

Eleanor Estes's Moffat Series.

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Stability and Change in the Family Saga: Eleanor Estes's Moffat Series

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Stability and Change in the Family Saga: Eleanor Estes's Moffat Series

David L. Russell (bio)

Eleanor Estes's endearing stories of the Moffat family of Cranbury, Connecticut, are much like a charming patchwork quilt, each of its various fabrics evoking in us some fond childhood memory—grandmother's paisley party dress, Uncle Arthur's silk robe, grandfather's nightshirt. As with such a patchwork quilt, the pleasures of Estes's works are derived from the evocative richness of their color, the multiplicity of their designs, and their familiar warmth, rather than from any artfully interwoven grand design. John Rowe Townsend calls Estes "a natural writer; not . . . a born novelist . . . Each [Moffat] book consists of a chain of episodes, linked unobtrusively by a theme which requires little development and imparts little tension . . ." (*A Sense of Story* 80). Caroline Hunt has also pointed out that the episodic structure may, in fact, be most aptly suited to the family story:

The family's saga is an ongoing chronicle and is punctuated as in real life, by the cycle of the seasons and by such rites of passage as a new school, a new baby, and so on . . . Events may be arranged so as to have a narrative structure that makes sense, but there is no hint that the family's *life* has a neat pattern.

(10)

But the real danger with which episodic chronicles flirt may be the failure to produce the necessary tension requisite of great art. Paul Murray Kendall observes, "All great art achieves much of its force from tension, the exciting state of balance or reconciliation achieved among opposing elements" (16). In literature, this tension is represented by the essentially random and chaotic nature of life juxtaposed against the demand for structure and pattern imposed by the work of art. Consequently, we fault clever and contrived plots, as well as those without any cohesive order or direction.

Estes's reputation as a writer may rely upon a relatively small handful of works, but that reputation is unquestionably solid and the popularity of the Moffats has endured for over forty years now. It is surprising that these books, having achieved the status of minor classics, have

attracted so little attention from literary critics. Among the reasons for this critical neglect we may suggest the lack of philosophical depth (although the works are psychologically genuine); the flirtation with a rose-colored view of reality (although Estes generally eschews sentimentality); and the apparent absence of a sophisticated literary design bringing unity to the books (although one of the great achievements of art is to make the work seem artless). Individually, the four books of the Moffat series (*The Moffats*, 1941, *The Middle Moffat*, 1942, *Rufus M*, 1943, and *The Moffat Museum*, 1983) suggest a rather casual fragmentation, but viewed together they present a more tightly-knit piece, and somehow the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The Moffat Museum, while lacking some of the magic of the earlier books, seems almost to have been written out of necessity, as if Estes felt a driving need to tie up loose ends, to put the edging on the quilt. Estes's pattern, however, was clearly established in the first book, *The Moffats*. In this book we are introduced to the four Moffat children—Sylvie, Joe, Jane and Rufus—and their widowed mother. They are a poor family, but "not poverty stricken," Mama assures them (*The Moffats* 190). And, as Virginia Wolf points out, "the family's lack of money provides what conflict there is in the novel" (148). They live a contented life in their yellow house on New Dollar Street.

One of Estes's greatest strengths is her ability to create a sense of place, deftly weaving colors, sounds, shapes, and smells, settling upon the most salient features:

New Dollar Street was shaped like a bow. That is it was not a straight street put out by a measuring rod. It had a gentle curve in it like one half of a parenthesis, the first half. Exactly halfway down New Dollar Street was the yellow house where the Moffats . . . lived . . . the yellow house was the best house to be living...

Stability and Change in the Family Saga: Eleanor Estes's Moffat Series

by David L. Ranch

Eleanor Estes's enduring series of the Moffat family of Chatsbury, Connecticut, are much like a charming patchwork quilt, each of its various fabrics evoking in us some fond childhood memory: your grandmother's paisley party dress, Uncle Arthur's silk robe, grandfather's呢喃呢語。As with such a patchwork quilt, the pleasures of Estes's books are derived from the evocative richness of their colors, the multiplicity of their designs, and their familiar warmth, rather than from one fully integrated grand design. John Howe Townsend calls Estes "a natural writer; not . . . a book novelist . . . Each [Moffat] book consists of a chain of episodes linked only minimally by a theme which requires little development and imparts little tension . . ." (A Sense of Story 80). Dorothy Hume has also pointed out that the episodic structure may, in fact, be more aptly suited to the family story:

The family's saga is an ongoing chiasmus and is punctuated at intervals by the cycle of the seasons and by such events of passage as a new school, a new baby, and so on. . . . Events may be arranged so as to have a narrative structure that makes sense, but there is no hint that the family's life has a neat pattern. (5)

But the real danger with such episodic chronicles lies may be the failure to realize the necessary tensions required of great art. David Mervin Kendall observes, "A great art achieves much of its force from tension, the exciting state of balance or reconciliation achieved among opposing elements" (16). In literature, this tension is represented by the essentially random and chaotic nature of life juxtaposed against the demands for structure and general imposed by the work of art. Consequently, we find clever and contrived plots, as well as those without any cohesive order or direction.

