

Roller Skates Short Guide

Roller Skates by Ruth Sawyer

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Overview

Roller Skates reflects Sawyer's strong belief that children should experience life and not be overprotected. The main character, ten-year-old Lucinda Wyman, is very independent and capable.

A good role model for young people everywhere, Lucinda makes intelligent, sensitive decisions while escaping from the world of restrictions in which most children are compelled to live. Her moments of self-doubt and insecurity make her realistic and believable, enabling readers to relate to her today as they did during the first half of the century.

Lucinda also reflects Sawyer's great faith in young people and their capacity to understand and face the challenges of life. In her many positive encounters with adults, Lucinda finds them tolerant, interested, and supportive of children. Her guardian, Miss Peters, gives Lucinda the responsibility of deciding how to spend her afternoons, only requiring that the girl leave a note as to her whereabouts. Miss Peters and her sister, Miss Nettie, likewise leave notes for Lucinda when they go out, demonstrating their true regard for her importance as a valuable human being.

While Sawyer has idealized her portrayal of adults, the exposure to such wonderful and sympathetic adults is refreshing.

Sawyer opposed depicting life as too soft or pleasant, even in books for young people, and her discussions of death in this book are forthright. Her attempt to let readers face the realities of life acknowledges their inner strength and affirms their ability to cope with truth.

About the Author

Ruth Sawyer, the youngest of five children, was born on August 5, 1880, in Boston, Massachusetts. The only daughter of Timothy and Ethalinda Sawyer, she attended Miss Brackett's Private School in New York City and then, in 1888, went on to the Garland Kindergarten Normal School. Upon graduation she accepted a position in Cuba demonstrating the art of storytelling to teachers setting up a kindergarten for orphans. Her work in Cuba led to a scholarship to Columbia University, where she received a bachelor of science degree in education in 1904. While still a student, she worked for the New York Sun and spent two summers in Ireland writing feature stories for the newspaper and collecting Irish folktales for her own publications. She began her career as a professional storyteller and lecturer in 1908, setting up the first storytelling program for children in the New York libraries.

Almost all of Sawyer's thirty-five books are based on her own experiences or on folktales she collected in different countries. Her fascination with Christmas resulted in several publications about this holiday: *This Way to Christmas*; *The Long Christmas*; *The Christmas Anna Angel*; *This Is the Christmas: A Serbian Folktale* (1945); *Maggie Rose: Her Birthday Christmas*; *The Year of the Christmas Dragon* (1960); and *Joy to the World: Christmas Legends*.

The autobiographical *Roller Skates* and its sequel, *The Year of Jubilo*, reflect Sawyer's belief that unsuppressed children are the happiest. *Roller Skates* won the Newbery Medal in 1937. Two of Sawyer's books were Caldecott Honor selections: *The Christmas Anna Angel* illustrated by Kate Seredy, and *Journey Cake, Ho!*, illustrated by Sawyer's son-in-law, Robert McCloskey.

In 1965 librarians in the United States honored Sawyer with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for the diverse nature of her contributions to children's literature, including storytelling, retelling folk tales, and writing books for young people. That same year the Catholic Library Association awarded her the Regina Medal, commemorating a lifetime of valuable literary contributions.

Sawyer died on June 3, 1970.

Setting

Roller Skates is set in New York City in the 1890s, when hansom cabs travelled along macadam roads, when vendors arranged pyramids of fruit on sidewalk stands, when colorful "rags and bottles" men collected and sorted discards, and when children thought of books and stories as essential components of leisure time.

Lucinda becomes quite familiar with the city streets, skating along the avenues surrounding Central and Bryant Parks as regularly as possible. During the course of the story, she resides with the Peters sisters who care for her while her parents spend a year abroad. These guardians afford Lucinda freedom to explore parts of the city independently.

Lucinda's world contains brownstone houses, Miss Brackett's Private School, the Gedney House Hotel, the Peterses' apartment, her friend Tony's cellarhome, Aunt Emily's "proper" home, and the various shops and restaurants within skating distance of these places.

Lucinda's physical freedom parallels her spiritual freedom in this unrestricted but protective environment.



Social Sensitivity

By the standards of the late 1930s, Sawyer's treatment of death in *Roller Skates* is unconventional. The story reflects her firm belief in honestly presenting the facts to children, and contrary to some negative reactions in the 1930s, most modern readers recognize the sensitivity with which she handles this subject. The facts about Princess Zayda's murder or Trinket's death are not kept from Lucinda, nor are they shared with her bluntly. The concerned hotel managers sooth Lucinda after she discovers the murdered princess. These sensitive people help the sobbing child, accepting her grief and confusion patiently, without question or condescension.

