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## Elizabeth Enright and the Family Story

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Elizabeth Enright and the Family Story

*Caroline Hunt (bio)*

Elizabeth Enright was a writer's writer if ever there was one, author of many "adult" stories for *The New Yorker*, yet with enough market appeal for paperback reissues of her children's books to be sold in supermarkets

50 years later. She grew up in New York and Connecticut, yet she described the Wisconsin countryside more compellingly than any other children's author has done—and won the Newbery Medal for it. She was the only child of divorced parents, yet she wrote her best books about families and wrote them with understanding and without sentimentality.

Her success with the family story, a rather amorphous genre with many technical problems, makes Enright particularly important today. In a period of renewed interest in traditional values, the family story has been making a comeback; Noel Streatfeild's books, for instance, have been reissued in paperback along with those of Eleanor Estes. From an earlier generation of the family story, *Five Little Peppers* and *All-of-a-Kind Family* have reached the paperback marketplace. Perhaps it is time to take another look at these books. The family story presents both fascinating technical problems and compelling social questions. Elizabeth Enright solved those problems and addressed those issues better than any other writer of children's books, and she did so both by using her immense technical skill and by drawing on a central myth of her own family: the myth of the Valley.

To say that the Valley gave Elizabeth Enright something she needed for the family story would seem to imply a simple cause and effect relationship: skillful writer plus durable family history equals good book. There may be something to this line of reasoning, but it is hardly demonstrable outside of psychiatry and, even if more or less provable, would not be legitimate (or even very interesting) criticism. Our interest must center, instead, on what Enright *did* with her idealized image of the family, embodied in the myth of the Valley. This investigation divides logically into two parts. First, what did the Valley and its values mean to this writer, and how did she adapt its traditions for her own purposes? Second, what techniques of rendering family life enabled Enright to **[End Page 16]** convey her image of the family so successfully, and how do those techniques differ from those used in other family stories?

All but one of Enright's family books are set partly or entirely in the country. The Blake children of the *Gone-Away* books take the train every year, in June, "to stay with Uncle Jake Jarman and Aunt Hilda and their cousin Julian in the country" (*Gone-Away Lake* 14). The Melendys, too, leave the city every year; when their father tells them during a budget crunch that they must "forget about the valley this summer," an "appalled silence" and a week of self-sacrifice and gloom follow (*The Saturdays* 141)—until Mrs. Oliphant invites them to spend the summer at her lighthouse.

Children in nearly all of Elizabeth Enright's books spend the summers, ritualistically, in the country, and most eventually move there year-round. When the Blake children stop calling their house "Amberside" and learn to call it simply "home," the last sentence of *Return to Gone-Away* concludes, "all their lives they knew that one of the best things that ever happened to them was to be able to call it that" (190). In her preface to *The Melendy Family*, Enright says that they "have and do all the things I would have liked to do as a child. . . . They live in the country all year round . . . and I lived in the city for most of it" (xv).

The "country" which Enright describes so often is a fictionalized version of southern Wisconsin. She was born in Oak Park, Illinois, where her maternal uncle, Frank Lloyd Wright, had settled. This suburb of Chicago, however, never replaced the family's home in rural Wisconsin, an area known to family members simply as "the Valley," which attained an almost Edenic importance to later generations. (The Lindens, in *Thimble Summer*, live in a town named...

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