

Heidi Short Guide

Heidi by Johanna Spyri

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Overview

Heidi is an old-fashioned book in which the good characters live "happily ever after." In today's uncertain world, where both the news and fiction tend to be painfully realistic, it is reassuring to find a story where good people are rewarded and where love and honesty triumph. Modern readers may find certain aspects of the book a bit overdone.

Heidi is almost too full of joy, Peter too simple-minded, and the grandfather too all-knowing and kind beneath his gruff exterior to be totally believable. Yet readers care about these characters deeply and become much involved in their story.

The book was originally written in German and first published in English in 1884. It is a simple narrative of love between a girl and her grandfather, of the joy of helping others, of the beauty of nature, and of reverence for God.

Neither of the villains, the selfish Aunt Dete and the pretentious Fraulein Rottenmeier, can appreciate the natural goodness of Heidi, the girl of the mountains. Heidi's home in the Alps is an idyllic place, far from the modern world and its concerns. The enduring popularity of the book arises from the liveliness of its characters and the universality of its themes. As Clifton Fadiman observes in his afterword to the Macmillan Classics edition of Heidi, ever since that first English translation in 1884, "year after year, it has kept its place in the hearts of young readers, especially girls." At present, there are fifteen editions in print, three of them in simplified versions. The secret of its continued success is simply that Heidi makes its readers happy.

About the Author

Johanna Heussel Spyri spent her entire life within a few miles of Zurich, Switzerland.

The details of her youth have been preserved in an account by her childhood playmate, Anna Ulrich, entitled *Recollections of Johanna Spyri's Childhood* (1925). Far less is known about her adult life. Not only have her personal papers and manuscripts been lost over the years, but she was said to be a deeply private woman who shunned public attention and considered the influence of her books more important than the details of her life. Her friends respected her wish for privacy by revealing little about her adult life.

Born in the village of Herzel, seven miles from Zurich, on June 12, 1827, Spyri was named Johanna after her father, Dr. Johann Jakob Heussel, a local physician. The family maintained a home of culture and activity, and songwriter. The family enjoyed acting out charades together, and the children were required to write little verses, which they turned in to their father every Sunday night. Spyri enjoyed these writing projects and even wrote extra verses for her younger siblings. Besides her large family—Spyri was the fourth of six children—her home included her mother was a gifted poet and grandmother, two aunts, two female cousins, and sometimes even a few of the doctor's patients.

From all accounts, the young Spyri was just like Heidi, even sharing the same grey eyes and brown hair.

"Hanneli" or "Hanni," as her family called her, enjoyed nature, frolicking out-of-doors, creative drama, storytelling, and music more than she liked academics. She studied with the pastor at the village school. Although lively and witty and a clever mimic, she lacked the talent in drawing thought essential for young ladies of her time. Her friend Anna Ulrich noted that Spyri used her eraser more than her pencil; indeed, she once submitted a drawing to her teacher with a hole in the middle of it. The teacher was not amused. Ulrich also quotes Spyri's sister, who remembered that Spyri loved the sound of the wind in the fir trees so much that she would stop playing just to listen. The two sisters also made friends with Franz Antoni, an old goatherd, who gave them bread with fresh cheese and butter to eat at his hut.

In *Writers for Children*, Catherine Eayrs notes that the kindly doctor in Heidi is much like Spyri's own father and that Clara's grandmamma and Peter's grandmother are storytellers much like her own grandmother. Heidi and Peter's difficulties in school come from memories of her own frustrations.

Even the settings are real. She knew well the city of Malenfeld in eastern Switzerland, and Dorfli, although fictional, is much like the village of Jenins, where she spent much time between 1846 and 1852.

Bernhard Spyri, her brother Theodor's classmate, often came to spend Saturday nights and Sundays at her house.



In 1852, while Johanna was studying in Zurich, they married. Bernhard Spyri was a lawyer and later became town clerk in Zurich. Their friends included the poet Conrad Ferdinand Meyer and the composer Richard Wagner. They had one son, Bernhard Diethelm Spyri, who died of tuberculosis in 1884 at the age of 29. The elder Bernhard died later that same year.

Johanna Spyri began writing for publication in 1870, prompted mainly by a desire to do something to help the soldiers wounded in the Franco-Prussian War. Many soldiers and war orphans came to Switzerland for shelter, but money for supplies to help them was scarce. Spyri had been active in the International Red Cross, begun in 1864, and she hoped to be able to donate all of her royalties to charities as well as to publicize the conditions of the orphans.

