

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years Short Guide

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years by Rachel Field

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Overview

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years appeals to younger readers as an entertainment—a pleasant few days' diversion. Probably not many boys read it, because Hitty is a doll and she tells her own story from a strictly feminine point of view. Many girls, however, adore the tale and turn back to it frequently even as they mature into their teens. They discover not only that they have been entertained, but that they have been given a microscopic panorama of American social history from the 1820s to the 1920s. They have learned what it was like to be a part of a family whose father earned his living from the sea, and they have learned more about whaling than they will know until they have read Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). They have also learned about what were, in the 1820s, strange lands with exotic customs. They have gained some knowledge of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century, and what the Civil War was like for average families of both the North and South. They realize with Hitty how quickly customs changed after the turn of the century. Hitty: Her First Hundred Years is written in a dignified style with much dry wit. Not all young readers will enjoy or even understand these strategies. Those who do will very likely be enchanted by this understated fantasy.

About the Author

Rachel Field was born in New York City, September 19, 1894, and spent most of her early childhood in western Massachusetts. In 1914 she was admitted to Radcliffe College, where she spent four years studying writing as a special student.

After college, Field held several editorial positions but soon turned to freelance writing. She wrote novels for children, young adults, and adults. Several of her adult novels were made into successful films. She also wrote poetry, mostly for children, and plays for both children and adults. In 1918 she won the Drama League of America prize for *Rise Up, Jennie Smith* and in 1929 the Newbery Medal for *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*.

Field married Arthur S. Pederson, a literary agent, in 1935, and the couple moved to California. They adopted a daughter, Hannah, in 1939. Field died after a brief illness in California in 1942. She was buried in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the ancestral home of the Field family.



Setting

If not the entire world, at least a great portion of it is the setting for this lively tale of adventure narrated from the point of view of a doll. Perhaps the setting that makes the most lasting impression is the Preble farm on the Maine coast, where Hitty comes is created by the old peddler, and to where she returns, perhaps a hundred years later. It is a comforting, ideal place, and Rachel Field presents it with carefully chosen details that make it sound like a place where any child would like to grow up. Hardly less absorbing, is the depiction of the Diana-Kate, the whaling vessel on which the entire Preble family, including Hitty, takes to the sea, from Boston to the South Pacific. Thereafter, the scenes shift rapidly from the island on which the Prebles are marooned, to Bombay, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and with many places in between. Although many of these place descriptions are brief, they are all vivid. Even the locales where Hitty spends many inactive years, such as between the cushions of a sofa or in the hayloft of a barn, are entirely believable: It was far from unpleasant in the hayloft. A softer bed I could not have found one more sweet and warm in winter ... I saw whole generations of field mice grow from babyhood to maturity . . . Sometimes the mice took pity on my sad state and when they were washing their babies' faces, they would wash mine, too.



Social Sensitivity

While old-fashioned virtues of patience, endurance, and forbearance are emphasized in *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*, there is little concern for major social issues, with a single exception.

During her life in New Orleans, Hitty realizes that Southerners, regarded by her Philadelphia family as enemies, can be as kind and as gentle as Northerners and that they suffered even more during the Civil War.

Even though conscious social concern is lacking, there is little that might be considered even casually offensive.

Some segments of society are presented as distinctly different from the mainstream, but there is nothing derogatory in any of the descriptions. For example, the Quakers in Philadelphia are commendable in every way. The episode at the black church in Mississippi will not offend thoughtful black readers, who will recognize it as an authentic depiction of Southern life near the turn of the century. The primitive tribe on the Pacific island where the Prebles are shipwrecked are pictured in terms not entirely complimentary, even slightly comic. If necessary, teachers and parents can point out that time has caused many changes in attitudes.

It must be conceded to environmentalists that *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* glorifies the destructive whale hunting industry. But whale hunting was important to nineteenth century society. Whale oil lighted the lamps of the world. Again, parents and teachers have a good opportunity to explain that changing times cause changing needs.

