

The Cuckoo Sister Short Guide

The Cuckoo Sister by Vivien Alcock

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Overview

The Cuckoo Sister treats questions of personal growth, as well as identity and isolation in a family first torn by loss, then shocked by a possible restoration. Preteen Kate Seton is faced with the sudden addition to her affluent household of a lower-class girl named Rosie, who brings with her a mystery.

Either Rosie is Kate's older sister Emma, kidnapped as a baby years ago, or she is an unwanted child turned over to a wealthy family by an impoverished woman who read about the lost baby in the newspaper. The gripping story comes alive as Alcock develops it in the form of a memoir by Kate.

Kate and Rosie struggle to adjust to each other, trying to overcome not only their social differences, but also the flawed adults in their lives. The process of accepting Rosie's presence especially delivers Kate from longstanding behavioral problems which are seen to have arisen from her parents' troubles and her mother's less-than-perfect traits. Alcock conveys the thought that a happy ending may require painful adjustments and growth for a family.

With sensitivity and without preaching, she ultimately affirms the healing, maturing effects of trust and love in cases of tragic loss, selfishness, and misunderstanding between social classes.

About the Author

Vivien Alcock was born September 23, 1924, in the seaside town of Worthing in Sussex, England, where she lived until her mother's death ten years later. She studied art for two years at Oxford's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts and worked as a commercial artist in London for several years after World War II. Alcock met her husband, the children's author Leon Garfield, while serving in the war as an ambulance driver for the British Army. She began publishing juvenile fiction in middle age, when she found that her small daughter enjoyed her storytelling.

Alcock writes provocative and suspenseful stories which often include supernatural and fantastic elements, although these are absent from *The Cuckoo Sister*. She has won awards or nominations for awards for *The Stonewalkers*, *The Sylvia Game*, *Travelers by Night*, *The Cuckoo Sister*, *The Mysterious Mr. Ross*, and *The Monster Garden*. *The Sylvia Game* and *Travelers by Night* were adapted for British television, and television serials were made from *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*, *Travelers by Night*, and *The Cuckoo Sister*.

Alcock's typical themes of adolescent alienation, struggles with flawed adults, and maturation through pity and love hint at Alcock's own troubled childhood. She coped with divorced parents, her mother's long illness, subsequent life with a guardian and a sense of being overshadowed by two talented older sisters. She brings an understanding to her stories that has won her considerable popularity among preteen and teen-age readers.

Setting

This contemporary story takes place in areas of London. Kate Seton lives with her mother and lawyer father in prosperous Hampstead, enjoying a spacious yard and roomy home maintained by a housekeeper. The tidy household is shaken by the arrival of shabbily dressed Rosie from Hockley, "a rough part of London" an hour's journey away. Except for part of a day's visit by Kate and Rosie to Hockley—a noisy, cluttered place of heavy traffic, tall buildings, dirty alleys and shadowed doorways—the action unfolds primarily at the Seton home.



Social Sensitivity

The Cuckoo Sister treats contemporary themes of social and family conflict with sensitivity, maintaining a balanced view. Although kidnapping and subsequent child abandonment lie at the heart of the plot, the story line revolves around efforts at restitution.

Some readers may be troubled by the character of the woman who raised Rosie, scrubwoman Louise Martin, whose shallow morals subjected the girl to an unstable home. Yet Louise Martin has, of late, also gotten married and, burdened by guilt, turned Rosie over to the Setons. Pity, rather than approval, is evoked for this woman's personal inadequacies.

Louise Martin is also portrayed as a member of a particular social class. The colorful residents of Hockley may appear to some socially conscious readers as working-class stereotypes, ignorant and gossipy, yet Louise Martin's shabby behavior is condemned by her neighbors, who show genuine concern for Rosie's plight. Readers should remember, too, that Hockley is depicted through the powerful voice of Kate, a lawyer's sheltered daughter whose extreme aversion to Rosie's neighborhood is understandable but merely a point of view. Part of the novel's value lies in the thought-provoking portrayal of tensions between two ways of life.

Alcock offsets Kate's voice by depicting Rosie as a powerful character.