Her first book, *A Leaf on Vrony's Grave* (1871), and the first of the Heidi stories, published in Germany in 1880, were both published anonymously. The second Heidi story, published in 1881, gave her credit for authorship. Originally entitled *Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning and Heidi Makes Use of What She Has Learned*, the two Heidi books are now published as one. Heidi ran through thirteen editions in its first ten years. After the death of her son and husband in 1884, Spyri's writing intensified, and in 1886 she moved near Zurich's municipal theatre. In time she became an invalid and something of a recluse, but she continued to write until her death on July 7, 1901. Her last story, *Jorli*, was published in Berlin that year.

Setting

Heidi takes place in the Swiss Alps and in nearby Germany, most particularly Frankfurt. The time is the late 1800s, when public opinion and traditional morality dominate daily life. On Heidi's mountain, the setting is pastoral in the literal sense, home to a shepherd and goats and filled with abundant flowers, broad meadows, gentle winds, ancient fir trees, and heavy snows. Sunrises and sunsets are always noticed and celebrated, especially by Heidi and her grandfather. Nothing is ever taken for granted.

The wildness of the place often frightens away city visitors. Upon returning Heidi to the mountain, for example, Sebastian lets her go on alone from the Mayenfeld train station, "glad of having no tiring and dangerous journey on foot before him." Transportation is difficult, to be sure, for after the train journey comes a ride in a cart or on horseback, then a steep climb up the footpath from Dorfli. Inaccessible as it is, the mountain richly rewards those hardy souls who make the effort to visit it. From it Heidi receives her strength; away from it she grows pale and weak.

The good doctor from Frankfurt and Clara each discover there a life-giving potion to heal their emotional and physical ills. The simple, natural diet of bread, cheese, goat's milk, and occasional meat, coupled with the mountain air, promotes good appetite, sound sleep, and emotional well-being.

In Frankfurt, life is much less rustic, and the book depicts in some detail the home of a wealthy family of the nineteenth century, replete with multiple servants, fine clothes, elaborate meals, and formal etiquette. Heidi feels trapped in the city, however, unable to see the sky or trees or grass.

Moral codes are strict in this period, both in the cities and in the small villages. The work ethic is strong. The A-B-C book from which Peter learns to read reflects clearly the sternness of the time, with beatings, starvation, and other punishments threatened for failure to learn any of the letters. Condemnation for wrongs is the rule in this society, as illustrated by Dorfli's longstanding criticism of Alm Uncle for drinking and gambling in his youth.

Social Sensitivity

Heidi is in many ways a religious book.

It espouses no particular dogma but most definitely reflects Spyri's background as a devout Christian. All is controlled by a loving God who knows what is best for his subjects, even when they do not. Prayer is encouraged as the answer to life's troubles and frustrations, and the book teaches that one must remember not only to ask God for help with troubles but also to thank him for blessings. The characters' greatest happiness comes from helping others, thereby dramatizing the golden rule. The book makes clear that forgiveness is always at hand for those who are truly sorry. In addition, the book promotes honesty, humility, and appreciation of nature's beauty.

Heidi is an old-fashioned story, and the solutions to Heidi's problems and concerns may sometimes seem too easy and simplistic to today's readers. But because these characters' problems are universal, the book should prompt discussion of how today's youth can and should deal with similar problems. Certainly the dangers of blindly following public opinion, the need for love, and the necessity of handling disappointment are very real concerns for young people today. Those critics who have accused the book of being outdated, too didactic, too sentimental, or too unrealistic ignore its treatment of concerns that continue to trouble young people of today.

Literary Qualities

Spyri followed the literary conventions of the late nineteenth century in a number of ways. She depicted an invalid and an orphan in many of her stories, Heidi included. These stock characters were expected to serve the didactic purpose of depicting death as a "release from earthly misery" and to help convey a spiritual message. Spyri's books manage to be both didactic and imaginative. She has been compared favorably to other noted writers of her time: to Louisa May Alcott for her development of female characters, to Robert Louis Stevenson for her setting and plot, and to Hans Christian Andersen for her treatment of death and spirituality.

Interspersed in the narrative of Spyri's story are frequent lyrical passages.

These convey Heidi's overwhelming joy at being alive and at the beauty of the world around her. Light imagery prevails throughout the story, as manifested in the dazzling light of the mountain sunrises, sunsets, and sparkling stars, all of which are admired and described in vivid color and detail. Clara, who has never seen the sky or the stars before, is entranced to be able to watch the heavens from her bed.

