

# Miracles on Maple Hill Short Guide

## Miracles on Maple Hill by Virginia Sorensen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Miracles on Maple Hill Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>

## Overview

Miracles on Maple Hill, a story about ten-year-old Marly and her family, tells about nature's healing powers. Marly's father suffered terribly during the Korean War; unable to find a job, he has become bitter and short-tempered. All the family members feel the strain, so Marly's mother, Lee, persuades them to spend some time at her now-deserted childhood summer retreat on Maple Hill.

While there, Marly and her family learn how to make friends among strangers, how to fend for themselves, and how to enjoy nature. The relationships in the novel are realistic and likely to be familiar to most readers, as are Marly's questions about the world around her as she grows up in a family beset by problems. *Miracles on Maple Hill* invites readers to spend a year on Maple Hill with interesting people who endure difficult times. Readers will leave the book with a greater appreciation for the natural world and possibly with a greater understanding of themselves.

## About the Author

Virginia Eggertsen Sorensen was born on February 17, 1912, in Provo, Utah, to Helen El Deva Eggertsen and Claude E. Eggertsen, an agent for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. Sorensen grew up in Manti, a small town in Utah's Sanpete Valley, where her fifth grade teacher encouraged her to write. This early encouragement was important in her development, as was her Mormon faith.

On August 16, 1933, Virginia married Frederick C. Sorensen of Mendon, Utah. In 1934, the couple moved to Palo Alto, California, where Frederick studied for his doctorate in English at Stanford University. Virginia received her bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in the fall. During this time, Sorensen gave birth to two children, a daughter in 1934, and a son in 1936. After Frederick received his doctorate, the family moved frequently, living in California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Alabama, and Pennsylvania. The Sorensens later divorced.

In 1942 Virginia Sorensen published her first book, an adult novel titled *A Little Lower than Angels*. During 1946 and 1947, she lived on a Guggenheim fellowship in Sonora, Mexico, which inspired her novel *The Proper Gods* (1951), about the Yaqui Native Americans of Sonora. In 1953 Sorensen published her first book for young readers, *Curious Missie*, and from 1954 to 1955, she was on a Guggenheim fellowship in Denmark, the setting of her novel *Kingdom Come* (1960). The American Library Association awarded Sorensen the 1957 Newbery Medal for *Miracles on Maple Hill*.

Sorensen married the author Alec Waugh on July 15, 1969, and moved with him to Tangier, Morocco.

## Setting

Miracles on Maple Hill takes place during the 1950s, mostly at the fictional Maple Hill in northern Pennsylvania.

Maple Hill is bitterly cold in the winter and alive with mystery and discovery all year round. When Marty's family first arrives there, the ground is still mushy with snow and the local maple trees are in the midst of their "sugar season," when their sugary sap can be harvested for syrup. As the weather warms, the region comes alive with flowers and wildlife.

At first, the house that the family will stay in appears uninviting: "The porch was heavy with snow and you could see where one step had fallen in. Huge snowy bushes hung over the railing. It looked as if nobody had lived there for a hundred years." Mice live in the musty interior. The house's isolation seems to help Marty's father, Dale, because he gets cheerier as time goes by, but the others—Marty's brother Joe in particular—miss their home and friends in Pittsburgh. In the city, they were only minutes away from stores and many sources of amusement; in Maple Hill, amusements are less obvious, and time passes slowly. Marty learns to love the excitement of exploring nature. Living on Maple Hill requires both Marty and Joe to mature faster than they would have in Pittsburgh, and when they discover that they can make new friends, Maple Hill becomes home.



## Social Sensitivity

Marly's mother tells her that the kitchen "is the first place we women have to learn to dig." Lines such as these may surprise modern young readers who have grown up in a society where women's roles have expanded far beyond kitchen chores and housework.