The world no longer needs whale oil, and the continued slaughter of these huge mammals will cause their complete extinction.



Literary Qualities

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years is often classified as a fantasy, but it has few of the usual fantasy characteristics. The only unrealistic element in the novel is the narrative method. The story is told by a little wooden doll with vivid powers of perception and a well-developed moral consciousness. The device is highly original and successful. From her detached point of view, Hitty is able to offer her often perplexed, often amused comments on human behavior.

There is no plot in the usual sense.

Instead, there is a series of episodes unified by the central character of Hitty that cover a time span of about one hundred years. The narration is extremely fast-paced. Hitty has scarcely begun her life before she is dropped on the church floor and left there for several days. Shortly after her rescue, she is off on an adventure that leaves her dangling in the branches of a tree, and not long after that, she sets sail on a whaling vessel bound for the South Seas. This rapid pace, which continues throughout the novel, is appealing to younger readers.

The story begins in the late 1920s and finds Hitty in an antique shop. Having discovered a quill pen and paper, she decides to write her memoirs. Her life is then related in one long flashback. Occasionally, as she relates her adventures, Hitty refers to her life in the shop, and at the end, she brings the reader back to the shop, ready for her second hundred years.

The style of the novel is distinctive. The little doll tells her story with dignity, understatement, and a good deal of dry wit. These qualities are apparent from the very beginning: The antique shop is very still now.

Theobald and I have it all to ourselves, for . . . Theobald has been so industrious of late that there are no more mice to venture from behind the woodwork. Theobald is the shop cat—the only thing in it that is not for sale, which has made him rather overbearing at times. Not that I wish to be critical of him. We all have our little infirmities and if it had not been for his I might not now be writing my memoirs. Still, infirmities are one thing, and claws are another, as I have reason to know.

Many of the episodes contain considerable suspense. A good example is the Preble family's sojourn on an uninhabited island after they have to abandon the burning Diana-Kate. They become endangered when a savage tribe arrives, but trouble is averted when the natives take Hitty and install her as an idol in her own little shrine. Hitty fears that her family does not know where she is, but Andy has been watching, and one dark night he steals her away. With the family, she escapes the island in one of the ship's boats, which has been hidden away. During the day, the captain has sighted a ship, and now they are rowing out, hoping to attract its attention. The boat is crowded and uncomfortable. The Captain, Andy, and two crew members take turns rowing until they catch sight of the ship, but then things become worse. Their signal lantern puts out too



feeble a light, so they make torches of their shirts and Mrs. Preble's petticoats, Hitty: Her First Hundred Years bonnet, and shawl. Hitty remarks, "I would gladly have offered my chemise too, but common sense told me that it would make no more light than a firefly."

Then the torches fail: "I saw Captain Preble drop the little knot of shriveled, black cloth into the water. No one moved or lifted a hand to the rowing. We all realized there would be no use in that.

Every eye was fixed on that far speck of light that meant so much to seven souls and a wooden doll."

The despair of the moment is intense.

It seems that hours pass, but actually, in the very next line we find that the ship has sighted the castaways and is shooting up flares as signals that help is on the way.

Field handles suspense tastefully. She does not lead readers to expect Hitty's return to Phoebe after the little doll is accidentally dropped in a gutter in Bombay. Even as Hitty describes how she lay there in the dust, she interpolates, "No, I never saw Phoebe or any of the Preble family again." Any additional suspense would be inappropriate: Hitty has to get on with the rest of her adventures.