The reason Alcock gives Rosie slang and lower-class speech patterns is to help contrast Rosie's harsh background with Kate's privileged one. Readers should be aware, however, that in both her behavior and talk Rosie can be tough. An occasional rebellion and uses of "bitchy" or "hell" occur. Yet elsewhere Rosie is seen as troubled or tearful, and she is always portrayed sympathetically. Her rebellious behavior is nowhere approved of—no more than is Kate's, which in its unique way has troubled the Seton family for years.

As a representative of Hockley, and as a person in her own right, Rosie is kind and morally upstanding. Her courage and maturity profoundly affect "spoiled child" Kate, who is actually the untrustworthy one. Remarks about "slum kids" by Mrs. Trapp, and her suspicions of thievery based on Rosie's background, are shown to be unjust and harmful. Kate even comes to envy the free-and-easy life of the poor, as streetwise Rosie roundly rejects the "smug," prisonlike existence of the rich.

Additionally, Alcock has been careful to bestow similar flaws upon both mothers involved, and to depict both daughters as alienated and deprived.

The Seton household is seen to be no happier for its many comforts, but actually troubled and tied to convention and pretense. A heartwarming change occurs when, toward the end, Kate tells Rosie: "I don't care who you are. I want you to stay." Not a violent or action-packed novel, *The Cuckoo Sister* is a provocative portrayal of

adjustments that can occur in persons of vastly different backgrounds who reach out to each other in sympathy and love.



Literary Qualities

The Cuckoo Sister sustains intrigue by a variety of techniques. Alcock's effective use of flashback is obvious at the outset. The reader is quickly drawn into the mystery by Kate's opening recollections of having been a shocked five-year-old who discovers she has a missing older sister. The flashback technique is used again to bring the novel to a satisfying conclusion, as the reader finally learns the truth about Rosie.

Alcock also conveys immediacy and credibility by using Kate's personal voice, rather than authorial, third-person narration. Kate's tight storytelling sustains continuity, heightens the emotional tension in the plot, and reinforces the theme of self-knowledge and growth. While the writing is serious and suspenseful, the reader is not overburdened because Alcock injects touches of humor or witty self-analysis to lighten the tone.

The characters are interesting and well-differentiated, from sensible Miss Wait to shallow Mrs. Seton, from streetwise Rosie to pampered Kate.

Alcock's deft handling of tension between the characters' viewpoints helps sustain the mystery. For example, Rosie strongly rejects her new identity, Mr. Seton insists on proof, and Kate behaves badly. Alcock carefully develops the stages of change in Kate and Rosie, setting up contrasts and comparisons between them or between one of them and other people. Kate, for example, when she realizes that she has taken on her mother's weak ways, rejects such behavior.

The dialogue is snappy and tailored to each character and scene, reinforcing the themes of personal isolation, search for self, and social identity. The social setting of Hockley—alien to Kate—is well conveyed by Rosie's street friends, who speak the slang of a tough London working-class neighborhood. In similar fashion Rosie's personal distance from Kate is enhanced by the street language she brings with her into the Seton home, and the barely literate note her mother sends.

Alcock's talent for creating word pictures shows in her vivid description. Often her words suggest character and emotion. Rosie's fear, for example, is conveyed in the phrase: "Her face went the color of bacon fat." The pretense of visiting the zoo lets the girls escape from the Seton parents to Hockley, where Kate's aversion is conveyed in terms related to a zoo: "I didn't like the stink of it or the way it roared."

Suggestive description dramatizes the steps of change the characters undergo. Kate's new ambivalence to the Rosie she at first rejected is conveyed in remarks about a washing machine with clothes spinning too fast to be seen. "That's just how I felt. Whirling and empty." Kate's final arrival at a sense of sympathetic union with Rosie is also evoked by Kate's figure of speech, based on Rosie's perception of the Seton household as prisonlike: "The rain was falling straight down, like the bars of a silver cage."



