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Kate Seredy's World

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In 1951, Kate Seredy wrote and illustrated *Gypsy,* the life story of a cat. This seems an ordinary theme for a book. In fact, one can think of innumerable books about cats, good books. There is just one Gypsy. One must go back several years to discover why *Gypsy* is an incomparable book.

It starts in Budapest where a child sat listening to words well spoken, thoughts well chosen. In a room filled with books where good music was often heard sat Kate Seredy listening to the conversations of her family and their friends, listening now to words and music beyond her comprehension, but delighted in for their rhythm.

It was then that the wish must have been born in Kate Seredy's heart to translate those words and music and thoughts into something of her own creation, something that would be alive and something that would make other people know of these wonderful things. This wish became a desire to paint pictures and as soon as she was old enough, she went to the Academy of Art in Budapest.

Her art lessons taught her those truths that are so apparent in her best illustrations. One must know muscle and bone structure in order to draw an arm. One must be able to draw an arm well before one can paint the picture of a child. One must discipline oneself to absolute compliance with facts, faithfulness to reality, and conformity to the laws of nature and of life.

Her link with America began in 1922 when she came here for a visit. Already she had illustrated several children's books in Europe, but her real work in America began when a friend introduced her to a publisher. Then her distinctive illustrations began to appear.

One of the books illustrated by Kate Seredy which was to find its way into permanent collections of children's books was a collection of poetry edited by Blanche Jennings Thompson, *With Harp and Lute.* The book was published particularly for the Catholic reader with emphasis on liturgical poetry. Kate Seredy's black and white drawings are reverent and dignified. The small drawing of Saint Pat-

[1]The Public Library of Concord, New Hampshire.

rick which accompanies the poem, "The Breastplate of St. Patrick," is in keeping with the spirit of the words,

"I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity
Through a belief in the Threeness
Through confession of the Oneness
Of the Creator of creation."

Here is evident in her drawings, which are so true to the feeling of the poetry, that faith and assurance which later appear in her work as an author.

Of her other illustrative work which appeared during the years 1935-1939, there is only one book which seems to be done in a style not immediately recognizable as that of Kate Seredy. In 1939 she illustrated *An Ear for Uncle Emil,* by Eva Roe Gaggin. There are eighty three black and white drawings of people and animals, none of which, with the exception of the goose, have that finish of her usual illustration. Although the illustrations for *Mademoiselle Misfortune,* by Carol Ryrie Brink, done in 1936, seem more comparable to her later work, the theme and characters of the story do not give full play for her talents. One might conclude that there must be a background of nature, a link with the eternal, perhaps, to bring forth the best of Kate Seredy's artistic abilities.

In *Caddie Woodlawn,* illustrated in 1937, there is again evidence of the promise of power in her work. In the picture where "Caddie set her hands to the handle of the plow and chirped to Betsy," there is the feeling of spaciousness, the roundness of form, the depth, and the hint of faith, characteristic of her best work.

Of the remaining books which Miss Seredy illustrated before writing and illustrating her own work, one might take particular notice of *The Gunniwolf and Other Merry Tales,* compiled by Wilhelmina Harper, and published in 1936. It is a compilation of simple folk tales with illustrations reproduced in colors of pale green, gold, and blue. Colored illustrations are rare in Miss Seredy's work. In this book, she did a commendable job in reproducing Little Black Sambo, although it is to be doubted that Little Black Sambo can belong to anyone other than Helen Bannerman. The last small illustration for this story of Little Black Sambo showing that brave child prone and full of one hundred and sixty nine pancakes indicates a whimsical sense of humor not often seen in Seredy drawings, but which becomes a part of the character of Kate in *The Good Master.*

In 1935, the first book written and illustrated by Miss Seredy was published by the Viking Press. Miss May Massee, Children's Book Editor for the Viking Press, suggested that Kate Seredy write and illustrate her own book based on her childhood in Hungary. The result was *The Good Master.* It is the story of a Hungarian ranch before World War I. Father is the Good Master, owner of the ranch, Jancsi is his son, and Kate is Jancsi's city cousin who is sent to the Good Master for a visit with the hope that her associations there will help her overcome her willfulness and loneliness.