The pervading sense of social history is an important literary quality of *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*. For example, during the period covered by the novel, approximately 1825-1925, the U.S. was involved in four wars, but only the Civil War is mentioned. Hitty refers to this war as "a time that is strange to remember." During this time she belongs to Clarissa Pryce, a little Quaker girl who lives in Philadelphia. Hitty tells the reader that she was "not clear what it was all about," but she makes very clear what it was like to be on what is often called the "home front." She describes watching the young soldiers march off and Clarissa's older sister knitting socks, writing letters, and rolling bandages. Much later, Hitty gets a postwar perspective on the same events from the Southern point of view when she becomes the traveling companion of Mr. Farley, an itinerant artist who often uses her in his portraits. Mr. Farley makes an extended visit to New Orleans, where he lives in the home of two elderly ladies, Miss Annette and Miss Hortense Larraby. They often speak of Miss Hortense's betrothed, who had been killed in the Battle of Vicksburg. Miss Hortense exclaims, "Oh, it was cruel, cruel" and Hitty thinks that "some of the Yankees could say as much," because she has good reason to know. But then she reflects, "Little did I think then [during the war] that I should be living among those they [the Pryce family] denounced so bitterly, or that I should meet only kindness at their hands. It was all so strange, beyond the understanding of a doll."

Other than this, the historical emphasis is all on people, how they lived, how they earned their livings, what they were interested in. Field vividly describes life on the Preble farm on the Maine seacoast. When the entire Preble family takes to the sea in a whaling vessel, the reader gets a good deal of information about whaling and its



importance in the early nineteenth century. Missionary life in British India is the focus of Hitty's brief sojourn with Little Thankful.

In the course of her hundred years, Hitty has the opportunity to meet some public figures, so that the reader learns something about popular culture in America. With Clarissa in Philadelphia, Hitty attends a concert performed by Adelina Patti, the much-acclaimed soprano. John Greenleaf Whittier, the famed American poet who was also a Quaker, visits the Pryce household and composes a poem in honor of Hitty, "Lines to a Quaker Doll of Philadelphia."

When Clarissa becomes older and goes away to school, Hitty is packed up in a box and eventually becomes the property of Isabella Van Rensselaer, a little girl in New York City. Isabella and her father, walking on a city street, observe Charles Dickens, on tour in America at that time, going into his hotel. Isabella becomes so excited that she drops Hitty right at the feet of the great author, who retrieves Hitty and returns her to Clarissa with a smile and a bow. For months afterward, Isabella exhibits Hitty "as the doll who had been held in the very important right hand of Mr. Dickens."

Field's novel is a very original children's story of high literary quality.

There is no other novel for young readers that is quite like this one.



Themes and Characters

The themes of fortitude and endurance are prominent in *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*. Field also emphasizes the desirability of looking on the bright side of things—of maintaining hope. Almost from the beginning of her existence, Hitty finds herself in predicaments that call for great patience. Only a few days after the old peddler has put the finishing touches on her mountain-ash body and Phoebe has finished her wardrobe, Hitty is lost in a church, into which Phoebe has smuggled her, and where of course, a doll has no business.

(Several of Hitty's trials come about as a result of a child's disobedience or spiteful behavior.) Hitty accidentally drops out of Phoebe's muff, and spends cold and lonely days on the floor of the church.

When Phoebe confesses her disobedience, Andy, the chore-boy, brings Hitty home. Meanwhile, Hitty has been frightened by bats swooping past her in the dark and brushing her with their wings. In discomfort she has been looking at an illustrated Bible on the floor beside her opened to "the most painful picture of a man being swallowed by a large fish." When Hitty hears the church sexton, she makes a sublime effort to attract his attention by making a clumping noise with her feet—an accomplishment which succeeds only in frightening him and sending him quickly out of the church. But it gives Hitty a thrill of pride that she "could produce such an effect upon him."

Hitty learns that she can endure and make the best of things even when she is snatched away by a crow and deposited in a nest in the Preble's yard, or when she becomes an attendant image for a Hindu snake charmer and travels all over India in a basket. Although Hitty is often placed in uncomfortable predicaments, things always improve.