Themes and Characters

The Cuckoo Sister features several important characters: Kate Seton, her parents Anthony and Margaret Seton, housekeeper Mrs. Trapp, Kate's godmother Elizabeth Wait, and Rosie Martin—who may be Emma Seton. Louise Martin—who raised Rosie and whom Rosie believes is her mother—is also important, although she is known to the reader only through her actions, her ungrammatical letters, and the dialogue of others. Brief roles are also played by several interested paternal relatives of Kate, several of her snobbish friends, Rosie's colorful and concerned Hockley acquaintances, and Harry Jenkins, Louise Martin's boyfriend-turned-husband who knows the truth about Rosie's identity.

Kate and Rosie are the most important characters. Kate is striking as the narrator and the one who changes most in the course of the novel. At the outset eleven-year-old Kate is a pampered busybody—untrustworthy, rude, jealous, and crybabyish. She has been that way since the age of five, when she found out that she had an older sister who was kidnapped from her pram in infancy, and whom Kate began to daydream of as the likeness of herself.

Rosie, the girl sent against her will to the Setons' doorstep by self-proclaimed kidnapper Louise Martin, neither looks like fair-haired Kate nor talks like her. Dark-haired Rosie is streetwise, garishly dressed, given to rough language, and thoroughly opposed to taking up the role of Emma in the Seton home. Rosie is alternately argumentative, bewildered, and terrified as she confronts her new life and the possibility that she really is Emma.

But despite her disturbing behavior, she is fundamentally honest and kind, and mature beyond her thirteen years.

Little resemblance exists between Rosie and Margaret Seton, who may be her real mother. Mrs. Seton is nervous, fearful, lacking in stamina and selfcontrol, irresponsible, and afflicted by headaches and fainting spells. Nor is Rosie like Louise Martin, the woman who raised her. Louise Martin is an uneducated scrubwoman, guilt-ridden and upset by religion on Sundays but morally weak and inclined to bet away her rent money on horse races.

The mature and sensible adults are Anthony Seton and his relative Elizabeth, whom Kate calls Miss Wait.

Kate's father is thoughtful, steady, kind, and, as a lawyer, inclined to be practical and inquisitive. Miss Wait resembles him somewhat in character.

She is a no-nonsense, fair-minded, and forthright older woman inclined to advise Kate on family matters and proper, grown-up behavior.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Trapp, fulfills the role of underscoring the social differences displayed by the household with Rosie in it. Mrs. Trapp is gossipy, protective of her



employers and her own status, and highly prejudiced against people of lower-class background. Rosie is often riled by Mrs. Trapp's condescending remarks about the poorer class and her suspicions that the household now harbors a thief.

Amid the turmoil surrounding Rosie's arrival, Kate begins to mature. Initially, spoiled Kate sees in Rosie the "cuckoo sister" who, like the species of bird called cuckoo, may usurp first place in the Seton home "nest." Yet it is Rosie who unintentionally uncovers the deeply felt isolation which has made Kate so ill-behaved, and who brings to the fore Kate's truly caring nature. Rosie's isolation in the family is paralleled by Kate's, and pity is the quality that initiates the redeeming process of personal growth. Kate is touched by Rosie's plight, and by the sisterliness and maturity Rosie displays despite her struggle with sudden displacement.

As the girls join forces—Kate at first for the selfish purpose of getting rid of Rosie—they develop a bond of friendship that helps them cope with their situation and the adults in their lives.

Each girl, especially, comes to terms with her mother's inadequacies. Rosie's influence enables Kate to find within herself the kindness and trustworthiness her father and Miss Wait had urged upon her in vain. The novel's happy outcome confirms Alcock's thematic conception that pity and loving kindness bring maturation and clarification of identity, cutting across social differences and completing the family.



