



Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Little Princess* recommended by Phyllis Theroux

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, children's author Phyllis Theroux (*Serestina Under the Circumstances*, Greenwillow Press) has selected Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Little Princess*. It is our hope this series will encourage parents and children will read and discuss books with unforgettable characters, like *The Little Princess*.

The other day a writer friend e-mailed me a short story that has all the earmarks of a children's best-seller: a little girl gets separated from her mother and father, winds up in an orphanage run by a cruel woman who treats all the orphans like dirt, finally escapes, gets married, has a daughter of her own, and in the last few paragraphs (the plot moves like the wind) is joyfully reunited with her grieving parents who had given up all hope of seeing their child again.

The author is my friend's nine-year-old daughter who thinks nothing of sitting down and rapping out another novella whenever it is too cold to go outside and play. She is clearly following in the footsteps of her father and some of the most successful children's writers of their time. Johanna Spyri (*Heidi*), Kate Douglas Wiggin (*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*) and Anne Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*) all wrote about orphans who had nothing but pluck, perseverance and a passionate sense of moral purpose to get them through.

But the queen of the orphan genre was Frances Hodgson Burnett, who specialized in stories about aristocratic children who had fallen upon hard times. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Secret Garden* are both classics. But to my mind her finest book was *The Little Princess*, which is, not only a great story but gave me a great role model for my life.

The heroine of *The Little Princess* is Sarah Crewe, a rich but philosophical little girl whose mother is dead and whose doting father sends her to a posh London boarding school so he can go off to the diamond mines to become even richer. Then he dies. The headmistress, a cruel and calculating woman, lets Sarah stay on as an unpaid tutor and servant girl who must live in an unheated, rat-infested attic.

A lesser character would quickly crumble into a heap of bitterness. But Sarah Crewe is made of stronger stuff. "Soldiers don't complain," she would say between her small, shut teeth. "I am not going to do it. I will pretend this is part of a war."

Pretending—that she is a prisoner in the Bastille, that her garret room is really a warm and cozy retreat, that the view from her attic window feeds her soul in compensation for the fact that she never has enough to eat—is what enables Sarah Crewe to endure. Yet she never becomes too good to be true, which is why, 40 years after I first read the book, it continues to hold up, as literature and life.

In the most well-known movie version of "The Little Princess," Shirley Temple plays Sarah Crewe, which is a mis-casting. The real "Little Princess" is not a sugary little girl with curls and dimples, but a thin, solemn-eyed child who tries to think things through. When she

realizes that she had wrongly assumed her classmate Ermengarde wouldn't like her, now that she is poor, she is hard on herself. "Now that trials have come," she tells Ermengarde, "they have shown that I am not a nice child. Perhaps that's what they are for."

For young readers, *The Little Princess* is a wonderful guide. Generous when rich, philo-

sophical when poor, neither proud nor toadyish and always ready to break apart her last hot-cross bun and share it with whomever, Sarah Crewe is a sort of classy Little Match Girl who gets rewarded in the end. Ms. Burnett knew her audience. If my writer friend's daughter is any example, it hasn't changed.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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