

Miss Hickory Short Guide

Miss Hickory by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

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Overview

Miss Hickory is a story that centers on nature. The characters are for the most part animals, and the changing seasons play an important role. The reader observes the interactions between the animals and sees how each creature prepares itself to survive the winter. Although the story is a fantasy, Bailey does not idealize the situations. Instead she shows the harshness of winter and the unpleasantness of selfish behavior.

Miss Hickory, a doll fashioned from a twig, is in some ways admirable, but she lacks charm, gentleness, physical attractiveness, and the sorts of qualities that make characters immediately likable. She is well aware of her stubborn nature and is constantly trying to change. This makes Miss Hickory an interesting character because her actions are unpredictable.

The structure of the book is also unpredictable. Instead of following a traditional plot, it is episodic, meandering from the dilemma of Miss Hickory's search for a home to the habits of a ground hog; from a Christmas celebration in the barn to a bull frog's search for solitude. But this episodic quality does not detract from the reader's enjoyment. Instead it adds to the diversity of characters and situations.

About the Author

Born October 25, 1875, in Hoosick Falls, New York, Carolyn Sherwin Bailey was interested in writing from a very early age. Even before she knew how to write, she dictated stories to her mother, who was a mathematics teacher and a writer. Until she was twelve, she was educated at home. During this time, her grandmother gave her the real Miss Hickory, a doll made from a pattern from pioneer days. By the time she was nineteen, Bailey's work was being published, and she wrote books for children for the rest of her life.

Bailey attended Teachers College at Columbia University. She later taught school and rose to become a principal in addition to editing a children's magazine and continuing her writing career. In 1947 she won the Newbery Prize for Miss Hickory.

Setting

The story takes place on a New Hampshire farm, and most of the action occurs close to where Miss Hickory lives.

The barn and the surrounding fields are also important. Because Miss Hickory is so small, the land that makes up her world—which seems small to humans—is very large to her. Although the story has no particular time setting (it could take place in either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries), the seasons of the year are very important to Miss Hickory and her animal fellows. As the book opens, winter is approaching.



Social Sensitivity

Social issues are not a focus of this book. Bailey focuses on personalities, suggesting that everyone must be true to their inner natures, which can be as complex and ambivalent as the natural world. There are extremes to nature—cruel as well as nourishing elements, bitter winters and warming springs, a mixture of good and bad outcomes. It is not easy to understand oneself or to find out where one belongs in the world. Miss Hickory struggles between the desires of her heart and the demands of her head.

But when she shockingly loses her head to the squirrel, she is somehow free to follow a deeper instinct. Such ambivalence pervades Miss Hickory and can provide interesting points for group discussion.

Literary Qualities

Images in *Miss Hickory* are more important than plot development, although the plot does take a surprising twist. Bailey's phrases such as "fellowfeeling," "two-legger," "cupboard love" and "up-boughs" and "down-boughs" are poetic. Her descriptions are vivid, as when Ann and Timothy follow Crow into the blooming apple orchard: Pink and white, all around and above Ann and Timothy, the orchard, as far as they could see, was blooming. It hung a pink curtain against the new green of Temple Mountain. All the worn crotches and ragged elbows of the gnarled trees were covered with blossoms, but Timothy was right. The McIntosh trees had the thickest, the loveliest bloom of all.

On the other hand, the tone of *Miss Hickory* is problematic. How are we to view her? Can we identify with a character who is happier when she loses her individuality and becomes part of a tree?

These and similar questions provide greater depth to the book than first appears.



Themes and Characters

The book contains many characters besides Miss Hickory. The most important of these are Squirrel, Crow, and Mr. T. Willard-Brown. Miss Hickory is a doll made of an apple-wood twig, and her head is a hickory nut, making her hardheaded in more ways than one.

Throughout the book she tries to become a nicer person, and sometimes nature works against her, and sometimes with her. For example, when spring comes, Miss Hickory's body becomes more supple as the sap begins to flow; her mind also becomes more flexible.

Miss Hickory's relationship with the other characters emphasizes the complexity of her character. She has an ambivalent relationship with Squirrel.

Though selfish, he is more likable than Miss Hickory. Because of his fondness for nuts and his irresponsibility in collecting a winter supply of them, he is a threat to the nut-headed doll. In one scene there is a flicker of possibility for them to become friends. Miss Hickory, because she is afraid for her head, loses this chance to gain a friend. She must be prodded into making any changes.

Mr. T. Willard-Brown suggests things to improve her personality, but Crow is the only one who is able to get her to try new things by making her do them. For example, when Miss Hickory's home under the lilac bush is taken over by Chipmunk, the doll just sits around moping.

Crow helps her out of this situation by finding her a new home—the robin's nest.