Throughout the novel, Marly confronts rules about acceptable behavior for women: she is not supposed to explore by herself because she is a girl; she and her mother have "a fine female time" when they eat leftovers, rather than cooking "perfect pots of things every meal" for the men, who have gone fishing; Marly is glad that she is a girl because it is acceptable for girls "to be scared or silly or even ask dumb questions"; and she thinks that "cities were much better for boys," apparently because boys are free to explore and go out with their friends. From a modern perspective, Marly faces unreasonable restraints, and her discontent suggests that girls in the 1950s found them unreasonable and painful as well.

Implicit in Marly's development is the idea that as she matures into full womanhood she will have to accept limitations that men will not have to accept. Sorensen presents this situation so matter-of-factly that it comes as a relief when Marly successfully takes a stand on allowing the girls to help with the maple sugaring. But despite this small victory, her restrictions remain discomforting. Some girls still face such limitations today, and Marly's feelings about being a girl could serve as a source of fruitful discussion about women's roles in families and society.

Miracles on Maple Hill portrays the positive results of effective communication among family members. Marly's increasing ability to express her inner feelings signals her maturation and results in the loosening of some of the restrictions she faces as a girl. Similarly, the family members' ability to talk to one another aids their collective maturing and healing. As a sign of how far the family has come, the parents consult with the children about whether they should all return to Pittsburgh or spend the winter on Maple Hill; the parents respect and care about the children enough to ask for their opinions, and the children care enough about their parents to take into consideration their father's health.



# Literary Qualities

The rich descriptions and realistic characters of *Miracles on Maple Hill* may owe something to Sorensen's detailed observations of a real place. Sorensen notes that she based the setting on a real place, Edinboro, Pennsylvania, and some of the characters, such as Mr. and Mrs. Chris, on real people who lived there. The author's own experiences at Edinboro inspired some of the events in the novel, and she seems to have transferred her own urge to explore to Marly.

The thematically complex narrative presents some fundamental ideas about what is important in life and then fully realizes them through Marly's adventures. Sorensen's skillful descriptions of the natural world symbolize much of the inner worlds of the characters, bringing together the important literary elements of setting and character development.

The themes are also carefully tied to the inner growth of Marly and those around her. Nothing is wasted; everything has meaning in this remarkable unity of setting, characterization, and theme.

*Miracles on Maple Hill* also succeeds in presenting well-rounded characters.

More than just vehicles for the author's ideas, the characters seem like real people. Sorensen's insight into the dynamics of the family unit produces a realistic sibling rivalry between Marly and Joe. Marly wants to be respected and to love her brother without worrying about his disapproval; Joe is lonely and does not want his younger sister to see his weaknesses.

Rather than directly defining the characters' personality traits, Sorensen reveals personalities and growth through the characters' interactions with one another and with the natural world.

Marly's excitement over what she sees on Maple Hill tells much about her personality. At first she seems oversensitive about the living things around her, yet most readers will share her revulsion when the baby mice are burned alive.

This enhances her appeal, and her joy at the miracles on Maple Hill does not seem too out of the ordinary. As the novel progresses, Marly's responses to the world around her become more mature; her revulsion at the callous taking of life becomes something she can articulate.

Similarly, it is evident that Joe has matured somewhat when he saves the foxes, showing his newfound appreciation of Marly's concern for animal life.

Joe's behavior toward Marly also suggests that he is maturing. He may still regard her as a nuisance, but he lets Marly tag along when he goes to visit Harry the hermit for the first time.



The contrast that the narrative sets up between Mr. Chris and Marly's father highlights the distinctive personality traits of each. Through most of the novel, Mr. Chris serves as the father figure, full of concern for Marly's welfare and eager to teach her about the joys of life, whereas Daddy is sullen, depressed, and overwhelmed by life's trials. As Daddy becomes more like Mr. Chris—resourceful, hard-working, and optimistic—he becomes the true father in Marly's life.