Sawyer also deals directly with the death of four-year-old Trinket. Lucinda participates fully in the care and treatment of Trinket, administering medication, persuading the small child to eat, and sleeping in the same room as her dying friend. Lucinda is encouraged to interact with Trinket's parents after their daughter's death and becomes instrumental in planning the child's funeral. The loss of these two friends leads Lucinda to think about how death divides people, with something going and something staying—a remarkably astute observation for a youngster.

It is important when reading *Roller Skates* to realize that many of the characters' attitudes accurately reflect life in the 1890s. While Sawyer's treatment of death is admirable, some readers might object to her treatment of women, ethnic groups, and the safety of children.

Lucinda is a strong protofeminist, but many of the adult female characters are not, and they provide stereotypical nurturing while the male characters tackle difficult situations and solve perplexing problems. Other gender-related stereotypes appear when Lucinda acknowledges the need for a boy to handle certain parts of a theater production, when she feels awestruck by a woman daring to smoke, when she praises a boy who refrains from crying, and when she resigns herself to someday belonging to a husband and losing her own identity in the process. In all these instances, Sawyer presents a slice-of-life view of our country's historical attitudes. Most readers will be appeased when they realize Sawyer's novel reflects rather than advocates such practices.

Much of the charm in *Roller Skates* derives from Lucinda's frequent encounters with people of diverse ethnic origins. Occasionally, however, comments indicative of the times and reflective of a less sensitive culture surface.

The Asian princess is thought to be a "heathen Chinee"; Aunt Ellen's resourcefulness is attributed to her Scottish heritage; Miss Lucy Wimple's cook is referred to as "faithful black Susan"; and suspicions about Tony's family are dismissed when it is found they are "simple, honest Italians, minding their own business." The attitudes of the heroine, however, do not reflect such insensitivity. Through Lucinda's childish innocence, the reader can see the beauty of regarding others as unique individuals. One of Lucinda's most appealing characteristics is her love of people. Despite the attitudes of the time, the novel clearly upholds the value of such unprejudiced love.



Since the late 1800s, the world has become an increasingly complicated place in which to live. The contrast between contemporary society and that of the 1890s is evident in the relaxed manner in which Lucinda's guardians respond to her propensity for striking up friendships with adult strangers whom she finds interesting. Today's children would be severely warned against going to the home of a cab driver for a "piece of griddle bread" or entering the apartment of a lady stranger who claimed to "like little children very much." Fortunately for Lucinda, most of her adventures are with decent, kind people. One, however, ends in terror, and Lucinda's discovery of the jeweled dagger embedded in Princess Zayda's back should suggest to modern audiences the dangers of being too trusting. This topic should be covered carefully by any educator using *Roller Skates* in the classroom.

Literary Qualities

Roller Skates is an endearing and entertaining story that relies heavily upon literary allusion for its effect. Sawyer's regular references to major works of literature not only entice readers to explore books on their own but also provide thematic connections throughout her novel. She draws from all of literature, alluding to the youthful freedom and discovery of "brave new worlds" in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*; Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*; Howard Pyle's *Robin Hood*; Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*; the Bible; Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"; and many of Shakespeare's plays. Many pages are devoted to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, allowing readers familiar with this play to recognize parallels between Prospero and Uncle Earle, Caliban and Aunt Emily, and both Miranda and Ariel and Lucinda. The enchanted New York City that Lucinda discovers during her unrestricted year mirrors Prospero's enchanted island.

Bird imagery reinforces the book's themes of freedom and independence.

Lucinda's hair is "as fine and sleek as a raven's breast." With no governess around to object, she jumps off of chairs onto beds to practice "flying." After Trinket dies, the doctor shares a folktale about seagulls and their connection with people's souls. Allusions are also made to "Winged Victory" and Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology.

Although *Roller Skates* is theoretically autobiographical, Sawyer writes it as fiction. The excerpts from a diary that Sawyer inserts into the narrative contribute to the story's credibility. The diary notes refer to historical events, such as the construction of General Grant's tomb, that add to the story's believability.

Sawyer also employs the literary technique of foreshadowing. An early reference to Bluebeard's beheaded wives foreshadows the subsequent murder of Princess Zayda, who is married to a man Lucinda nicknames Bluebeard. In a separate instance, when describing her friend Tony, Lucinda compares him to Michelangelo, hinting at the later discovery of Tony's artistic talents. Sawyer's control over every detail in *Roller Skates* makes the uncovering of such connections an adventure in itself.