Glowing images also celebrate abstract forms of light, such as the light of joy, peace, faith, and understanding. Even the blind grandmother finds that Heidi's exuberance and the hymns she reads "often make it so bright for her that she is quite happy again." The original religious verses that Heidi reads reveal Spyri's poetic talents and convey a deep faith in God that goes beyond any particular denomination. One's heart must be open, however, in order to fully benefit. The doctor, for example, because of the loss of his daughter, has "such a shadow over his eyes that he cannot feel and enjoy the beauty around him, while the heart grows doubly sad knowing how beautiful it could be."

Heidi, to ease his pain, reads him one of the grandmother's favorite hymns, reviving him with its message of faith in God.

Beautiful as all this light may be, it seems almost too much at times for the modern reader. The book tends toward hyperbole, with little subtlety of character or theme. Every thought or feeling is explicit. Heidi's delight at the goats, the sunset, the cheese, the flowers, the goats' milk, even the tumbledown house in Dorfli is portrayed in details so descriptive that they overwhelm and almost embarrass the reader: "She rejoiced with all the myriad little beetles and winged insects that jumped and crawled and danced in the sun. . . . All the tiny living creatures must be as happy as she, for it seemed to her there were little voices all round her singing and humming in joyful tones, 'On the mountain! on the mountain!'"

The ending of the book focuses on one smiling face after another, smothering the reader with its overabundance of happiness. This discomfort arises, of course, from more cynical contemporary attitudes in an age when joy and exuberance are distrusted and downplayed. Perhaps the book's lasting appeal comes partly from the very novelty of this unabashed joy and happiness.



Themes and Characters

Heidi is a book of absolutes, with definite vices and definite virtues. The chief vices are selfishness, hypocrisy, and materialism, as embodied mostly in the minor characters: Heidi's Aunt Dete, the Sesemanns' head housekeeper Fraulein Rottenmeier, and the villagers.

The virtues are equally clear and include love for others, faith in God, humility, and respect for nature. The "good" people—Heidi and her grandfather, Peter's blind grandmother, Herr Sesemann, his invalid daughter Clara, Illustration by Jessie Wilcox Smith for Heidi by Joanna Spyri. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York (1951).

and Grandmamma Sesemann—are easily recognized as such. Peter, the goatherd, is the only neutral character.

He is basically lazy, somewhat simpleminded, and very jealous, but he is a friend of Heidi's and embodies the essence of pastoral life. He also learns the power of prayer and forgiveness at the end, which makes him the only character to grow; all the other "good" characters are good when the story begins.

The vices in this book are obvious when they appear. Dete reveals her selfishness with her treatment of Heidi, whom she considers little more than a piece of baggage left behind by her dead sister. Dete cares for the girl when it is convenient or when she has something to gain by it but abandons her when she has better things to do. The opening scene, in which she delivers Heidi up to her grandfather, whom everyone fears, makes her selfishness clear. Similarly, when she snatches Heidi away after her grandfather has grown to love her, Dete again acts for her own personal gain.

Another vice, hypocrisy, manifests itself in all the villagers, in most of the servants, and in Aunt Dete. Spyri implies that society as a whole is hypocritical, basing its actions primarily on appearances. Gossip rules, and people always criticize others when in fact they are no better themselves. Heidi's grandfather, the Alm Uncle, has moved to the mountain because of his refusal to tolerate this hypocrisy. He tells Heidi that when the great bird of the mountain croaks and screams he "is mocking at the people because they all go huddling and gossiping together, and encourage one another in evil talking and deeds."

Even those who think well of the grandfather have not the courage of their convictions to defend him, waiting until the pastor has publicly shaken his hand before greeting him themselves like "an old friend whom they had long missed."

Hand in hand with gossip goes materialism, another form of slavery to appearances. Fraulein Rottenmeier tries to throw away Heidi's tattered straw hat and red shawl, considering them inappropriate for her new station, but Heidi is sentimentally attached



to them and knows she will need them for her homecoming. She remembers her grandfather's parting words to Dete about her "hat and feather" and does not wish to make the same mistake herself. To this end, she sheds her pretty town dress and feathered hat at Brigitta's house, explaining to the puzzled Brigitta, "I would rather go home to grandfather as I am or else perhaps he would not know me." Her instincts prove correct, for his first pleased response to her return is, "You don't look much of a grand lady."

