

# The Chestry Oak Short Guide

## The Chestry Oak by Kate Seredy

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## Overview

The Chestry Oak is an inspiring story about Michael, a young Hungarian prince who begins a new life in America after his family is killed during World War II. Like Seredy's other novels, it has a strong anti-war theme, both in the depiction of the cruelty, upheaval, and destruction caused by the Nazi occupation of Chestry Valley and in the implied message that people of good will can get along regardless of ethnic or cultural differences.

In a sense, the story is a parable about the hopes and dreams of all European immigrants who viewed America as a "land of opportunity," where people could make a new start. Through all the changes in his life, Michael carries the symbol of hope, an acorn from the great Chestry oak in his native valley, which he hopes to plant in American soil.

## About the Author

Kate Seredy was born in Budapest, Hungary, on November 10, 1899, to Louis Peter Seredy, a gifted teacher, and Anna Irany Seredy. After high school, Seredy attended the Academy of Arts in Budapest for six years, where she received her art teacher's diploma. She served as a nurse in World War I and subsequently took summer courses in Paris, Rome, and Berlin from 1918 to 1922.

Seredy immigrated to the United States in 1922 and worked as an artist, designing book covers and greeting cards and illustrating textbooks and children's literature. A chance suggestion from editor May Massee of Viking Press that Seredy try to write a story about her childhood in Hungary started her career as a writer in her newly acquired English language. Her first book, *The Good Master*, was written with great effort in longhand but was promptly accepted for publication. Intensely pictorial, her novels begin with a series

of visual images around which a narrative develops. Many of her later books were based on childhood stories her father told her or on a trip she and her father took to the Hungarian plains when she was nine. Seredy illustrated her own books, and she was highly respected as both an author and an illustrator, winning the Newbery Medal in 1938 for *The White Stag*. Her last book, *Lazy Tinka*, was published in 1962.

Although she briefly attempted to run a children's bookstore in 1933 and later tried to manage a one-hundred-acre farm in New York, Seredy eventually devoted herself full-time to writing and illustrating children's and young adult books. She died in Middletown, New York, on March 7, 1975.

# Setting

The story begins in the Chestry Valley of Hungary in 1936, when a prince is born to the old and illustrious Chestry family, princes of the valley since the time of King Stephen, the first monarch of Hungary. Nana, a peasant girl from the village, cares for the young Prince Michael. The outbreak of World War II disrupts Michael's idyllic life when Nazis occupy the castle. In 1944 an Allied air raid destroys the castle, and Michael, ill and suffering from amnesia, becomes a refugee in a hospital for war orphans.

Tom Brown, a friendly American soldier, finds him there and arranges for Michael to come to America, where he settles on the Browns' dairy farm in upstate New York. The second part of the story describes Michael's gradual adjustment to American life after the Browns adopt him.



## Social Sensitivity

Seredy presents her anti-war theme by relating some of World War II's tragic consequences, but she never resorts to depicting graphic violence to make her point. She shows how the war affects Michael on a very personal level, and she shows him dealing with an unfortunate situation in a positive way.

Like Hungary itself, Michael becomes an unwitting victim of war, and of Nazi aggression and cruelty. Seredy treats the psychology of enemy occupation with great depth and subtlety. Her purpose is obviously to point out that Hungary was not simply a Nazi puppet state during World War II, but an occupied country whose people managed as well as they could to harass and defeat the enemy from within. Seredy tries to show how difficult and dangerous it was for Michael's father, the Prince, to serve as a double agent, pretending to collaborate with the Nazis in order to spy upon them and send military information to the Allies. His role is made more difficult by the resentment of the villagers, who assume that their prince has become a traitor. These subtleties of war may be difficult for younger readers to follow without some guidance from teachers or parents.



# Literary Qualities

Seredy's account of a young Hungarian immigrant coming to America to begin a new life reflects her own life. Her close identification with Michael lends a sentimentality to the story's character and plot development. At times, the book reads more like a fairy tale than a realistic account of the immigrant experience. For example, the account of Michael's seventh birthday becomes a "prince and pauper" tale when he pretends for one day to be just an ordinary boy and rides with the gypsy boy Andris.