She is happiest when she belongs to a little girl, although she finds that all owners are not as ideal as Phoebe Preble. Little Thankful, the daughter of missionaries in India, ashamed that Hitty is not as attractive as the chinaheaded dolls belonging to other girls, thrusts the little mountain-ash doll deep into the cushions of a sofa, where she remains for a very long time. Years later, Sally Loomis, the daughter of a Mississippi steamboat captain, steals Hitty from a showcase at a cotton exposition.

When she hears a black preacher's sermon about sin and watches baptisms in the river, she throws Hitty into the river, where the little doll floats like Moses in the bulrushes until her rescue.

At the end of the novel, Hitty's home is in an antique shop, where she is writing her memoirs with a quill pen. Each new customer excites her, for any one of them may carry her away to new adventures. She contemplates the possibility of flying, "since the world is always arranging new experiences for us." She is ready for another hundred years.



Hitty, of course, is the main character in the novel. Around her, in her various adventures, revolves a myriad of fascinating people. The Preble family plays the dominant role because it has the greatest influence on Hitty's development and because the family remains important to her after her separation from them. The family consists of Phoebe, Hitty's first owner, and her parents. Andy, the chore-boy, is almost like a brother. Mrs. Preble is a strict but loving mother, doing her best to instill old-fashioned virtues and morality in Phoebe. The instruction rubs off on Hitty, too, and she often thinks back to Mrs. Preble's worried concern about such things as Phoebe's wearing breeches on board the whaling ship.

Captain Preble is a good-natured foil to his wife, taking life in a more relaxed fashion. Phoebe becomes the ideal little girl to Hitty; none of her other owners ever means as much to her. Clarissa Pryce, the little Quaker girl in Philadelphia, comes closest, for Hitty spends several happy years with her.



Topics for Discussion

1. What are some of the advantages of having these adventures narrated from the point of view of a doll?
 2. The old peddler who carves Hitty out of a piece of mountain-ash wood from Ireland believes that the wood itself brings luck and protects against witchcraft and evil. Does this superstition play an important part in the story?
 3. What does Mrs. Preble mean when she says to her husband, "You were always one for extravagance—two lamps burnin' an' no ship at sea"? Can you find and explain other "sea phrases"?
 4. Why does Patch, the first mate, start the mutiny aboard the Diana-Kate?
 5. Have you read other stories about dolls? How does Hitty: Her First Hundred Years differ from most of them?
 6. The author is rather vague about time in this story, but there are some clues to give us the approximate dates of the various adventures. What are some of these clues?
 7. What is your opinion of Hitty's description of the black minister in Mississippi? Do you find it comic? Racist?
- Authentic for the time period being described?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Rachel Field was inspired to write *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* after she and her friend Dorothy Lathrop found just such a wooden doll in an antique shop. How would you have written the story? Would you have written it from the point of view of the doll or of someone else? Would you have the doll stay with one family and concentrate on a few adventures? After considering these and other questions which may occur to you, try writing a few chapters of your own story of a doll.

2. Why was the whaling industry so important in the nineteenth century?

Write a report on this enterprise. If you have seen the New England whaling ports, be sure to include your observations about them. In the light of your research, does Rachel Field's description of the *Diana-Kate* seem authentic?

3. Only a few countries allow whale hunting today. Which ones are they and why do they allow this industry? Why are many groups against the practice?

4. Several superstitions besides the one about mountain-ash wood are mentioned in the novel. See how many you can identify and discuss whether any of them plays an important role in the story.

5. *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* is often classified as a "fantasy." Look up "fantasy" in a dictionary of literary terms. In what ways does the novel conform to the definition? How does it differ from the usual fantasy?

6. In New Orleans, the Misses Larraby dress Hitty as a bride and enter her in a Cotton Exposition. What was a Cotton Exposition? What was its purpose? Why was it important to the people of the South?

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Related Titles

Calico Bush, written by Rachel Field in 1931, resembles Hitty: Her First Hundred Years in that it contains a good deal of history. It features a pioneer family in Maine during the French and Indian War. Many critics consider it to be Field's finest work.



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