Themes and Characters

Distinctive characters represent a wide variety of ethnic, social, and age groups throughout *Roller Skates*. They include wealthy businessmen, shopkeepers, members of the gentry, cab drivers, police officers, and virtual paupers; they are of Italian, Irish, African, Polish, Asian, and Scottish descent; and they range from less than a year old to past retirement age. All these characters contribute to the development of the story's heroine, Lucinda Wyman.

Self-assured, confident, and capable, Lucinda Wyman has, at age ten, the compassion and sensitivity of a mature adult. She leaves a lasting impression on everyone she meets, garnering a treasure of supportive, genuine friends who delight in her free-spirited ways.

Three male characters who treat children respectfully develop a personal and protective interest in Lucinda's affairs.

Mr. Gilligan, the hansom cab driver, provides a link between the affectionate but rather detached parents and Lucinda's temporary home with the Peterses.

Patrolman M'Gonegal also befriends Lucinda and helps to provide her with a sense of security as she begins her year of skating the sidewalks of New York. He lives up to Lucinda's expectations of a police officer, personifying justice for her. Mr. "Night Owl," so named for his unconventional work schedule at the *New York Sun*, gives Lucinda a look at life through the eyes of a youthful adult.

His lighthearted antics at the dinner table, his spontaneous invitation to the circus, and his willingness to share a ride on Jumbo provide an adult parallel to Lucinda's personality. Collectively these three men are substitute fathers for Lucinda, providing her love, acceptance, security, and a mature, but still carefree, look at life.

Lucinda's official guardians, the Misses Peters, are sweet, docile, and understanding—ideal adults for the curious and energetic Lucinda to live with. The elder Miss Peters is especially comfortable around children. A schoolteacher, she realizes the value of an inquisitive mind and tolerates Lucinda's need for freedom. Her sister, Miss Nettie, is more timid but also more loving. She needs Lucinda's affection as much as the child needs hers. A warm, genuinely loving relationship develops between the two.

Not all of the adults Lucinda encounters are pleasant. Aunt Emily, Mrs. Wyman's self-righteous older sister, has appointed herself overseer of Lucinda's training in "social graces." Aunt Emily's unwavering loyalty to "System, Duty, and Discipline" renders her incapable of sensitivity. Her own four daughters are "good little girls," perfectly molded; she cruelly considers Lucinda to be nearly hopeless, frequently reminding her that she is as "homely as two toads." Aunt Emily is an insecure, priggish, social snob whose one redeeming quality is that her kind husband occasionally influences her.



Lucinda's marvelous Uncle Earle, determined that Lucinda be allowed to maintain her individuality, shields her from Aunt Emily's severity. His practical good sense endears him to readers and makes him a dominant influence in the story. He is educated and wealthy, but not arrogant. When he cradles the panicked Lucinda on his lap and listens to her concerns about the Browdowskis' funeral plans, there is no doubt that he will act in a generous manner. His ability to talk about death with his niece demonstrates his great sensitivity. His devotion to her serves to firmly stabilize Lucinda, giving her strength and a sense of family security.

Lucinda's world is not filled entirely with adults. Tony Coppino, her primary playmate, is trustworthy and artistic.

Even though he lives in a very small cellar with his parents and several brothers and sisters, his cheerfulness is persistent. He becomes troubled only when a gang of bullies threatens him while he tends his father's fruit stand and when, at the end of the story, he begins to feel inferior and attacks Lucinda's social position. A talented artist, he proves his skill as a set designer during a production of William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*.

Another playmate is Caroline Browdowski, nicknamed Trinket. The humble and destitute Browdowskis are among the most sympathetic characters in *Roller Skates*. An only child, the unassuming and quiet Trinket loves Lucinda, the only playmate she has ever had.

She derives pleasure from simple things: decorated Christmas trees, visits to toy shops, listening to songs. Trinket's proud and determined parents try to hide their poverty, and their pride leads to the eventual death of their four-year-old daughter.

The fact that ten-year-old Lucinda easily survives her year in New York City without her parents attests to the enduring qualities of the Wymans' love.

This theme of love and separation appears throughout *Roller Skates*, affecting permanent partings as well. After the deaths of Trinket and another friend, Princess Zayda, Lucinda realizes the lasting value of friendship and the possibility of keeping other people alive through memories. She comes to the understanding that love transcends all barriers, even death.

The conflict between Lucinda and Aunt Emily introduces the theme of individual freedom in *Roller Skates*. Lucinda refuses to stay with her aunt while her parents are gone because she realizes that Emily will end up owning her, molding her into something that she simply is not. Most of the other adults in *Roller Skates* value Lucinda's independent spirit, wistfully recognizing traits in her that remind them of their own carefree days of childhood. Miss Peters especially values a child not "run into a mold." Patrolman M'Gonegal instinctively knows that "young things shouldn't be tied up," and Mr. Gilligan confides to Lucinda's caretakers that he would not mind the freedom of being ten years old again. Lucinda's freedom is contrasted with the

suggested constraint of Princess Zayda, whose jealous husband isolates her from the rest of the world. But eventually Zayda escapes, her freedom coming only in death.