In the first few pages, Jansci is established as a real boy, a boy worth the consideration of any other child, when he brushes his teeth. "Squirting out the salty

water, he set a new long-distance record; he even paused long enough to gaze at it admiringly and mark the spot with a stone. 'Can spit almost as far as Father,' he muttered with pride." And then came his temptation with the bottle of green stuff —perfumed hair oil which only grown men used. Quickly it was applied and with great self-satisfaction Jancsi was through the door and on his way to meet his city cousin Kate.

With two small incidents Kate Seredy forms a boy who immediately arouses reader interest. On the drive to town, the countryside is portrayed and the character of the Father emerges. Father is a man of few words, Father delights in teasing, and Father understands the nature of animals and of small boys—Father, the Good Master. "Jansci heaved a sigh of relief. This was a man's world, and he was accepted!" The words secure a sense of warmth and love and sympathy which is sustained throughout the story.

While the character of Kate may be slightly overemphasized for the adult reader, this "miniature whirlwind" has her counterpart in real life, and she does delight the child reader. Kate's introduction to the ranch life of Hungary is the reader's introduction, too. The home, the animals, the customs, and the dress are a part of the story, not just descriptive words. Jancsi's costume will be remembered forever because Kate splits her own best blue dress in imitation. After her long riding lesson, Kate seems more a real little girl as we read the words that tell us that she ate her supper standing and as we look at the picture of her clinging to the door, one foot rubbing the other, skirt split and pushed aside, exposing voluminous bloomers and saying, "Can't hurry and haven't any other dress. Can't sit either."

Here it is in *The Good Master* that Kate Seredy's unmistakable horses first appear. Since the horse is a most important part of the Hungarian rancher's life, many of the illustrations are devoted to the horse. Not only do they indicate the economic value, but also the historical and mythological importance of the Hungarian horse. This mythological background gives us a stylized horse, a magnificent animal, exciting and thrilling. The seed of *The White Stag* is here in *The Good Master,* here in the legend of the Milky Way told to Kate and Jansci by Arpád.

Her interest in folklore is displayed in *The Good Master* by the inclusion of several Hungarian tales. They impede the progress of the story somewhat, but they heighten the Hungarian atmosphere of the book.

The most popular of her books, this, *The Good Master,* is deserving for its characterization, basic soundness, and beautiful illustrations. It includes that love for the good thought and word that was a part of her childhood.

The next year came *Listening,* a departure from *The Good Master* in that the story is laid in America and in that another strong interest of Miss Seredy's comes to light. Although a story of the first Dutch settlers in America is interwoven, essentially, *Listening* is a story dedicated to the simple country way of life with its hominess, its appreciation of woods animals and the domestic dog and cat.

This is the first time we have Miss

Seredy's cat. Almost all the drawings show a preference for a triangular balance. The picture of the three cats with a teddy bear is a study in design. The suppleness and grace of the cat is used in an interesting fashion to form a softened triangle. One feels that the strength here is in design.

The prose of *Listening* does not show the same artistry of plot or characterization seen in *The Good Master,* but there is greater ease in the handling of conversational passages. It seems an experimental book and thus lacks the reader interest of *The Good Master.*

The White Stag, appearing in 1937, is the legend of the separation of the Huns and Magyars and the picture of the mighty conqueror, Attila. It is a terrifying and potent story of a powerful man who was the synthesis of the intense and compelling forces of conquest of the times. Its epic quality, its poetic elements give Miss Seredy full opportunity for artistry in illustration. The nobility of the man, the unearthliness of the stag, and the magnificence of the horses make a book of undisputed beauty. Old Testament in substance, despite its paganism, it should be read with that in mind. It is a substantiation of faith, faith in a pagan god, the only god they knew.