But the Hungary that Michael lives in before the Nazi occupation is a magical world that cannot survive the brutality of war. By establishing Michael's world as idyllic in the early part of the novel, Seredy sets up the contrast of the subsequent chapters, thus intensifying the evil of the Nazis and the brutality of the war that destroys Michael's family and home. Seredy's use of specific dates places the novel in the realistic setting of World War II, as does her naming of Nazi officials such as Marshall Goering, who was sentenced to death for war crimes at the Nuremberg trials in 1946, just two years before the publication of Seredy's novel. Despite its apparent romanticism, the novel probably seemed immediate and real to readers of the time.

While both the Nazi and American characters seem stereotyped, Seredy infuses the Hungarian characters, particularly Michael and Nana, with depth of feeling and insight. Similarly, although the conclusion of the novel, set in an idealized rustic America, seems flat and predictable, Seredy's strong anti-war theme saves the story from utter sentimentality.

Seredy uses the stallion Midnight as an important literary device in the story. Midnight serves as a representation of Michael's aristocratic legacy; as a challenge for him to master as a rider; as the source of both his escape from the castle and his injury; and as the symbol of reunion with the past when Michael and Tom discover Midnight among a group of European horses at a U.S. Army cavalry display in upstate New York. The stallion is to be taken out West and released on the range, and Michael's farewell ride symbolizes his reconciliation with his past and his acceptance of his new, liberated life in America.

# Themes and Characters

The Chestry Oak features a contrasting set of Hungarian and American characters. Prince Michael, a bright and precocious six-year-old early in the story, shows a mixture of assertiveness and dependence typical of his age, enjoying the protectiveness of his nurse while trying to be more independent. He is eager to show his father how well he can handle a horse, but his father, the old Prince, is preoccupied with the difficult affairs of war and cannot give his son the time and attention he needs.

Young Michael is very proud of his Chestry heritage, and on his seventh birthday, he plans to follow the family tradition of planting an acorn alongside the venerable old Chestry oak on his family's estate.

Unfortunately, the Nazi occupation of the castle complicates Michael's life. His English tutor and French governess are forced to flee, to be replaced by a cold, harsh Nazi professor. Nana, his nurse, tries to shield Michael from the events around him, which he cannot fully understand. A remarkably kind and vital character, she embodies the warmth and decency of the Hungarian people.

During the feast at Chestry Castle after Michael's birth, she is chosen to be his nurse for her boldness in speaking out.

Nana replaces the absent, sickly mother who plays no role in Michael's life. Later, when the people of the village accuse the old Prince of being a Nazi collaborator, she alone understands his difficult role as a double agent working to protect the people of the valley. When the Prince calls down the air strike that will destroy the castle and the Nazis, she helps arrange for young Michael's escape. As one of the survivors, Nana embodies the strength and determination of the Hungarian people to survive the horrors of war and Nazi occupation.

Other Hungarian characters play minor roles in the narrative. The old and trusted household servant, Antal, serves as a counterpart for Nana's patriotism.

When, on his seventh birthday, Michael asks to be treated as "Miki," an ordinary boy, and to be allowed a day of freedom from his rigid daily schedule of studies and responsibilities, he meets Andris, a gypsy boy of his own age. Andris's begrimed clothes and carefree independence contrast the aristocratic young prince's neat appearance and dependence on his nurse. Andris and Michael spend one carefree day together as the young prince rides out through the valley on the black stallion Midnight. This day proves to be important, in retrospect, as the calm before the storm.

Various Nazi officials soon occupy the castle, and Michael's father must pretend to cooperate with them. The various Nazi functionaries, including Marshall Goering, are mostly treated as enemy stereotypes. They serve as reminders of the horrors of World War II, from which Michael and other refugees must flee.





On the evening that Chestry Castle is bombed, Michael flees on the black stallion toward a prearranged rendezvous with Nana, but unfortunately he is thrown from his horse and injured. An old charcoal collector finds the young prince and nurses him back to health.

Afterwards Michael is brought to a hospital for war orphans where he lives for six months. No one believes his real identity, and the doctors and nurses assume that he has suffered a head injury that has caused amnesia.