The interesting point about materialism in this book is that the truly wealthy people, such as the Sesemanns, are not the least bit materialistic, while those who wish to be wealthy are the most preoccupied with material objects. The true benefit of the grandfather's way of life is that, without being wealthy, he has no need of money in order to live comfortably. He is already rich in the intangible gifts of the mountain.

A major message of Spyri's book is that people must love each other and work together. Although outsiders never penetrate Alm Uncle's gruff exterior, he is never unkind to any creature. His goats are the best cared for on the mountain, and from the start, his tenderness toward Heidi comes through. Early in the book, at Heidi's suggestion, he repairs Peter's grandmother's house, although he refuses to accept any thanks for it. He developed his abilities as a nurse when he cared for a dying captain long ago, and he achieves miraculous results for Clara. Again he wants no reward, telling Herr Sesemann, "I too have my share in the joy of your daughter's recovery, and my trouble is well repaid by it." He wants nothing for himself, only assurance that Heidi will be cared for should he die before she is grown.

This joy in doing for others is especially apparent in Heidi, who always puts those who are less fortunate before herself. She uses her money to buy soft white rolls for the blind grandmother rather than things for herself, and she requests for her reward at Clara's cure only a bed with fluffy pillows and warm covers for the grandmother. She assumes the role of a substitute daughter for the doctor, promising to come to him if he is ever ill and in need of her. Much as she loves being outdoors, the thought that her reading "might make it light and happy again for the grandmother gave her the greatest pleasure, greater even than being out on the sunny mountain with the flowers and goats."

Heidi readily embraces a deep faith in God's goodness. Clara's grandmother teaches her to pray when she is at the depths of her homesickness, and Heidi comes to believe that she must never forget God, who always knows what is best for her. The faith she learns from Grandmother Sesemann builds on the premise that God always listens but does not always answer prayers immediately. Heidi believes that God delayed answering her prayer to go home so that she would be better able to help those that she loves. The events of the narrative suggest that "everything will come to pass according to God's purpose."

Along with joy in helping others and faith in God come two related virtues: humility and appreciation of nature.



Grandfather must learn humility in order to thank God for sending Heidi to him. Similarly, Peter must confess to destroying Clara's chair before forgiveness, relief from fear, and a reward of a penny a day come to him. Humility is also promoted in the emphasis on simple clothes, simple food, and a simple way of life.

Appreciation of nature comes readily to all those on the mountain, especially Heidi and her grandfather. Heidi's exuberance at seeing her first mountain sunset, when "everything is on fire," is sustained throughout the book. The sights and sounds of the mountain continuously beckon her out of doors, and even at night, the stars are in full view from her bed. The shock of confinement is tremendous on the first morning she awakes in Frankfurt and feels like a caged bird "trying the bars in turn to see if it cannot get through them and fly again into the open." In the city she grows pale, loses her appetite, and begins to sleepwalk. Sent home to be cured, her joy overflows upon seeing the mountain sunset once again: "the two high mountain peaks rose into the air like two great flames, the whole snowfield had turned crimson, and rosycolored clouds floated in the sky above.

. . . Heidi . . . thanked God for having brought her home." This power of the natural to inspire and heal also touches the doctor and Clara, who recover in soul and body while visiting the mountain.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the townspeople fear the Alm Uncle? Why does Heidi not fear him?
2. The grandmother is permanently blind, yet Heidi manages to bring her light. Explain the various ways in which she does this.
3. How is Heidi's year in Frankfurt a positive experience for her? What does she gain from being there?
4. Grandfather wishes to keep Heidi at home rather than send her to school because at home "she is safe and will learn nothing evil." What does he wish to protect her from? Is his caution justified?
5. As Heidi gets ready to go home to her grandfather, she is careful to wear her red shawl and old straw hat, and she leaves her feathered hat behind at Brigitta's house. Why is what she wears so important to her? What does the book have to say about the significance of clothing?
6. Heidi's favorite story, given to her by Grandmamma Sesemann, is about a shepherd. She loves the picture because it reminds her of home, but she loves the tale too. What is the story? Why is it important to the theme of the book?

Think about her reading it to her grandfather as you consider its significance.

