

Hans Christian Andersen Short Guide

Hans Christian Andersen by Rumer Godden

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Overview

Hans Christian Andersen: A Great Life in Brief recreates and celebrates the life of a teller of tales born 150 years earlier.

Although it is but one of innumerable Andersen biographies, Godden's work is distinctive, uncommonly readable, and inviting. As a writer of fiction, Godden brings her seasoned storyteller's craft to the task of rendering sensitively, but not sentimentally, a rich account of Hans, the mercurial man and his matchless work. The familiar facts of Andersen's life find expression in his tales, and Godden fuses fact and fiction beautifully in this book.

Andersen, a "lonely, gentle, grotesque figure," was well acquainted with despair and happiness, heartache and joy.

Failure, however, never deterred him long from his stalwart determination to write. Ultimately, late in life, he achieved near-global recognition far beyond anything he expected. Andersen has written, "Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale."

Godden's biography, nonetheless, is no fairy tale; it has the "touch of wormwood" Andersen himself thought essential to his fiction. Godden traveled to Denmark to research the book, and she brings the Danish country and culture, past and present, vividly to life for her readers. She involves readers with the people and places that shaped Hans's character, but never drowns them in detail. While Andersen's life unfolds in the pages of this book, the ideas he valued speak quietly, insistently at every turn: faith, loyalty, simple tastes, unpretentious dignity, diligence, and the satisfaction of work well done and of a reputation unquestionably well earned.

About the Author

Margaret Rumer Godden was born on December 10, 1907, in Sussex, England, but moved to India at the age of nine months. She lived in India with her father, who was a steamship agent in Bengal, her mother, and her three sisters until 1919. Godden later claimed that she and her sisters had the happiest of childhoods. Sent "home" to England at age twelve, Godden was unfamiliar with the culture and unhappy there. She moved from school to school for many months until settling, finally, at Moira House in Eastbourne. Encouraged to write, Godden published a book of poems with her own money while yet in her teens and sold not a copy.

In 1930 Godden returned to India and started a school for dance in Calcutta.

While there, she married Laurence Sinclair Foster. Her first book, *Chinese Puzzle*, was accepted for publication during the week her first daughter, Jane, was born. Jane's sister, Paula, joined the family shortly thereafter.

Godden juggled dual interests in dance and writing for many years.

A versatile and prolific writer, Godden has authored plays, poems, novels, short stories, biographies, scholarly works, and translations for readers of all ages. On occasion, she has collaborated with her sister Jon, also a well-respected writer and a painter. *Two Under the Indian Sun*, an autobiographical reminiscence, was co-authored by the Goddens in 1966.

Godden is perhaps best known as a writer of fiction for children and young adults, although she publicly abhors the practice of "targeting" an audience.

Godden contends repeatedly that young people are intelligent readers and should be respected as such. She believes an author is, first and foremost, a storyteller, and that a writer's real work is to challenge young readers.

Throughout her distinguished career, Godden has received recognition and numerous awards, including the Whitbread Award of 1972 for *The Diddokoi* as the year's best children's book published in the United Kingdom. She currently makes her home in Lockerbie, Scotland.



Setting

The story of Hans Christian Andersen's life begins in Odense, capital of Fyn, an island of central Denmark, where he was born on April 2, 1805.

Hans lives with his mother, Anne Marie, and his father, a young but disgruntled shoemaker also named Hans, in a oneroom home in the poorest part of town.

Although they are poor, Anne Marie fills her humble home with love, and young Hans knows a joy there never paralleled later in life. After his father dies prematurely and his mother remarries, Hans, age fourteen, sets off alone to seek fame in the theater in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. Copenhagen remains Hans's home until his death, yet he travels to Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, England, and America.

Denmark is portrayed in this book as a somewhat magical land, pastoral and practical: a country where castles and cobbled streets coexist with good schools and factories that "make beautiful things—china, silverware, glass."

The Danish people are courteous, cooperative, peace-loving, and playful; they are also fiercely proud to be of Viking descent.

Perhaps no other aspect of the Danish landscape, though, has influenced more imaginative expression—from Norse mythology to Andersen's tales and beyond—than the haunting, eerie quality of Denmark's never-dark summer nights. This twilight habitat of faeries, trolls, and spirits seems a likely place to meet a muse, or spawn a story. It is, as Godden says, "fitting that the most renowned of all [the Danes] should be a teller of fairy tales."



Social Sensitivity

In Hans Christian Andersen: A Great Life in Brief, Godden captures poignantly the affection Hans feels for his native land as well as his arduous struggle to win the reciprocal affection of his fellow Danes. Godden does not romanticize Hans's childhood or the plight of the poor in general, nor does she overstate Hans's achievements. She is, at all times, mindful of Hans's manic-depressive nature, and she leaves the distinction between his pathology and genius deliberately blurred. An undercurrent throughout this book is Godden's tacit approval of the cooperative spirit of the Danes. Their unwavering support for education and the arts is matter-of-fact and laudable. Hans's own character exemplifies the virtue of this policy: even when fortune befalls him, he lives simply and does not become avaricious, always taking what he needs and no more.

Godden's appreciation for the social sensitivity implicit in Andersen's own work is evident. Conflicts in Andersen's tales are often between the established society and its outcasts—a story Hans knew only too well.

Literary Qualities

The outstanding quality of this book is that it is both comprehensive and brief.

The tone is conversational though not colloquial, and the story is engaging.

