Elizabeth Jennings

What Katy Did

What Katy Did was the second of more than twenty books written for children by "Susan Coolidge," the pen name of Sarah Chauncey Woolsey (1835-1905). Early in Sarah’s childhood, the Woolseys moved from Cleveland to Connecticut, where she and her younger sisters and brother grew up. They and her relations provided the models for the fictional Carr family of the Katy novels, Sarah having much in common with Katy herself. What Katy Did was published by Roberts Brothers of Boston in 1872 and is often compared with Louisa M. Alcott’s Little Women, published very successfully by the same firm only four years earlier. Katy Carr was as immediately popular as Jo March, who may well have created an eager market for her.

Like Little Women, What Katy Did appeared in London within a year or so, and its American setting seems to have been no obstacle to British readers. Four more books about the Carr family followed, including What Katy Did at School (1874) and What

Elizabeth Jennings was born in 1926 in Boston, Lincolnshire, but since the age of six has lived mostly in Oxford. She was educated at Oxford High School and read English Language and Literature at Oxford University. Her first book, Poems (1953), won an Arts Council Award, and A Way of Looking brought her the Somerset Maugham Award in 1956. The latter enabled her to make the first of many visits to Rome, a city which has had a formative influence on her work. She has published fifteen volumes of poetry as well as Collected Poems (1986), which was awarded the W. H. Smith Award in 1987. She has also written two books of poems for children (now out of print) called The Secret Brother and After the Ark, has translated Michelangelo’s Sonnets (reissued in 1988), has edited four anthologies, and has written four critical books, including Every Changing Shape and Robert Frost. Over the years she has received five Arts Council prizes or bursaries. CLE invited her to revisit a favorite book of her childhood.
Katy Did Next (1886). What Katy Did has retained its appeal for over a century, although its tale of personal redemption through suffering in the "School of Pain" seems so firmly rooted in the Victorian era.

A few years ago I decided that I would take a look at one of Angela Brazil's school stories; I had enjoyed them avidly in the past. Alas, when I started reading the story in question I found it boring and not well written. It was a great disappointment. On the other hand, there are books I read in childhood, such as Stalky and Co. and almost any Beatrix Potter tale, which I still read with huge enjoyment. When I came to read What Katy Did for the first time since my childhood, I felt a certain apprehension. Was I going to be disappointed again? No, I was not. In fact the quality of Susan Coolidge's writing was the first thing which struck me; her style is direct and vivid and inspires trust. She also writes in a way that draws you into her confidence, gives you absolute faith in her.

This last gift obviously worked on me in childhood, though of course I could never have found words for it. As for the literary merit of the author, I was clearly quite ignorant of it. I have therefore come to the conclusion that in childhood we can be pleased almost equally by good and bad writing.

When I was about twelve—and a young, tomboyish twelve at that—I loved the boys' school stories in The Gem and Magnet magazines (collectors' pieces now). The stories about Billy Bunter, Harry Wharton, and the rest captivated me totally. I think that the feel of the actual, the smack of realism are what draw and keep our attention in childhood. And these are, of course, literary merits. At about twelve I also read Pride and Prejudice with enormous pleasure. Jane Austen takes you straight into her world; there are no long ramblings about the past as with Walter Scott's novels. Of course, I did not appreciate the subtle depiction of character and human behavior or the perceptive portrayal of snobbery, but I did see the humor in Collins's ineffable letter and greatly enjoyed the attraction of the arrogant D'Arcy.

Children do not care for the abstract; their five senses are quick and almost un tarnished and they respond eagerly to the tangible. In What Katy Did, Susan Coolidge writes deftly and vividly. She starts her story like this:

I was sitting in the meadows one day not long ago, at a place where there was a small brook. It was a hot day. The sky was very blue, and white clouds, like great swans, went floating over it to and fro.