Topics for Discussion

1. How does Kate picture her sister Emma before Rosie arrives? What are Kate's first impressions of Rosie?
2. Describe Miss Wait and her relationship with Kate. What does Miss Wait mean when she tells Kate "you're just using Emma as a stick to beat your parents with" (Chapter 2)? Compare this to Mr. Seton's point of view, based on his remark that "trust has to be earned, Kate" (Chapter 4).
3. Why is Mr. Seton suspicious of Rosie's identity? Do you agree with his approach to the problem?
4. Does Rosie's character fit the novel's title? Explain.
5. What is Mrs. Trapp's opinion of herself and the Setons? Of Rosie and the people who live in Hockley?
6. When Kate and Rosie go to Hockley to find Louise Martin, Rosie is happy and Kate wishes they had gone straight to the zoo. Why?
7. Is Kate the "snob" Rosie claims she is? Or does Rosie only think so because she feels angry and displaced?
8. Why does Kate destroy the photo of Robbie? Why does she regret it later, and how does she try to make amends?
9. When Kate overhears her grandmother say, "Kate takes after her mother," Kate runs away (Chapter 16).
Why? How does this episode change Kate?
10. When Kate finally has her friends come for a visit to meet Rosie, what happens? Why does Rosie refuse to wear the new clothes Mrs. Seton has provided?
11. Toward the end of the novel Kate remarks, "I wanted it to end like that," meaning that she prefers not to reveal Rosie's true identity. Does it matter to the story who Rosie really is? Does the knowledge make the ending more satisfying to the reader?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe relationships among the Setons. Take into account Miss Wait's observations of the family situation (Chapters 2, 10), Kate's remark that her parents behaved "like snipers" (Chapter 11), and Kate's assessment of her eleven-year-old self as "a spoilt child who had been so jealous" (Chapter 22).

In the long run, what changes came about as a result of Rosie's living with the family?

2. In Chapter 4, Kate tells her father: "Her name's Rosie and she's horrible!"

In Chapter 21, Kate tells Rosie: "I don't care who you are. I want you to stay."

Trace the changes in the relationship between Kate and Rosie.

3. Rosie's mother is known to the reader only through her actions, notes, and the remarks of Hockley residents, but both she and Mrs. Seton are important to the story. Compare the characters of the two women. As mothers, are the women more alike or different?

4. Compare the lifestyle of people in Hampstead, London, with the lifestyle in Hockley. During her visit to Hockley, Kate remarks: "I had never felt so horribly unimportant before" (Chapter 13). Rosie complains that Kate and her "soft lot" of friends have so little "freedom" that they are in "prison" (Chapters 11, 20). How do these observations reflect the way children are raised in each neighborhood?

5. Description in a story can be used merely to tell how people, places, and actions appear, or the author can use it to suggest how episodes or characters are to be interpreted. (Example: The sky darkens as the heroine meets a stranger, suggesting something dark or sinister about the stranger.) Give examples of Alcock's use of description, and comment on its effectiveness.

6. The Cuckoo Sister takes place in England, a country sometimes associated with unique types of class consciousness. In the novel is the issue of social class handled in such a way as to seem distinctly British, or can readers in other countries, such as the United States, easily grasp Alcock's message and apply it? Explain.

For Further Reference

"Alcock, Vivien." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Vol. 8. Edited by Agnes Garrett and Helga McCue.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992: 1-8.

The entry is valuable for a detailed biography of Alcock in the context of critical commentary on selected novels, with listings of publications, awards, and honors.

"Alcock, Vivien." In *Children's Literature Review*. Vol. 26. Edited by Gerard J. Senick. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992: 1-8. The entry is a helpful overview containing a concise appreciation of Alcock's writing followed by excerpted reviews of specific titles, including *The Cuckoo Sister*.

"Alcock, Vivien." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Vol. 41.

Edited by Susan M. Trotsky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994: 5-7. The entry is useful as an abbreviated sketch of Alcock's life with critical commentary and listings of publications, awards, and honors.

"Alcock, Vivien." In *Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989: 8-9. In a brief statement for young readers, Alcock tells about her childhood, her marriage, and her start in writing.

Related Titles

Alcock's interest in social and family tensions can be found in *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* and *The Stonewalkers*.

Although these novels contain supernatural elements not found in the realistic *The Cuckoo Sister*, the problem of flawed mothers is explored in both.

Cassie Palmer is alienated by the expectations of her mother, an impoverished medium who turns to fraud.

Poppy of *The Stonewalkers* is an attention-seeking liar whose hardworking, widowed mother is cold and unfeeling.

The themes of reconciliation and maturation through friendship and love typify the books.



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