There is more excitement, more story value in *The White Stag* than in any of Miss Seredy's books. It is a book for the older child or for the adult. It was awarded the Newbery medal for the most distinguished contribution to the literature for children during the year 1937. Whether or not one is in sympathy with the ideologies hidden in *The White Stag,* it is a distinguished book, a fascinating story.

Three years later in 1940, a sequel to *The Good Master* was published. *The Singing Tree* is the story of The Good Master's ranch during World War I, without the Good Master. It is a story of life and death and war. It is a story of individuals, of nationalities. It is an indictment of hatred, a plea for peace, a proclamation of faith in mankind.

In *The Singing Tree,* Jansci must take over the management of the ranch during his father's absence. With the help of Kate, his mother, and Russian prisoners of war, the ranch continues to be the good home it always has been—a place of refuge and security.

Here the writing surpasses the illustrations. Dialogue and descriptive passages are well balanced. The words come effortlessly, they read quickly and well. If one episode in the plot is contrived, if there is some obvious preaching, it is not enough to spoil a good story. The true picture of adult-child relationships, the delightful play between Gregori, one of the Russian prisoners, and Kate, the understanding of the relationships between peoples of different backgrounds, and above all, the shining faith in the dignity and worth of man and beast make *The Singing Tree* a book worthy of young people everywhere.

In this book, there are hints of other themes running through Miss Seredy's mind. Kate's father, Sandor Nagy, says, "Home as no place in the city can ever be. There you are walled in like a prisoner, and your closest neighbors are strangers. Each family seems to live in a little cell, not knowing or caring what goes on next door. Here miles of the plains separate us from the nearest neighbor and yet I feel

among friends." Her preference for the country life which was evident in *Listening* is here stated most definitely, for the reader feels that it is Miss Seredy speaking as well as Sandor Nagy. In *Listening* there was an indirect comparison of city and country life, but here the comparison is direct and emphatic in its conclusion. This alliance with country living was to form the theme of a story published in 1943, *The Open Gate.*

To go back two years to 1941, a year after the publishing of *The Singing Tree,* brings us to *A Tree for Peter*—the very titles bespeak the nature lover. Although *A Tree for Peter* is a nature lover's book in that it treats of people longing for grass and flowers, it is not that alone. It has been called a modern miracle story. It is another statement of faith—faith in people and in the abilities of people.

A Tree for Peter tells the story of a small boy, who, because of his great longing for beauty grows up to become a builder, a man who transforms the ugliness of slums to homes of dignity and beauty.

Peter, the small lame boy, who feels the need for trees and grass and beauty finds a helper. His friend is a tramp, a stranger. Perhaps the tramp who helped Peter transform Shantytown into Peter's Landing was known only to Peter. Perhaps he could not have been known to anyone but Peter, but Peter knew him, and knew that he would come with his tree. He could have been an ordinary tramp, he could have been The Stranger. He was Peter's faith.

A Tree for Peter is a different release for Miss Seredy's recurring themes—love for the country and absolute faith, the first, to her, a natural sequence to the second. The rotogravures are not as successful as her other illustrations, and Peter seems younger than his six years. The art work as a whole is uneven, the foreshortened figures and faces of some of the illustrations are not in keeping with the beautifully done picture of the tramp clasping small Peter to him.

This story, a little sentimental, has not the strength of most of her other books, nor is Peter, his mother, or Pat as convincing as Kate, Jancsi, or the Good Master. It is however, inspirational in its message, has an unusual theme, and, of course, has its place in our Christmas literature.

The Open Gate, published in 1943, is the fulfillment, and completion of a theory hinted at in *Listening,* stated in *The Singing Tree.* The superiority of a country life over a city life is the argument of the book. The plot, deriving its interest less from exciting incidents and more from a quiet suspense, concerns a city-bred family who find themselves, through the contriving of Gran, the owners of an old farm. Will Gran be able to convince Father that here on the farm is the best way of life for them?

Little by little, Gran converts each member of the family to her way of thinking—not that the children offered opposition. Gran, in her dissertation on the life of the farmer says, "But a farmer, if he is worthy of the name, does not expect a reward that he can put in the bank, his real reward comes from the same source as his strength; from within himself." So here is the final statement on the best way of life. To be a part of the country, to plough

the earth, to plant the seed, to harvest the crop, to tend the animals is to have the best of life—a dependence upon oneself and upon God, the real expression of faith.