Godden frames her biography with Andersen's own words, and she further augments her narrative with carefully selected excerpts from his tales and poetry. Her writing style is marked by rhythmic, lyrical prose rich in images that transport the reader instantly to another time and place. Because Godden was herself a practiced writer of fiction for children when she undertook this biography, she shares a sensibility with her subject: a deep appreciation for acts of imagination and the cognitive capabilities of the young. Readers of all ages will find Hans Christian Andersen: A Great Life in Brief both entertaining and informative.



Themes and Characters

Even as a child, Hans Andersen plans to be famous. This appears improbable for a big, awkward, impudent boy with no patience for school or the usual pastimes of children. In his youth, a fortuneteller predicts that Hans will be "a wild bird who shall fly high, great and noble in the world." Remarkably, just as his ugly duckling grows to be a beautiful swan, so Hans lives to fulfill this prophecy. Eventually, he makes many loyal friends, and the support and constructive criticism he receives from them leads to Hans's great success as a writer.

Before the elder Hans dies, he exhorts Anne Marie to let the boy do as he pleases, and she does. What Hans wants most is to be set free: free to pursue a career in the theater. Hans hopes to one day be revered as an actor or playwright, but he never attains these lifelong goals.

As a poor, unschooled teen-ager in Copenhagen, Hans literally sings for his supper. Refused admission to the Royal Theatre School, he persistently submits scripts for the directors' consideration.

Jonas Collin, a Royal Theatre director, recognizes young Hans's potential and petitions the king to grant him a small stipend to attend grammar school.

Chastised but resigned, Hans attends.

When he returns to Copenhagen, Hans begins writing seriously. He lives frugally on a succession of small state grants and the generosity of his friends.

Always of a mercurial temperament, Hans begins to experience more pronounced emotional highs and lows. His loves remain unrequited; his writing is hailed as brilliant abroad but subjected to severe scrutiny at home. Many of his friends and critics suspect he often deludes himself with an inflated esteem for his talent. Throughout his travels and travails, however, Hans retains a remarkable rapport with children. He does not coddle them but, rather, shares an innocent, unquestioning kind of faith. And he knows of no other way to be than honest.

Hans writes his tales as gifts for the children of friends; he does not consider them the serious work of his life. Yet, almost like wildfire, Andersen's tales spread, "first over Denmark, then into Germany, on to Sweden, England and over the world." Fame takes Hans by surprise. But he refuses to concede that the tales will be his legacy, believing that he will be remembered for his plays and novels.

Andersen travels widely and meets many people during his lifetime. A few of the more influential figures include the Collins, his surrogate family—stoic, secure and smug, equally quick to scold and to forgive—and Simon Meisling, the brilliant but psychotically cruel rector of the school at Slagelse, who teaches Hans discipline and fear. Henriette Wulff, hunchbacked but witty and gay, serves as Hans's companion and confidant.



Riborg Voight, the sister of a school chum, is his first unrequited love; Jenny Lind, the famed Swedish opera singer, is his second. Lind befriends Hans but marries another. Hans later immortalizes her in *The Emperor's Nightingale*. In England, Andersen stays for a period with Charles Dickens and his family. Dickens and his daughters are barely civil to their Danish guest; only Mrs. Dickens sympathizes with Hans's demonstrative, emotional responsiveness to the world around him.

Themes that recur throughout Godden's biography, and Andersen's life, include the artist's heightened emotional response to his surroundings; the fine distinction between mental illness and creative genius; the human need for companionship, acceptance, self-expression, and goals; and the importance of state support for education and the arts. The biography also depicts the relative nature of success. Despite the fame that Andersen's tales bring him, he never achieves the success as an actor or playwright that he longs for most.



Topics for Discussion

1. Consider how Anne Marie's decision to let Hans leave home at age fourteen may have been either wise or foolish.

What would you do if you were in her position? Why?

2. Hans Andersen has often been compared to the ugly duckling in his tale by the same name. Why is this comparison appropriate?

3. Andersen claimed that he did not write his tales just for children. What qualities of his works make them so well known and beloved by people of all ages?

4. Hans is a lonely child. Why? How might this childhood isolation have fueled his desire for fame?

5. The Collin family is described as "smug" and more limited in vision than Hans. Why do they adopt him if they believe he deludes himself with visions of grandeur?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Denmark is both benevolent and severe with Hans. Find incidents in Godden's book to support this statement.

2. Hans's father is an unsuccessful shoemaker and dies at a young age.

Godden suggests that he may have died, in part, from a "broken spirit." How are Hans and his father similar? Why do their lives take different directions?

3. Prophecy, superstition, and folklore play a role in Hans Andersen's life. The wise woman who predicts his success is but one example. What other prophecies, superstitions, or folk stories influence Hans's life and work? How so?

4. Hans can be hypersensitive at times, as when a critic's unkind words provoke a flood of tears. Other times he is immune to the reactions of people, as illustrated by his persistent belief that his legacy will be his novels and plays, not his tales. What illustrations does Godden use to underscore Hans's emotional ambivalence? Are mental illness and genius reconciled in this text? Discuss.

5. Denmark's "never-dark summer nights" are cited as a source of literary inspiration. Why is this so? What other authors can you find who are somehow indebted to this natural phenomenon?

6. Discuss the significance of the quotation Godden uses to close this book. Why is it relevant? How does this relate to the fact that more people visit Andersen's birthplace than his grave?

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Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996