

# Heidi

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I must have read the story as a child, probably in the summer of 1960 when I was ten and read a lot of books. It must have charmed me, as it apparently have charmed millions of readers the world over<sup>1</sup>, supposedly being one of the most successful children's books ever written<sup>2</sup>. I also recall watching an adaptation of the book on TV, the most memorable incident of which was a fine lady from the city falling face first in a cow pat, something which has no correspondence in the book. In 1981 I bought the book during my fall term in Bonn and a British colleague was surprised, maybe even scandalized that I would buy and read a children's book. Anyway the charm from childhood still exercised its pull but I do not recall much from my reading, except the repeated use of the word 'kurzweilig' presumably to be seen as the opposite of 'langweilig'. Maybe I did not finish the book, at that stage of your life, children's books are not high priority. And now, still under the influence of its erstwhile charm I attend to it again, now with a more critical and informed eye.

First in what lies its charm? It must be the depiction of the Alps, the living high up in the mountain among flowery meadows with herds of goats and clean air. Encountering it as a child for the first time is bound to leave an impression, in Jungian terms it is a description of an archetype and thus much larger and deeper than the tale itself. And indeed my impression at my rereading is one of wonder. Is that all there was to it? Somehow in your imagination it was much fuller than the present pages manage to convey. What you read seems only to be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. If I had never read it before would it have left any impression at all? At least not any sentimental in spite of the fact that the tale is sentimental to say the least<sup>3</sup>.

The tale is skillfully constructed, and Spyri was at the time in her fifties and already an accomplished writer with a number of published work to her credit, and played a role in the cultural life in Zürich, where she was friendly with Conrad Ferdinand Meyer to whom she sent early versions of 'Heidi'. The didactic purpose of the story is very clear, it is meant to be an exemplary tale in which the simple, natural and sound life up in the mountains is contrasted to the refined life in the city. Up in the mountains we have little Heidi who is brought to a rich family in Frankfurt where the daughter is a sickly girl confined to a wheel chair under the supervision of a strict governess and a stab of servants, as the mother is simply not there (is she dead?) while the father is always on trips, often to Paris, and visits his home and daughter only intermittently (maybe the sight of her

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<sup>1</sup> Especially popular in Japan and Turkey

<sup>2</sup> In fact originally it was written as two books, the sequel following quickly.

<sup>3</sup> I recall seeing the adoption to film and already as a child feeling that it was laid on a bit too thick at the end, everyone being so good and well-meaning including the grandfather who at least in the beginning was gruffy and forbidding.

pitiful state pains him). Heidi does not fit into the life of the city and is always looked upon with disapproval by the governess, a stock character. The one mitigating element during her stay is the visit of the grandmother (or grandmama, to distinguish her from another grandmother who plays an important subsidiary role in the story) who teaches her to read (by impressing on her the need for her as well as her ability to do so) and teaches her not to give up praying to God. Heidi has prayed to God to deliver her back to her grandfather, but her fervent wishes have not been heeded and she has given it up, But God knows better than us our best interest, the grandmama tells her, and if he does not grant our immediate wishes it is because he has something better in store for us in the future, for which our wishes would only have been in the way<sup>4</sup>. Heidi wilts during her prolonged tenure in Frankfurt and is then on the advice by the friendly family doctor sent back to her grandfather. But she has not forgotten her friends back in Frankfurt and they come and visit. Klara, the sick girl is to spend time up in the hut drinking nourishing goat milk, and after her wheel chair has been sent to its destruction down the mountain side in a rage of jealousy by Heidi's longtime local friend the young goat herding boy (Geißenpeter) forced to learn to walk. Thus when her father and his mother reclaim her they are up for a most delightful surprise. The mountains have cured her, and the evil act of destroying her wheel chair in the end turned out to be indeed a blessing in disguise. Everything ends very well, and everybody is so proper and delightful and thoroughly good. Most of all Heidi, who is almost insufferably so. The only dark aspects to be found are of course in the past life of the grandfather and his initial rejection of society causing his life as an eremite, and the jealousy of Geißenpeter and his one act of malicious mischief, which of course causes him no end of torment supplied by his conscience (on which the grandmama gives a lecture). The final conversion of the grandfather is accomplished in a rather contrived and for a work of fiction disastrously transparent way, namely through the narration of the prodigal son in the book given to Heidi by the grandmama and whom she later reads to her grandfather, who apparently identifies strongly with the erring protagonist, and one day he appears, to the surprise of everyone in the village church.

Wherein lies the charm of 'Heidi'? Is it just in the sweetness of wish fulfilment? The nature and beauty of the Alpine landscape is passionately evoked by the author in such detail one would think children would be bored by such lengthy word-paintings. When the sun sets or rises, it colors the cliffs and the snow fields in rosy or golden tones, a spectacle that repeats itself every day. Then there are high up the alpine meadows where the goats find their nourishment and humans (and insects) their flowers. The 'Glockenblumen' (blue bells or bell flowers) being the most prominent, or at least most often mentioned. Yet even if children skip those passages, they must make an unconscious impression, as noted the most memorable impact of the book is the evocation of the alpine landscape and the delightful realization that one can actually live there. Johanna Spyri was as noted a resident of Zürich and must have had a very romantic vision of the peasant life, unsullied by civilization, which was fashionable at the time. Traditionally the mountains had been

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<sup>4</sup> One may be reminded of mathematics, where our initial wishes often may be frustrated, only later to be revealed as mistaken. Thus if things do not go your way, do not give up but continue working. But what is uncontroversial in mathematics is not so in real human life, where atrocities cannot be justified by the benefits they will bestow on later generations, at least not if perpetrated by humans.

seen as scary and ugly (and one cannot help speculate about the origin of the German 'Alptraum') but with the first rise of tourism in the 18th century they were being seen as aesthetically noteworthy, in fact not only beautiful but sublime (a fashionable word at the time). In Spyri's tale sublimity is not really the issue (although there are warnings about the dangers of cliffs and the inhospitable weather of winters) but beauty and purity. And it is of course this that constitute the real charm of the book and which no doubt has fostered dreams about alpine paradises among many children. And dreams have a tendency to project onto the future and supply guidance also in adulthood.

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