7. When the grandfather and Heidi appear at church for the first time, the pastor tells him, "Neighbor, you went into the right church before you came to mine." What does he mean?
8. Peter is Heidi's friend, and yet, in a number of ways, he is not a particularly attractive character. What are his strengths and weaknesses? How does he grow and change in the course of this book?
9. Heidi suffers a number of sorrows and disappointments in this book, but everything turns out well in the end. List the difficulties she faces and discuss how she manages to overcome each of them. Do you see any overall pattern in her methods of dealing with things that trouble her?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explore the meaning and importance of light in the book. Some of its forms are concrete while others are abstract.
2. Contrast the various elements of Heidi's home—the fir trees, the goats, the house itself, the sky, the flowers, the great bird—with Clara's home in the city of Frankfurt. What general patterns are revealed in these specific differences?
3. Grandmamma Sesemann tells Heidi that even when her prayers seem to be ignored, God is still listening. She assures Heidi that "God is a good father to us all, and knows better than we do what is good for us. If we ask Him for something that is not good for us, He does not give it, but something better still, if only we continue to pray earnestly and do not run away and lose our trust in Him."

Discuss the extent to which this is proven true or false by events of the book. Think not only of Heidi's requests but of those of other characters as well.

4. Learning to read is a major milestone for Heidi and Peter, and reading is presented as something very special in this book. Why is reading so important?

To whom does it bring the most benefit?

Think of all the characters in discussing the value of books and reading.

5. Grandfather feels most people put too much weight on appearances rather than on realities. Is he correct? Use the characters and events of this book to support your answer.

For Further Reference

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New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. This article provides a good biography of Spyri, along with an analysis of her style, autobiographical elements in her writing, cultural and historical background, and reception by critics.

"Heidi—or the Story of a Juvenile Best Seller." *Publisher's Weekly* (July 5, 1953): 318-321. This article, written on the occasion of Heidi's 75th birthday, explores the book's publication history and the reasons for its continued popular success. It also provides some interesting biographical details, especially concerning Spyri's childhood.

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This includes an interesting and detailed biography of Spyri.

Nash, Jay Robert, and Stanley Ralph Ross. *The Motion Picture Guide, 1927-1983*. Vol. H-K. Chicago: Cinebooks, 1986. Provides brief critical entries on each of the Heidi films, including complete lists of credits.

Smith, James Steel. *A Critical Approach to Children's Literature*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967. This book has scattered, brief references to Heidi Ulrich, Anna. *Recollections of Johanna Spyri's Childhood*. Translated by Helen B. Dole. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1925. This is the classic account of Johanna Spyri's youth by a childhood friend.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Although Johanna Spyri wrote perhaps fifty children's stories in all, no other book has enjoyed the success of *Heidi*, which was a best seller from the moment of its first publication in Germany in 1880. She set all her stories in the lands she knew best—mainly Switzerland, but also France, Germany, and northern Italy. After *Heidi*, her first fulllength book, she wrote others about Swiss mountain inhabitants. Some of the best known of these are *Children of the Alps*; *Gritli's Children*; *Cornelli*; *Dora*; *Mazli*; *Moni, the Goat Boy*; and *Eueli, the Little Singer*. All were written in German and later translated into English.

Because of its enduring popularity, *Heidi* was a natural candidate for movie adaptations and children's theater productions. Each of these dramatizations imposed its own interpretation on Spyri's beloved story, exaggerating character traits, intensifying dramatic scenes, sometimes even altering the story line. The 1937 movie starring Shirley Temple in the title role is the classic production. The movie remains fairly true to the original, although Fraulein Rottenmeier becomes considerably more evil as she deliberately tries to keep Clara bound to her wheelchair for her own personal gain, and Heidi's return to her grandfather is made considerably more poignant by having him search the streets of Frankfurt to find her. Other movies of *Heidi* include a Swiss production in 1954, said to be one of the better renditions; an Austrian movie in 1968, known for its outstanding Alpine photography; and a 1979 American television version, starring Michael Redgrave as the grandfather and featuring a musical score by John Williams. The scriptwriters for this NBC production took considerable liberties with Spyri's story: Heidi's grandfather becomes her mother's father rather than her father's; Herr Sesemann becomes Heidi's uncle, her dead father's brother, and Clara her first cousin; Fraulein Rottenmeier is recast as a beautiful and kind young woman in love with Clara's father; and the grandfather is a gifted musician and organ builder who returns to his music triumphantly at the very end by playing the organ in Dorfli, his masterpiece, which had lain silent ever since his daughter went away. An animated musical version of the story for small children, called *Heidi's Song*, was produced by Hanna-Barbera in 1982, featuring Lorne Greene's voice as the grandfather and Mike Winslow's as the mountain.



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