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:
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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...

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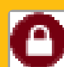 Access options available:

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