Estes's reputation as a writer may rely upon a relatively small handful of works, but the reputation is one unassailably solid and the popularity of the Moffats has endured for over forty years now. It is surprising that these books, having achieved the status of "classic" classics, have managed to hide subtleties from literary critics. Among the reasons for this critical neglect we may suggest the lack of philosophical depth (although the works are psychoanalytically penetrable), the fluency with a two-colored view of reality (through Estes generally *reduces*, sometimes *simplifies*), and the apparent absence of sophisticated literary design, bringing unity to the books (although one of the great achievements of art is to make the work seem artless). Individually, the four books of the Moffat series (*The Moffats*, 1941, *The Middle Moffat*, 1942, *Ruth M.*, 1943, and *The Moffat Mother*, 1983) suggest a rather curious fragmentation. But viewed together they present a more tightly-knit piece, and somehow the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Moffat Mosaic, while lacking some of the magic of the surface books, seems almost to have been written out of necessity, as if Estes felt a driving need to tie up loose ends, to put the edges on the quilt. Estes's pattern, however, was clearly established in the first book, *The Moffats*. In this book we are introduced to the four Moffat children—Sophie, Joe, Jane and Julius—and their widowed mother. They are a poor family, but "not poverty-stricken." Mama assures them, (*The Moffats* 109). And as Virginia Wolf points out, "the family's lack of money

provides what conflict there is in the novel" (148). They live a contented life in their yellow house on New Dollar Street.

One of Estes's greatest strengths is her ability to create a sense of place, usually using colors, sounds, shapes, and smells, setting upon the most salient features:

New Dollar Street was shaped like a bow. Here is it was not a straight street put out by a surveyor; and it had a gentle curve in it. Two one-half of a pace apart, the first half of Newy Hallway down New Dollar Street was the yellow house where the Moffats . . . lived . . . the yellow house used to be living in it the whole block because it was the only house from which you could see all the way to both corners. (*The Moffats* 5)

The language evokes security—the gentle curving street reaching to embrace the warm yellow house set contentedly in the middle, from where one may safely survey the happenings in the outside world. At one end of the street are the trolley tracks and the way to the railroad; at the other end are the railroad tracks and the way to the wide world. However, we quickly learn that this comfortable and apparently secure world is, in fact, illusory, for in the first chapter we learn that the owner of the yellow house (i.e., the Moffats) has put it up for sale. The sale of the house would force the Moffats to move, and it is this theme of "life-imperiling change" that provides the unifying focus for the entire book.

Typically of children, the four Moffat siblings react with impatience to the imminent move—a reaction resulting partly from the natural need for security that all children have and partly from the natural fear of the unknown. We might also acknowledge that the Moffat children may have more than the normal need for security since they have lost their father—an event only briefly alluded to in the entire series, but nevertheless less very real. The image of the family as it finally convened through the eyes of the children (and it is through their eyes that the events of the story are presented) is very much like that of Wordsworth's child in "We Are Seven": the family is a constant and the family unit as they know it always has been and always will be. But Estes knows better, and the need for the family's acceptability becomes an important theme as this book—and indeed the whole series—progresses.

At the center, the Moffat children see themselves as the owners of everything—all roads converge on Chatsbury and lead to New Dollar Street, and the simple events of their lives take on heroic proportions. Rufus, the youngest, for example, feels personally responsible for the trolley. Hugie Pudge on the last day of school, June, in the Middle Moffat, imagines himself to be personally responsible for seeing to it that the oldest inhabitant makes it to his or her birthday. That they never feel insignificant or unimportant is a testimony to their mother's loving care. They do, however, possess the uneasy self-consciousness of children, personified near the eyes of the world as upon them, and events in their lives become history's occasions.

Estes's style further conveys the childlike point of view in its deceptively naive simplicity and its free, almost jubilant, disregard for exposition. The caught entitled, "Share and Share Alike," in *The Middle Moffat*, opens with Joe and Rufus playing on stilts and June making a cutting dash beneath the greater's nose:



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