Thimble Summer Short Guide

Thimble Summer by Elizabeth Enright

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Overview

In Thimble Summer Enright projects a deep understanding of the concerns and emotions of young adults. Garnet Linden, her brother Jay, and their friends Citronella Hauser and Eric Swanstrom are complex, engaging characters, and their desire for adventure, their need for security, and their wish to be respected will touch responsive chords in most young readers.

Garnet enjoys living on a farm with her parents and brother, but she is curious about the world outside her small country home, and she longs to venture out on her own, seeking education and excitement. Her adventures in town and her interaction with the other characters in the novel make for an amusing, moving story about growing up.

About the Author

Elizabeth Enright was born on September 17, 1909, in Oak Park, outside of Chicago. Her father was Walter J. Enright, a political cartoonist, and her mother was Maginel Wright Enright, a magazine illustrator. Influenced by her parents' interest in art, Elizabeth began drawing at age three. Her pictures were often of her favorite children's stories.

Once out of high school, she studied at the Art Students League in New York from 1927 to 1928. She spent part of 1929 in Paris, and in 1930 she married Robert Marty Gillham; they had three boys: Nicholas, Robert, and Oliver.

Enright began her career by illustrating children's books, most notably those by Marian King: Kees (1930), Annan, a Lad of Palestine (1931), and Kees and Kleintje (1934). Wanting to focus her illustrations on a subject of her own choosing, Enright wrote her first book, Kintu: A Congo Adventure (1935). For this book, she created the pictures first and then wrote the text. While working on Kintu, she discovered that she preferred writing over illustrating, and she turned her talents to writing Thimble Summer.

Accompanied by Enright's own illustrations, Thimble Summer was well received by the critics, and it won the 1939 Newbery Medal. As her career developed, Enright became one of America's most respected writers for both young adults and children. Her book Gone-Away Lake (1957), which is written for younger children, won the New York Herald Tribune's Children's Spring Book Festival Award in 1957 and was a Newbery Honor Book recipient in 1958.

Tatsinda was a New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival Honor Book recipient in 1963. Enright was nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, which is given for a writer's lifetime achievement.

In addition to writing for young readers, Enright wrote many stories for adults that appeared in such magazines as the New Yorker, Saturday Evening Post, Harper's, and McCall's. As with her fiction for young people, Enright's short stories feature a gentle sense of humor and keen insight into human nature. She died on June 8, 1968.

Setting

Most of the book's events take place during a summer in the 1930s in Esau Valley, Wisconsin, where Garnet lives on her family's farm. The valley contains a river, marshland, and woods. Local farmers raise com and oats, as well as cattle, pigs, and chickens. Some of the action takes place in New Conniston, a small town that, for a country girl like Garnet, glitters "like Bagdad and Zanzibar and Constantinople." New Conniston has a dime store, furniture stores, restaurants, and movie theaters. For Garnet, it is a place full of Interesting people, city luxuries, and prospects for adventure. New Conniston is also the location of the Southwestern Wisconsin Fair, held in early September. Complete with carnival sideshows and rides, the fair offers new sights and sounds.

At the beginning of Thimble Summer, southwestern Wisconsin is in the middle of a terrible drought. The 1930s brought hard economic times to America with the Great Depression, a problem that was compounded when much of the Midwest suffered from a disastrous drought that dried up farm crops. The soil, without plants to hold it together with their roots, blew away in great clouds of dust. In Enright's novel, the lack of rain leaves Garnet's father's crops withering, and for a while he stays up late every night worrying about paying his bills. Garnet and Jay sympathize with their father, and Jay vows never to be a farmer. Rain brings relief early in the novel, and with it comes the freedom for Garnet to explore her world.

Social Sensitivity

Thimble Summer is set in the 1930s, the time of the Great Depression and the drought that afflicted many midwestern states. Eric is Enright's vehicle for introducing some of the horrors of the era. Readers may be interested to know that many people rode railroad boxcars the way Eric does and that hawking goods on the street was common. The drought made the tough times even worse for farmers, and many families lost everything they owned.

Thus, the opening chapter of Thimble Summer presented to readers in 1938 a dark and fearful reality. Thimble Summer may help generate discussions of what life in the 1930s Midwest was like.

An issue that parents and teachers will want to discuss with readers of Thimble Summer is Garnet's hitchhiking. Although the story of Mrs. Eberhardt's girlhood adventure creates some suspense by suggesting that running away may have serious consequences— the young Mrs. Eberhardt is robbed— Garnet meets only nice people and has an interesting adventure. Readers should know that even in the 1930s it was unwise to hitchhike, and that in the modern world, a young person alone and hitchhiking is in very real danger of being harmed.

Literary Qualities

Thimble Summer features clear, unadorned prose. With descriptive power Enright creates moods and images that reflect Garnet's feelings, as in this passage that depicts Garnet's twinges of fear as she and Jay walk along the wooded riverbank at night: All along the wooded banks owls hooted with a velvety, lost sound; and there was one that screamed, from time to time, in a high, terrifying voice. Garnet knew that they were only owls, but still, in the hot darkness with no light but the solemn winking of the fireflies, she felt that they might be anything.

Although Garnet's growth and personality are the primary unifying factors of the novel, symbols also help pull together the episodes. One significant but simply presented symbol is the silver thimble Garnet finds beside the river: " 'it's solid silver!' she shouted triumphantly, 'and I think it must be magic too!'" Garnet keeps this thimble with her throughout her adventures, and by the end of the novel she declares, "Everything has happened since I found it, and all nice things! As long as I live I'm always going to call this summer the thimble summer." Throughout the novel, the thimble is a symbol of home, a reminder that special events are about to happen.