# Themes and Characters

The main character of *Miracles on Maple Hill*, Marly, is ten years old at the start of the novel. She is worried about her father, sensitive to the feelings of others, and eager to explore the world around her. Indeed, she loves learning and exploring more than any other activity. She chafes at the traditional supporting roles of women, resenting the times when she has to wait until her brother or other males do the exploring first. The changing seasons and the wildlife of Maple Hill fascinate her, and she looks for miracles in the natural world.

Miracles dominate the themes of the novel. "Every week end you come until school's out," Mr. Chris says to Marty, "I promise you at least one new miracle."

Mr. Chris becomes Marty's guide to the wonders of Maple Hill. A huge man, he seems as sturdy as the trees, although he has a weak heart. At one point, Mr. Chris exclaims that she hates the sugaring season because of the strain it puts on her overworked husband's heart.

From this exclamation, Marly begins to understand the mixed blessings of life: the annual coming to life of dormant trees is a miracle, even in Pittsburgh, but with that miracle comes an annual threat to Mr. Chris, who grows dearer to her than any other adult with the exception of her parents.

Each season furnishes its own special miracles. Spring returns life to plants and brings new life from seeds and animals. Summer affords Marly the time to explore and discover living things that she has never seen before, including foxes. The foxes bring with them their own special miracle: Joe, who once made fun of Marly's desire to preserve the lives of mice and other animals, saves the foxes' lives, revealing his new sensitivity to the sanctity of life. Fall brings with it amazing colors: "Every morning on Maple Hill, Marly woke in the middle of a scarlet and golden miracle." Even this joyous outbreak of colorful leaves must be tempered by the knowledge that another of the region's typically bleak winters will come soon.

Yet winter too has its miracles, as when a cardinal comes to Marly's window for the food she has left out to attract birds.

Other miracles are highly personal.

When Mr. Chris has a heart attack, Marly learns what she can do for a friend. His maple trees need to be tapped of their spring run of sugary sap or he will not have the money he needs for supplies. She and her family not only tap their own maple trees, they help Mr. Chris's hired hand, Fritz, tap the Chrises' trees. Through cold and exhaustion, Marly works as hard as anyone. When local schoolboys are invited to spend a day helping with Mr. Chris's trees, she provides good evidence that girls can work as hard as boys and that the girls should be allowed to join in the sugaring. When she learns that Mr.



Chris is doing better, she adds another miracle to the many she has seen and experienced: "It was how light a heavy bucket could suddenly be."

Marly learns that miracles follow one upon another; her diligence and caring are reciprocated by others. The final miracle may be too easy to anticipate, but the careful development of the miracles of nature and of personal growth makes it seem apt: Mr. Chris recovers after being near death. Like his maple trees in spring, he is reborn.

The theme of growth represented in nature by spring and summer, is also found in Marly, Joe, and Daddy. Joe learns to overcome his tendency to sulk and begins to take responsibility for himself; he also learns to care for the welfare and feelings of others. For instance, after violating Harry the hermit's privacy and then fleeing in fear, he not only apologizes to Harry but takes an interest in the man's well-being. As a result, he learns about woodcarving and caring for animals from Harry.

Daddy's development is not shown in great detail, but it is important to the theme of miracles. Sorensen drops hints about what happened to him during the Korean War: he was a hero and was kept in a vile prisoner-of-war camp. His war experiences have left him too ill to work and always in a bad temper. On Maple Hill, he discovers that he can take control of his life. His self-esteem, which seemed hopelessly lost, returns as the seasons pass, and he raises a garden, fixes up the house, learns to care for his own maple trees, and develops sincere new friendships with his neighbors. His sharing in the cycles of the natural world reawakens his desire to participate in life, and, like Mr. Chris, he is reborn.

