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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 night shirt. 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. Rowland

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 parsley-patty crusts, Uncle Arthur's sickle, grandfather's nightgown. 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 family warmth, rather than from any carefully constructed 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 requires little revision. . . ." (A Scene of Story 80). Constance Hunt 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 chronicle and is punctuated in real life 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 limit that the family's life has a neat pattern. . . . (9)

But the real danger with such episodic chronicles may be the failure to maintain 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 order and for structure and control imposed by the work of art. Consequently, we find clever and sophisticated plots, as well as those without any obvious order or direction.

Estes's reputation as a writer may rely upon a relatively small handful of works, but this reputation is not unreasonably 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 critical attention. 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 *is* humane and sensitive), 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, *Radio M*, 1943, and *The Moffat Museum*, 1983) suggest a rather casual, fragmentary, but viewed together they present a more tightly knit piece, and somehow the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

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The long, curving street reaching to embrace the warm yellow house set colorably 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 market; 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, insecure, for in the first chapter we learn that the owner of the yellow house (to the Moffats are tenants) has put it up for sale. The sale of the house would force the Moffats to move, and it is the threat of this impending change that provides the weaving focus for the entire book.

Typical of children, the four Moffat siblings react with repulsion to this inevitable attack—a reaction stemming partly from the natural need for security that all children have and partly from the natural fear of the unknown. (We must 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 never in less very real.) The image of the family, at first only covered through the eyes of the children (and it is through their eyes that the events of the novel are revealed), is very much the first of Wordsworth's child as "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 adaptability becomes an important theme as it develops and indeed the whole series—progresses.

At the center, the Moffat children see themselves at the center of everything—all roads converge on Cranbury 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 innkeeper Hughie Podge on the last day of school. Joe, in *The Middle Moffat*, inspires himself to be personally responsible for seeing to it that the oldest inhabitant makes it to his one hundredth 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, persuaded that the eyes of the world are upon them, and events in their lives become historic occasions.

Estes's style further conveys the childlike point of view in its deceptively naive simplicity and its free, almost rushing, chapter organization. The chapter entitled, "Share and Share Alike," in *The Middle Moffat*, opens with Joe and Rufus playing on the ice and Jane making a scarf that brings the governess home



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