Garnet's symbolic name refers to both a dark red color and a gemstone. Jewels and jewelry figure often in the images of Thimble Summer. For instance, in her story of youth, Mrs. Eberhardt tells of her desire to own a particular coral bracelet with a coral heart hanging from it. Coral as a color is red, recalling Garnet's name; the heart is like a gem, again recalling Garnet. This symbolism helps to convey the idea that Mrs. Eberhardt's story of the past is related to the Garnet of the present. The overall impression created by Garnet's name is that she, herself, is a jewel—as bright and colorful and precious as a gem.

Themes and Characters

The themes involving family and adventure unify Thimble Summer. These themes find their focus in Garnet Linden, a girl "between nine and ten" who craves independence and the respect of her family. A tomboy, Garnet goes barefoot most of the time, dislikes wearing dresses, and enjoys physical activities such as swimming and helping out with the farm work. Quick to anger and nearly as quick to forgive, she is a resilient, good-hearted character.

Garnet looks to her family for warmth and support, but she is an independent girl who wants adventures of her own and who sometimes acts without thinking. When her brother's teasing leads her to run off impetuously to New Connlston, she has a vague idea that maybe her family will be "sorry later on."

This childish notion of punishing those who love her is forgotten in the excitement of hitchhiking and then riding a speeding bus on the way to town. Once in New Conniston, she is delighted with the shops and ends up buying small presents for her family. Having carelessly spent her money, she finds herself stranded and must walk some of the eighteen miles home before she finds a ride with a truck driver. Upon Garnet's return, her neighbor Mr. Freebody points out just how painful her thoughtlessness could have been to those who love and worry about her.

Garnet's situation is a difficult one.

She needs to learn to think about how her actions could affect others, but she also has to satisfy her independent spirit and sense of self-respect. Much of the novel emphasizes how she develops self-control, and by the end of the novel, she is well on her way toward adulthood, having decided that she wants to follow in her father's footsteps and become a farmer. She demonstrates her independence by exhibiting her pig Timmy at the fair, then treating her family and friends to her own special party, paid for with the first-prize winnings of three dollars and fifty cents.

Citronella Hauser is Garnet's best friend. She shares several of Garnet's interests, including reading, but the novel emphasizes their contrasts: Citronella focuses on household chores, such as cooking, while Garnet is primarily interested in outdoor work, such as threshing; Citronella is primarily a talker, not a doer, while Garnet prefers action. Even the girls' names suggest a contrast between Citronella's mild manner and Garnet's fiery temperament.

"Citronella" is the name of a bluishgreen grass, whereas "Garnet" suggests the color of a dark red gemstone.

Despite their differences, the girls are united by a common concern for each other's welfare.

It is through Citronella that Garnet meets Mrs. Eberhardt, Citronella's great-grandmother. She tells the girls stories of the times when farmers and Native Americans shared Esau Valley, and of her mischievous behavior as a young girl. The young Mrs. Eberhardt described in these stories resembles Garnet and suggests that Thimble Summer concerns universal values that remain constant over generations.

Garnet and her brother, Jay, are very close until Eric Swanstrom enters their lives. Jay turns his attentions to the new boy, and Garnet becomes jealous.

But Garnet learns to like Eric and soon treats him like another brother. The other youngsters envy Eric because he has led an adventuresome life, but he emphasizes that his experiences were born of hard necessity after the deaths of his parents. Only thirteen years old, he has bounced around the United States, looking for work so that he can feed himself. When he first enters the story, Eric has not eaten for two days.

"I've seen rivers dried up and shrunk away to nothing," he says, "and the earth all full of cracks, and cattle dead for want of water." He has seen the misery of the Great Depression and has no more taste for wandering or adventure: "I want to stay here for years and years." His experiences and views help to strengthen the theme of family, emphasizing the value of close family ties and suggesting that adventures are best when they are shared with loved ones.

Topics for Discussion

1. What does Garnet learn from running away to New Conniston? Is it safe for her to hitchhike?

2. How did midwestern farms in 1938 differ from farms today?

3. How do the illustrations contribute to the story?

4. Garnet wants to be a farmer like her father but Jay does not. What do we learn about each character from their attitudes about farming?

5. How do Eric's experiences help Garnet understand her life?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the Great Depression of the 1930s. Compare the conditions you learn about with Enright's portrayal of those hard times.

2. Eric travels in railroad boxcars, as did many people during the Depression.

Research other sources and explain what the life of a "hobo" was like in the 1930s.

3. Read another book set about life on a farm, such as Robert N. Peck's A Day No Pigs Would Die, and compare it to Thimble Summer.

4. Make a list of the symbols in Thimble Summer and explain how they contribute to the story.

5. Mrs. Eberhardt tells of a childhood adventure that is similar to the one Garnet has when she goes to New Conniston. How are the young Mrs. Eberhardt and Garnet similar and different?

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Martin's, 1978. Includes a listing of Enright's books and a brief critical summary of her work.

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Sutherland, Zena, and May Hill Arbuthnot, eds. Children and Books. 7th ed.

Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1986.

A summary of Enright's books.

Townsend, John Rowe. Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature. 2d. ed.

Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1983.

Briefly places Thimble Summer in the context of other 1930s writings for young people.

Related Titles

Enright's other works include four books about the Melendy children, three of which make up The Melendy Family trilogy: The Saturdays, The FourStory Mistake, and Then There Were Five. In The Saturdays, the young people pool their allowances so that each one, in turn, can enjoy a special day with enough money to do what he or she wants. This first novel in the trilogy takes place in New York, but the others take place in the country, emphasizing the adventures and pleasures to be found there. These books feature good characterizations and a fine understanding of what it is like to be a young person. The other book about the Melendy Family is Spiderwebfor Two: A Melendy Maze.

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