Topics for Discussion

1. While on the way to the Misses Peters for the first time, Lucinda's cab driver realizes that no one has told him where to take her. What is the effect of depicting Lucinda, who is only ten years old, in this situation?
2. Aunt Emily is portrayed as a character addicted to "System, Duty, and Discipline," always doing everything "right." How does she compare with Uncle Earle? Does he, by contrast, do things that are "wrong"?
3. Lucinda befriends many strangers during her year in New York City. How does her behavior differ from the way many ten year olds today interact with strangers? Why?
4. Lucinda feels that a theater performance is "real the first time" and less so in subsequent performances. What does she mean by this statement? Do you agree?
5. After the production of *The Tempest*, many of the adults crowd around the tiny theater feeling "rather wistful." Why do you think they feel this way?
6. Some people might be critical of Mr. Spindler's method of handling the princess's death. Does he deal with the situation in the best way? Why does he choose to feign ignorance about the murder?
7. In the Schultzes' shop, Lucinda always walks about and unfastens all the jack-in-the-boxes. What is the function of this act to the book's development?
8. Uncle Earle has been described as one of the finest uncles in literature. Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. Lucinda is portrayed as a selfsufficient, confident girl, but in chapter 7 she decides to keep her diary key around her neck until her mother returns "to make it safe." Why does she do this? What insights does this give about her personality?
10. Lucinda is kind to old people, careful not to wear out her welcome, sensitive to the needs of others, and motivated to act against the injustices in the world. Why, then, does Aunt Emily consider her to be a bad influence on her own four daughters?
11. Why does Lucinda believe that after her parents return she will "never belong to herself again" and that eventually she will belong to her husband?
12. At the end of the novel, Lucinda returns to the carousel and sees other children on the horses that she and Tony always rode. Why does she want to stick her tongue out at them?
13. Why does Tony not want "stylish people" poking around in his cellar?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. *Roller Skates* is an autobiographical account of Ruth Sawyer's year in New York City without her parents. The author frequently mentions actual names and places from the 1890s. How do these allusions contribute to the success of the novel?
2. *Roller Skates* won the Newbery Medal in 1937. Its sequel, *The Year of Jubilo*, chronicles the Wyman family's life after the death of Lucinda's father.

Compare the two books. Which book would you have given the award to?

Why?

3. In her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, Sawyer said she believed a free child was a happy child.

What evidence is there to suggest that Lucinda was a happier child during her year in New York City? Support or dispute the wisdom of Sawyer's assertion with evidence from the text and from your own experience.

4. Ruth Sawyer makes many allusions to the works of Shakespeare in *Roller Skates*. How do his plays relate to this novel?
5. In what ways is Lucinda an unconventional child?

For Further Reference

Haviland, Virginia. Ruth Sawyer. New York: Henry Z. Walck, 1965. A short critical account of Sawyer's life and work. It includes biographical information and a discussion of several of her books.

McCloskey, Margaret Durand. "Our Fair Lady!" Horn Book 41 (October 1965): 481-486. This article, written by Sawyer's daughter, provides insights into the author's personal life.

Moore, Anne Carroll. "Ruth Sawyer, Storyteller." Horn Book 12 (January 1936): 34-38. Besides providing a short history of her storytelling career, this article describes the origins of a Christmas festival in the New York City libraries in which Sawyer participated.

Overton, Jacqueline. "This Way to Christmas with Ruth Sawyer." Horn Book 20 (November 1944): 447-460.

The author calls upon Sawyer's ability to lift spirits during a wartime Christmas. The article also tells of Sawyer's experiences collecting folktales in Spain.

Sawyer, Ruth. *The Way of the Storyteller*. 1942. Reprint. New York: Viking, 1962. This is not a book devoted to the "hows" and "whats" of storytelling but rather to those special qualities that contribute to a storyteller's expertise. It includes eleven of Sawyer's stories and an extensive bibliography for other noteworthy sources of folktales.

Related Titles

Roller Skates describes ten-year-old Lucinda Wyman's year in New York City.

Its sequel, *The Year of Jubilo*, begins after the family moves to Maine following Mr. Wyman's death. This novel chronicles Lucinda's maturation. Another book that, like *Roller Skates*, explores relationships between the young and the old is *Maggie Rose: Her Birthday Christmas*. *Daddies: The Story of a Plain Hound-Dog* treats themes of death in a manner similar to *Roller Skates*.



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