



Obituary: Eva Ibbotson

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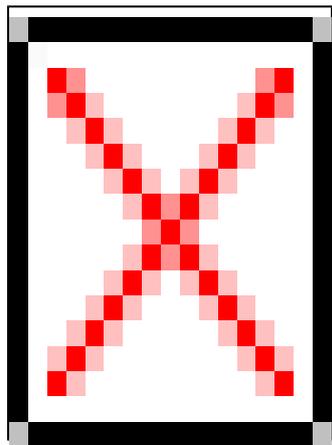
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Eva Ibbotson: 1925 - 2010



21 January 1925 ? 20 October 2010

Eva Ibbotson, born Maria Charlotte Michelle Wiesner in Vienna, has died at her home in Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne, aged 85. She was the beloved author of a diverse and increasingly rich body of fiction that included madcap magical ?romps? such as **Which Witch?** and **The Secret of Platform 13**, ?old fashioned? historical adventures like **Journey to the River Sea** and adult historical romances, recently reissued for Young Adults.

Eva?s career as a novelist began late with the publication of **The Great Ghost Rescue** (1975) by Macmillan as she approached fifty, *but*, as her agents Curtis Brown wrote: ?Once she got going, she never stopped.? Recognition of her singular gift for antic invention, satire, comic pacing and making mayhem with magic, fairy tales and folklore came early with the shortlisting of **Which Witch?** (1979) for the Carnegie Medal. Just this year, her latest novel **The Ogre of Oglefort** was shortlisted for both the Guardian Children?s Fiction Prize and the Roald Dahl Funny Prize. Eva?s skill as storyteller in the mode of her beloved Frances Hodgson Burnett saw her win the Smarties Book Prize Gold Award for **Journey to the River Sea** (2001) which was also runner-up for the Whitbread Children?s Book of the Year and the Guardian Fiction Award, and was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal (2002) as was her later novel **The Star of Kazan** (2005). **Magic Flutes** (1983), reissued for young adults as **The Reluctant Heiress** (2009), received the Best Romantic Novel of the Year Award from the Romantic Novelists Association.

Born in Austria, Eva grew up in a ?Bohemian, left wing family... at the centre of the Viennese intelligensia?. Her parents ? the scientist Bernard Wiesner who was a pioneer of human artificial insemination and the novelist and playwright Anna Gmeyner ? separated early and Eva?s childhood in Vienna and from 1933 on, as an emigre from the Nazis in England, was spent being shuttled between their homes and those of her older relatives on the continent and later between Edinburgh and London. It was a time when she felt ?displaced... lost... always looking for a home?. She found a ?home? of sorts at Dartington Hall, the newly founded progressive school, which she attended for eight years ? a place filled, she recalled, with a heady mix of ?idealism, idiocy, wealth and amazing good teaching?.

After taking a degree in physiology at London University, she met her husband, Alan Ibbotson, an ecologist, at Cambridge University where she was engaged in post-graduate research. Marriage brought Eva the security and home that she had always longed for and with it, a new understanding of the need to live in harmony with the natural world. As her daughter and three sons grew up, and she and Alan settled in Newcastle where Alan had taken a job at the university in 1960, she turned to writing and discovered that she had a talent for composing short stories for women's magazines.

The creative roots of Eva's subsequent works – however light, humorous or fantastical they might be – lie in her past and a delightfully wild imagination. Her characters – be they dispossessed ghosts, worried witches, or orphaned, mistreated or unappreciated children – long, as she did, to find a home and an adult who will recognize their worth and uniqueness. Her stories, like fairy tales or the books of Frances Hodgson Burnett and L M Montgomery that sustained her both as a child and an adult, – must have happy endings?. – I can't imagine, she said, – what you'd have to pay me to write an unhappy ending. I just want to reassure people and reassure myself. I want my characters to find love and safety.?

Her contemporary fantasies with their supernatural casts – often told in an irreverent, tongue-in-cheek voice – examine serious issues beneath their humorous surfaces. A respect for difference is all pervasive as is a concern for the natural world and the environment. In **The Great Ghost Rescue**, for instance, a national ghost refuge must be found for spirits whose haunts have been reclaimed and gentrified, a theme pursued in **The Haunting of Hiram C Hopgood** (1987) and **Dial a Ghost** (1996), while in **Monster Mission** (1999), an unusual rescue operation is mounted to save mermaids and other sea creatures from having their home turned into a theme park. That love for the natural world in all its forms which Eva shared with her husband is most evident in the prize-winning **Journey to the River Sea**, written after Alan's sudden death in 1998. Set deep in the jungles near the fabled city of Manaus on the Amazon River in Brazil, this – old fashioned, homespun, Cinderella-like adventure – a new departure for Eva – follows orphaned Maia to a new home near Manaus and an exotic, sometimes sinister, cast whose fates are determined by their response to the jungle.

If Eva espoused living in harmony with nature, she was quick to poke fun at outrageous behaviour. Characters – often villains – who are greedy, snobs, pompous or who misuse and abuse power come to suitably sticky ends. Beauty competitions, fraudsters, even politicians are in her line of fire: Margaret Thatcher makes a cameo appearance in **The Secret of Platform 13** as a harpy with a handbag. Stories, Eva thought, should be reassuring entertainments – filled with humour and wit.

Eva was modest, sometimes self-deprecating, about her craft. She once told me: – If there was an epitaph on my tombstone, it would say: She took trouble. Not: She was a great writer but: She took trouble? with her writing. She loved the – sheer beauty? of the English language – first discovered in the Hampstead Library as a child where books became her way into England and Englishness. She wrote with a sense of – being chosen by the words rather than choosing the words? herself. In 2004, she placed many of her manuscripts and typescripts in the newly developing collection of the – work-in-progress? of British children's authors and illustrators held at Seven Stories in Newcastle, the first museum in the UK to collect and celebrate this nationally important art form.

Eva was surprised when **Journey to the River Sea** brought her widespread acclaim and she began to be seen as a – national treasure?. She was equally surprised when the Harry Potter phenomenon propelled her books onto the best seller lists in America and last spring, into the White House when President Barack Obama bought **Journey to the River Sea** for his daughters. Despite suffering from the debilitating auto-immune disease lupus, Eva wrote and was brimful of new ideas for books until the day before she died – leaving readers with one more story to discover – **One Dog and His Boy** – to be published by her great friend and editor Marion Lloyd at Scholastic in 2011.

For a writer who continually explored our need for home, her books have found her a place in homes across Europe, Asia and the English speaking world.

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