

The Cook Corpus Assessed

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Samantha's Secret Room, Lyn Cook. Scholastic-Tab, 1973 Repr. 210 pp. \$1.00 paper.

In 1973, Scholastic-TAB, publisher of inexpensive paperbacks distributed largely through school book clubs, began to offer original and reprinted Canadian children's books. One of the first off the press was *Samantha's Secret Room* by Lyn Cook, first published in 1953. As Miss Cook is one of Canada's more prolific writers for children, it is perhaps not surprising she should be considered representative, though certainly not of the promised 'best of Canadian children's literature.' Why *Samantha's Secret Room* should have been the title selected is more of a mystery, for it is a depressing example of Miss Cook's weakness in plotting, style, and characterization.

The story relates the events of one year--a favored time span with Lyn Cook--in the life of 11-year-old Samantha Wiggins who lives on an old family farm in Penetang Bay, Ontario. The secret room is an old root cellar to which Samantha retreats to ponder and record her private thoughts. The existence of another old family secret room and a long lost book add a modicum of mystery, but the search for both is desultory and incidental. Much of the story is taken up with a friendship which develops when Samantha ties a note to a Christmas tree bound for city delivery, with details of farm life, with a family reunion, and with Samantha's antagonism toward the near-senile, querulous Great-Gran who lives with the family. The discovery of the secret room and Samantha's acceptance of Great-Gran coincide in the final chapter.

The development is unstructured, being little more than a chronological recital of events. The story is thus aimless, but more critical, it is extremely tedious thanks to a flat unvaried style. Dialogue is used extensively--less to reveal character or advance the plot than to provide edifying information. The arrival of Samantha's friend with her father provides an opportunity for the adults to toss back and forth items of interest on the antique business, and a later tour of the town gives everyone a chance to chip in with historical facts about Champlain and the Hurons. Even the personable young Josh is eager to inform his cousins about archaeology, and takes several pages to do so. The frustration occasioned by these constant interruptions of data is further compounded by Miss Cook's technical mishandling of the journal. An obvious device for revealing the central character's innermost soul, it becomes here merely repetitious padding. All too often, following an incident to which Samantha has reacted in actions, speech, and thoughts, she retires to the secret room and we are treated to a long recapitulation in a journal entry.

The weakness in narrative and descriptive technique severely

hampers any effort to build up to and especially to sustain dramatic climaxes. Since there is barely the semblance of a plot in *Samantha's Secret Room*, the short shrift given the final discovery of the secret room is not unexpected. The scene, however, warrants just over a page and the prosaic description of Samantha's emotion--"her eyes widened with astonishment. . . . She nearly dropped the candle in her astonishment." These lines do not arouse similar excitement in the reader. In minor incidents as well, the promise of suspense is allowed to fall flat. In a chapter entitled, "Island Magic and the Hidden Cave," Samantha and her friend find an Indian cave. They are in and out of it in seconds flat; the 300 odd words devoted to the incident are mainly informative exchanges of dialogue, and there is not even an attempt to evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of an underground passage.

In stories with more cohesive plotting, Miss Cook's tendency to dispose quickly of climactic scenes becomes even more apparent. Both *Bells on Finland Street* and *Jady and the General* are stories of individual determination and should lead to scenes of soaring personal triumph. However, Elin's skating display and Jady's horse jumping are both thinly and briefly described: the exhilaration is stated but not revealed. The most serious failure of dramatic climax is evident in *The Secret of Willow Castle*. Throughout, liberal hints have been dropped that a little Irish orphan befriended by the heroine is actually the daughter of a sad-eyed Irish widow who acts as housekeeper for another village family. Since the two have been in such close proximity, by the time they finally meet, the reader has maintained considerable suspension of disbelief and is poised for a highly charged emotional scene, but is left stranded on a reef of clichés.

The people who inhabit Miss Cook's stories rarely come alive because she seems more concerned with moral character development than literary development of character. *Samantha's Secret Room* promulgates the notion that peace and joy will reward those who learn to accept their lot with good grace--a theme of doubtful merit and certainly one difficult to make compelling to children. In the beginning, Samantha is a free spirit, longing for excitement and adventure, but all people and all things conspire to bring her to a more sober adult acceptance of reality, an acceptance symbolized by the abandonment of her secret room. Her 'wisdom' begins with an episode, which is in itself convincing, yet in its resolution unconvincing. Samantha has for weeks been anticipating a school boat trip, but just as she is leaving the house, Great-Gran insists that she change from slacks to a dress. Mother makes one feeble attempt to explain changing times but gives way before the old lady's onslaught. Furious, Samantha shouts her hatred of Great-Gran, flees in tears, misses the trip, and spends the day in her secret room, battling the twin devils of rage and remorse. Partly because Great-Gran is depicted as not only old and difficult but really quite nasty, and partly because for once strong emotion is honestly portrayed, the reader is unprepared for Samantha's abject repentance. After this flare up, much of the vitality goes out of the main character.

A similar scene featuring youth's passionate revolt against authority occurs at the beginning of *The Secret of Willow Castle*. Headstrong Henrietta comes into conflict with her stern unbending father over her keeping a little mirror she has been given. Because at this

point the characters have been barely sketched, the violence of Henrietta's tantrum and the harshness of her punishment are not totally convincing, but one admires her spunk. Thereafter, the heroine's explicitly stated task becomes learning to control her temper, a task which inevitably implies accepting conformity. To the degree she succeeds, she wins Papa's approval but forfeits the reader's interest.

In *Samantha's Secret Room*, as in other stories, the minor characters are two dimensional, serving either instructional or moralizing ends. Kit, the 12-year-old who finds Samantha's note and makes three visits to the farm, is a colorless figure whose main function is to extol farm life and cast Great-Gran in a more romantic light. Mr. Martin, the recluse bachelor Samantha befriends, and the much admired cousin Josh both offer her jewels of wisdom on the need for compassion and understanding in dealing with the elderly. Attractive young adults are frequently used as mouthpieces to make the moral more palatable. In *The Secret of Willow Castle*, dashing cousin Alex counsels patience to Henrietta; in *Bells on Finland Street*, Mr. Crane the skating instructor expounds on Canadianism and racial tolerance; in *Jady and the General*, Woody, a worldly-wise ex-RCAF type, discusses at length the evils of prejudice. In these stories, while the young protagonists absorb the moral and mend their ways, they are at least allowed to enjoy some small personal triumph. Henrietta saves her friend; Elin stars in the figure skating show; and Jady wins the jumping trials. Poor Samantha achieves only a rather tenuous insight into the complexities of human relationships.

One young reader advised me that she "learned things" from Lyn Cook stories, and that they were something to read "when you have nothing better to do." This unsophisticated critical assessment rather accurately sums up the lukewarm merits of this author.

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