

Visiting Judith living alone in her nice house opposite Barnes Common in South London was always a pleasure.

Refusing ever to see herself as a victim, she survived the death of her husband in 2006 with typical courage, making herself constantly available for talks and interviews where she always charmed with her honesty and good humour. Immaculately turned out, she rarely turned down a party invitation. Her only unresolved sadness was when she thought about the life her parents were forced to lead after leaving Germany. Her brilliant, adored writer father never found compatible work, and her highly-strung musician mother, composer of two unperformed operas, was at time near suicidal. But Judith, always conscious of the good fortune that had come her way, never remained downcast for long. A brisk walk even when she was over ninety to a favourite Italian restaurant nearby, during which time she would dispose of the mouse corpses her latest cat brought her each morning, was always enough to restore her habitual warm outlook.

Interested in everything around her, and working with all her usual perfectionism on a new book until the end, the affection and delicacy that marked her art-work, with its characteristic use of crayon outlined in coloured inks, was of a piece with the natural grace of her personality. In 2012 she was awarded the OBE for services to children's literature and Holocaust education. Survived by her children and two grandchildren, she died at home after a short illness, enjoying her daily small shot of whisky with the friends and family surrounding her before finally slipping away.

Nicholas Tucker

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