



# Classics in Short No.139 What Katy Did

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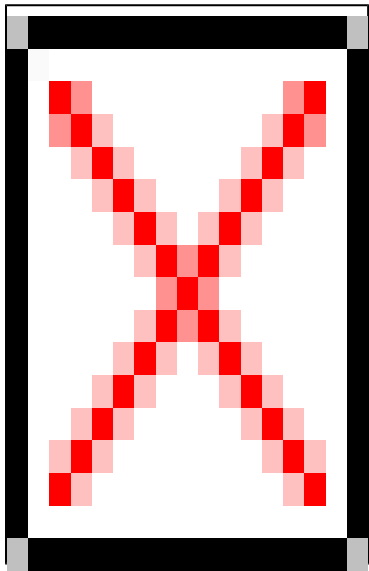
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What on earth did Katy do to become a classic?

*Brian Alderson wonders what on earth did Katy do to become a classic?*



## Little Women redivivus

is unsurprising. Every generation presents those young ladies for itself (the current manifestation is about the seventh movie) and praise remains undiminished. It would though be interesting ? but impossible -- to know what the tally of female to male readers might be of this Weltbuch since its publication in two parts in 1868-9. (And how many commentaries do you think have been written on it by masculine critics?)

## Less puzzlement

need arise over its immediate successor which came from another authoress known to Alcott's Boston editor, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, who prevailed upon her to produce for them another family story for girls so as to cash in on the unexpected runaway success of Miss Alcott's book. Thus, in 1872, drawing upon her own childhood memories, Sarah Chauncey Woolsey turned out for him **What Katy Did**, writing under the name of Susan Coolidge.

## In this case however,

we have to do with six siblings, almost all younger than the March girls and with the focus on Coolidge's female characters further sharpened by their centrality, the two small boys of the family being mere cyphers. (This would later probably have affected the character of its readership. I doubt if any boy reader worth his salt would have looked at more than three pages of the book.) The ?Jo? of the story is, of course, twelve-year old Katy, and she is paired with her

younger sister Clover and partnered throughout by the neighbour's daughter, Cecy. Next one down in the pecking order is the interesting eight-year old Elsie, about whose character Miss Coolidge does not seem able to make up her mind. She is introduced as 'the odd one' between her adventurous elders and the 'babies' but our author is too kind-hearted to allow her to be properly scorned so that her own doings may claim a minor denouement of their own. In any case, we have been told at the start that our subject is first and foremost what Katy gets up to.

### **These siblings**

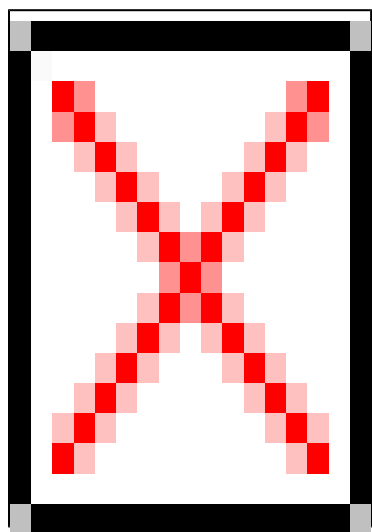
are the children of Dr Carr and, since their mother has died some years before, they are being brought up by his sister, Aunt Izzie, 'sharp-faced and thin... and very neat and particular about everything' ? temperamentally at odds with the children but by no means dragonish. For the first half of the book she serves as a counterweight to the varied exploits of Katy which, for readers of today, are pretty lacklustre and require the dramatic turning-point at the centre of the story to inject a larger purpose to the whole affair. Disobeying orders, Katy takes herself off to a newly installed swing which is awaiting the replacement of a cracked staple before use and in the course of her energetic activities on it, 'like flying she thought', she comes to grief and injures her back.

### **The four years**

that follow this calamity see the conversion of our mildly tearaway Katy into a bed-bound responsible mortal. In this she is much helped by Cousin Helen, whose own suffering after a near fatal accident provides occasion for a disquisition on the Lessons of Pain (no Red Room here) and the momentary dream intrusion of the Teacher who will always be on hand if the lessons seem too hard. The patience that is demanded forms a basis for allowing Katy to grow into a carer for her family after the sudden death of Aunt Izzie. At first she practises housekeeping from her bedroom until, with her injury slowly healing, she graduates to a wheelchair and then to a final recovery as the 'Heart of the House'.

### **Such was the immediately successful reception**

of **What Katy Did** that, within a year, Coolidge published a sequel, **What Katy Did at School**, which was, in turn followed by what she did next when she is taken on a trip to Europe (possibly modelled on **Little Women: Part Two**). The three books were followed by excursions into later adult events in **Clover** and **In the High Valley**, but the original trilogy has taken unto itself the status of a unit and has retained a marketing appeal carrying its very dated substance down to the present time in various 'classic' series. (At least thirty editions have come out since the war, with the books seemingly better known in Britain than in the United States).



### **An instance of its regular reprinting**

Can be found in the publication in 2015 of a Puffin edition of **What Katy Did** with an Afterword by Jacqueline Wilson in which she recorded her own pleasure in reading the book as a child - 'such fun and very easy to read' ? but confessed to what is a very understandable unease about what looks like Katy's rather miraculous recovery from her severe but

unspecified injury. (Come to think of it, the injured Clara in **Heidi** enjoys a similar recovery). As a result, Jacqueline Wilson ? master storyteller that she is ? conceived for the idea of writing a modern Katy, mirroring many of the events and incidents of the original (and naturally illustrated by chapter headpieces by Nick Sharratt). We are now in a land of t-shirts and mobile phones and people-carriers and when our modern Katy defies her stepmother, Izzie, by going off and making a rope swing in a tree her fall results in authentic paraplegia that will last for good and all. Distant Miss Woolsey from nineteenth century Ohio may loom in the background but Wilson doesn't just give us a drastic clinical truth that she avoided but a recreated story for everyone.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children?s Books History Society** and a former Children?s Books Editor for **The Times**. His latest book [The 100 Best Children?s Books](#) [3], Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk, is out now.

**What Katy Did** is published by Puffin Classics, 978-0241372326, £6.99 pbk. [Katy](#) [4] by Jacqueline Wilson, illustrated by Nick Sharratt, is published by Puffin, 978-0141353982, £6.99 pbk.

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