Tom Brown, a young American soldier, finds Michael in the Budapest hospital and arranges for him to come to America. The last five chapters of the book deal with Michael's adjustment to his new home on a dairy farm in upstate New York, where he is adopted by the Browns. Mr. Brown is a kind and likable figure, an American equivalent of Marton Nagy in Seredy's *The Good Master*, Mrs. Brown is warm and motherly but otherwise nondescript; and the two boys, Charlie and Bruce, are likewise undistinguished except for Charlie's interest in farming and Bruce's interest in horses.

At its most basic level, Seredy's novel depicts how World War II destroyed traditional Hungarian society and caused great suffering for thousands of children like Michael, torn from their families and forced to begin new lives in strange countries. Still, the novel conveys a sense that people of decency and good will are united in spirit, no matter what their cultural differences or language.

Michael comes to America from a wartorn and ravaged country, determined to fit into his new home and to repay Tom Brown's kindness. Ultimately, with the Browns, he finds a new valley, as good in its own way as his native Chestry Valley, in which to begin a new life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Michael is a prince of the old and distinguished Chestry family, yet at times he wishes he were just plain "Miki." Why is it sometimes difficult for him to grow up as a prince?
2. Why is it difficult for Michael to understand his father's role under the Nazi occupation? How does Nana shield him from the war?
3. Why is it so important for Michael to save one acorn from the Chestry Valley? How does he preserve the acorn before it can be replanted in America?
4. What is the significance of the young gypsy boy Andris? How does Michael's outing with Andris foreshadow his life in America?
5. What happens to Michael after he is thrown from Midnight during his escape from Chestry Valley? What happens to his father? To the castle? Why?
6. How does Tom discover Michael?

Why does Tom decide to help the boy?

7. What difficulties does Michael face in adjusting to life with his new foster family in America? How does he overcome these difficulties?
8. Why is Midnight so important as a unifying symbol in the story?
9. Why are Michael's new foster brothers, Charlie and Bruce, suspicious of him at first? How does Michael win them over?
10. Why does Nana, Michael's nurse, play such an important role in the story?  
In what ways are she and Mrs. Brown alike?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find some information in an encyclopedia about Hungary's role in World War II. What misconceptions is Kate Seredy trying to correct in her story?
2. What physical and emotional problems did war refugee children face after World War II? Is Michael's story typical of these displaced children?
3. Look at a map of Europe and find out where Hungary is and what nations surround it. Where are the Soviet Union and Germany? Why was it difficult for Hungary to remain neutral in the war?
4. Find some information about how children from other countries are adopted by American families. Why did the Browns want to adopt Michael?
5. What happened to Hungary after World War II? How did its government change? Why was it better for Michael to come to America than to stay in the hospital in Hungary?
6. Research the historical accounts of immigrants in America after World War II. Were they welcomed? If Seredy romanticizes the immigrant experience in America, why does she do so?



## For Further Reference

Cech, John, ed. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 22. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Contains a fine introductory article on Seredy's life and career, with summaries of her major works.

Kassen, Aileen. "Kate Seredy: A Person Worth Knowing." *Elementary English* 45 (March 1968): 303-315. This article provides useful background information about the author for teachers and students.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1983. Contains a short biographical sketch and bibliographical list of Seredy's works.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Howard Haycraft, eds. *The Junior Book of Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951. Provides excerpts from an interview with Seredy in which she talks about how she came to America and began as a children's writer.

Senick, Gerald J., and Melissa R. Hug, eds. *Children's Literature Review*. Vol.

10. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Contains a long article with condensed reviews and critical commentary on each of Seredy's works.

## Related Titles

The Chestry Oak is one of several stories by Kate Seredy involving characters and settings from her native Hungary. The Good Master, perhaps her finest book, tells the story of Kate, a spoiled city girl from Budapest who goes to visit her uncle Marton Nagy and his family on the Hungarian plains, where she is transformed by the wholesomeness of farming life. The Singing Tree continues the story of the Nagy family during World War I, when Uncle Marton is called into the army and his son Sandor must learn how to run the farm in his father's absence. The White Stag retells the myth of the original settlement of the Danube Plain by the Magyar tribes who came out of Asia and wandered across the Carpathian Mountains into Europe. Seredy's books set in America lack the strongly conceived characters, themes, and settings that characterize her Hungarian stories.



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