Miss Seredy's great desire for understanding between peoples is apparent, too, in this her sixth book. When the family is listening over the car radio to the news of the Russian scorched earth policy, Father sighs, "Those people in Russia...Poland...China...Norway...oh, all of the little people with their beloved little farms and cherished little possessions, why THEY are the unsung heroes of wars." And then comes Mike, Slovak and victim of middle European troubles, who affirms, "Me, American." To Gran, "it was a hymn, a prayer, a salute to liberty... it was the most beautiful speech I ever heard in my life," concluding in her matter-of-fact way, "I am going to bed to think about all he said." An invitation to the family and to the reader to think about Mike.

Her reverence, too, becomes noticeable in *The Open Gate.* When Father and Mike are discussing using Mike's spring as water supply for Father's barn and Father suggests payment, Mike says, "Say t'ank you to He. He make water, He make friend in here." An then her point becomes very clear, "Say Mist' John, you city-man. You PAY for water in city ma'be? And for friend?" Father's reply is half-serious, half-laughing, "For water, always. For friend, well, most of the time."

Miss Seredy's regard for God's creatures, God's plants, and for God's gifts is evident in the scene when Mr. and Mrs. Van Keuran are told of the success of the boy Andy's sketches. Mrs. Van Keuran says, "It's the words you brought into this house... that Andy is blessed with a gift from God." Father's conclusion about the character of Mike sums up Miss Seredy's feeling about country living. "He is so close to Nature every moment that he has become a part of it. He is as honest as Nature itself, and as big and clean and as simple. He has grown, with roots deep in the soil, as naturally as that tree. He can't be wrong, he doesn't know HOW to be wrong—God bless him..."

This book, as do several others, ends with a religious ceremony—Christmas—the festival of birth and hope. "An open door, an open gate, an open heart—you never can tell what minute happiness walks in, if we only keep them open."

The Chestry Oak takes us across the ocean to Hungary and back again to America, symbolically perhaps. Miss Seredy's artistry is without doubt at its best in her native Hungarian background. The illustrations, wonderfully drawn and design perfect, are presented in an unusual manner, placed as a series in the front of the book. Here, they do lose some of their story value, but they also whet the appetite for the story to follow. This story, woven around the legend of the planting of the acorn from the Chestry family oak is an interesting one. It is the story of a father and son, princes of Hungary, who must deal with the Nazi usurpation of their home and their lands. Michael, prince of Chestry, nine years old, taught and cared for by his Nana, is ill prepared to withstand the part he must play in escape from the Nazis.

Despite the alarming and frightful

events, the story drags and we cannot quite believe in either Michael's complete naiveté, or the reappearance at the end of the story of Midnight, Michael's beloved horse.

Passages are beautifully written. After Michael's wild ride on Midnight, trying to make his escape, he has been hurled through space to awaken to "the world made of leaves, grass, and spots of sunlight [which] spun around him. . . fast. . . fast . . . faster." This sentence and the ensuing passage show a style developed to more maturity and strength than before. The words rush, they paint and color, they lack only restraint.

Three years later, restraint, beauty, workmanship, and reverence are discernible in Gypsy. Here Miss Seredy is literally in her element. This is not precisely a religious ceremony or theme, but yet an epic event—birth. In her element she is, too, in subject, —a cat. Gypsy is God's creature and man's companion. The warmth and sureness, the dignity and reality wipe clear any vestige of sentimentality. Here is no cuteness, no design, no sloppy depiction of adorable kittens. Here is a cat with all her feline cunning, her knowledge, and her desires.

In text and picture with all the artistry possible Miss Seredy has made a book, a translation of those thoughts well chosen, those words well spoken, the music well played that she heard in her father's house. May we say that it might be as it was with Gypsy, "Now, indeed, she knew all there was to know. She was content"?