Although Miss Hickory is often unpleasant to be around, she unselfishly helps the Hen-Pheasants form the Ladies' Aid Society to improve their living conditions. Likewise, she unhesitatingly helps the stranded Bull Frog out of his predicament. Through her interactions with Bull Frog and the Hen-Pheasants, Miss Hickory is able to show her good side. Another aspect of Miss Hickory's complexity is that she is quick to judge others, particularly Crow.

Despite all of Miss Hickory's criticisms, Crow acts as her friend throughout and shows Ann where to find her at the book's end. Crow and Miss Hickory do not share the same values—he is not tidy, for example—but they are able to share some ideas. Crow is much more experienced than Miss Hickory because he travels south every winter. Thus he is able to counsel her. He listens to her complaining and criticisms without becoming angry, and in return he offers sound advice. He is, as he is described in the list of characters, "tough and wise.

Also kindly," and he and Miss Hickory share "fellow-feeling."



Another advisor to Miss Hickory is a cat named Mr. T. Willard-Brown, the head-ratter of the barn. Like Crow, the cat offers kind advice, but he does not go out of his way to see that Miss Hickory is safe. With his "suit yourself" attitude, he refuses to cajole the doll into taking his counsel. Other, less important characters such as Fawn, Wild-Heifer, BamHeifer, and Cow provide diversity in the book. Other animals provide lessons about nature. The only human characters are Great-Granny Brown, Timothy, and Ann. By going to Boston for the winter, Ann is the indirect cause of Miss Hickory's problems. Ann and Timothy appear near the end of the book, when Ann is able to recognize the doll's metamorphosis into a scion as positive.



Topics for Discussion

1. Miss Hickory often lacks initiative.

What options did she have after Chipmunk took over her home? What would you have done if you had been in her situation?

2. Miss Hickory is hardheaded. Once she has reconciled herself to a solution, however, she shows her strengths. What are these strengths? What kinds of things does she do after she finally settles into the robin's nest?

3. Discuss the Ladies' Aid Society.

What was the problem in the relations of Hen-Pheasant and Cock-Pheasant?

What changes did Miss Hickory bring about? What different changes could have been made? What would you have done if you were a Hen-Pheasant displeased with your situation?

4. Do you like Miss Hickory? Why or why not? Do you think Miss Hickory likes herself?

5. Discuss the roles of minor characters in the novel. How did Mr. T. Willard Brown help Miss Hickory? What is the importance of Bull Frog to the novel?

How about Ground Hog? Ann?

6. In the beginning of the novel Crow is described as "tough and wise. Also kindly." Find examples demonstrating these qualities.

7. What is the purpose of the Christmas scene? Is it believable? Does it help us understand the characters and the book better? How does Miss Hickory's involvement in this scene help us to understand aspects of her character?

8. Would Squirrel have eaten Miss Hickory's head if she had been friendlier towards him? Do you like Squirrel?

Compare the attitudes of Squirrel and Miss Hickory towards life. Whose is more admirable?

9. How would you describe the plot of this book? Usually, the main character of a novel changes by the end of the book. In what ways, if any, does Miss Hickory change?

10. Is the ending happy? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is a scion? What is its purpose? Find out more about how apple trees are grown and maintained.
2. List the difficult words you have found in this book. Define and explain each in its context.
3. Some poetic turns of phrase in Miss Hickory are "cupboard love" and "fellow feeling." Find others and discuss them.
4. Find out about New Hampshire.

What is the weather like? How do the plants and animals differ from those where you live?

5. Write an essay about the last paragraph of the book. Consider what happens to Miss Hickory. Is it good? Do you think she is happy? Would you be?
6. Write a short report on one of the following animals: ground hog, crow, pheasant, bullfrog.
7. Find out more about Ground Hog Day.
8. What is a lithograph? Do you feel that the lithographs by Ruth Gannett fit this book? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Carolyn Sherwin Bailey." In *Something About the Author*.

Detroit: Gale, 1978. The editors have compiled a long list of Bailey's publications; there is also a section quoting Bailey on the art of writing for children.

Kunitz, Stanley, and Howard Haycraft, eds. *The Junior Book of Authors*. 2d ed.

Revised. New York: Wilson, 1951. An autobiographical essay.

Marquardt, Dorothy, and Martha Ward.

Authors of Books for Young People. 2d ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971. This short entry gives biographical information and a list of Bailey's writings.

Related Titles

Bailey divides her writings into two categories: those about children in early America, and those set in the countryside around her hometown of Temple, New Hampshire. Books in the first category include *Boys and Girls of Colonial Days* (1917), *Boy Heroes in Making America* (1931), and *Boys and Girls of Pioneer Days* (1924). *Miss Hickory* is the best example of the New Hampshire books. Also of interest is *Finnegan II: His Nine Lives*, about a cat who, like *Miss Hickory*, must survive on his own. But unlike *Miss Hickory*, who lives in the country, *Finnegan* lives in an alley across from a delicatessen.

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