Marly's development is deceptively complex. On the surface, her experiences seem ordinary for a girl growing toward womanhood. But growing up is not easy, and *Miracles on Maple Hill* shows a full awareness of the true complexities of maturing. Through her search for the miracles on Maple Hill, Marly learns to be observant, to note the details that can be important. Further, she sorts out her values and learns to set priorities in her life. The ability to make these distinctions is a significant aspect of being a mature adult. But this learning experience and all the other lessons Marly learns—about love and caring, about respect for living things, about good deeds, about exploring, about family values, and about miracles—have special meaning because of one more lesson that Marly learns without knowing it. She learns to act on what she knows; she changes from a passive little sister to a positive force in the lives of others. She withstands ridicule and lectures about the proper role of young women in order to do what needs to be done. The fullness of Marly's character and the complexity of the narrative's themes make *Miracles on Maple Hill* a novel of depth, giving it a richness that rewards careful reading with pleasure and surprises.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is Marly a crybaby for being upset about the killing of the mice?
2. Why is it significant that Daddy sings in chapter 4?
3. When Mrs. Chris confides that she hates the sugar season because of its effect on her husband's health, how does it make you feel about all the fun everyone seems to be having?
4. What does Marly learn from her adventure with the cows?
5. What do readers learn about Joe during the adventure with the family of foxes?
6. Why does Joe own a gun? Is he too young to own one?
7. Why does Joe go back to Harry the hermit after running away? How should Joe have behaved to avoid embarrassing himself?
8. In what ways are animals killed in Miracles on Maple Hill? What are the reasons for killing the animals? Are any of these good reasons? Are any of them bad reasons? Marly, Joe, and Mr. Chris have different views about killing animals. Who do you most agree with?
9. What is significant about Harry the hermit giving Joe two goats and Marly eight chickens?
10. Everyone is worried in chapter 10 when Joe is late coming home. Do they react as they should? Besides rushing right over to Harry's place, what should they have done? Does Joe do the right thing? How should people have reacted to what he did for Harry?
11. Would you work as hard for a friend as Marly does when Mr. Chris is sick? After all the heavy carrying and long hours she works, why is Marly the only one who thinks of including girls in the field trips to Mr. Chris's farm?
12. Would you like to explore the woods the way Marly does? Would it be important for both boys and girls to be accompanied by someone like Mr. Chris on the explorations?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When Mr. Chris shows Marly a bloodroot, she thinks uneasily about his heart condition. What is bloodroot?

Does it really stop peoples' hearts if they eat it? What is its symbolic significance in the novel?

2. The sugar season plays a major role in the novel. Research maple trees and how their sap is harvested. When is the best time to tap the trees? How do people know when the time has come? How do farmers prepare freshly tapped maple sugar sap?

3. Maple Hill is supposed to be in Pennsylvania, north of Pittsburgh. Research this rural region and compare what you find to Sorensen's account.

What kinds of wildlife are found there?

4. Marly's father was in a prisoner-of-war camp, probably in North Korea.

What were prisoner-of-war camps like for American prisoners during the Korean War? Why would Daddy be so shaken by his experience?

5. Miracles are mentioned throughout the novel. List all the miracles you can find. Do they fall into different kinds of categories? Which miracle is the most important one? Why?

6. The schools of Pittsburgh are apparently different from those of the Maple Hill area. In what ways are urban schools different from rural ones? What advantages do urban schools have over rural ones? What advantages do rural schools have over urban ones? Could looking at the advantages of urban schools suggest practical ways of improving rural schools? Could looking at the advantages of rural schools suggest practical ways of improving urban schools?

7. What traditional family values are depicted in the novel? Which ones have practical applications to today's families? How? Which ones are impractical for today's families? Why?

## For Further Reference

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963. In an autobiographical sketch, Sorensen summarizes her career and early influences.

Kingman, Lee, ed. *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965*. Boston: Horn Book, 1965. Contains Sorensen's Newbery acceptance speech, which details influences on her writing and the background of *Miracles on Maple Hill*, as well as an overview of Sorensen's career by her friend Anna Marie Smith.

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

Martin's, 1978. Contains a bibliography of Sorensen's books and a brief commentary on *Miracles on Maple Hill*.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Vineta Colby, eds. *Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1955. Sorensen's autobiographical sketch summarizes her life up to 1955.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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