

Writing for 'the child within'

Author Elizabeth Starr Hill creates fiction from bits of everyday reality

By Rosemary Gohd
Staff Writer

Like a camera, the mind of Elizabeth "Betty" Starr Hill captures snippets of the sights and sounds in her everyday life. These bits of reality will most likely show up in her fiction.

Usually something as common as a snatch of dialogue overheard in a diner catches her attention. Sometimes she finds a house while driving that makes a lasting impression for no apparent reason. But once something very special found her.

That something was "Willow."

MRS. HILL met Willow nearly 20 years ago while living with her husband Russell in a Plainsboro apartment. Wild, starving and pregnant, the golden-haired dog approached her one fall day from the woods behind the apartment building.

Moved by the sight, Mrs. Hill began feeding the dog and named her. Not long after they met — around Thanksgiving Day — Willow gave birth to six puppies in the woods.

The day after Christmas, Mrs. Hill was surprised to find the puppies on her patio. As if leaving the pups in Mrs. Hill's care, Willow briefly watched from a distance and then ran into the woods.

Mrs. Hill decided to give the puppies to someone who could find a home for them. She never saw Willow again.

"I hesitate to tell it — it sounds like a made up story," she says in her living room. The Hills now live in Kingston.

THE AUTHOR recreated Willow's tale in her recently released book "When Christmas Comes," published by Viking Penguin. The novel, which is recommended for fifth through seventh graders, focuses on a young girl named Callie. As Callie adjusts to a new mother and home, she meets Willow.

The book, which is locally available at Titles Unlimited in the Princeton Shopping Center, was chosen as a Junior Library Guild selection for young readers.

Recognition of this sort is not new to Mrs. Hill.

One of her most highly regarded works is "Evan's Corner," a children's story book about a boy living in a crowded ghetto apartment who wants a place of his own.

First published more than 20 years ago, the book has been honored as an American Library Association Notable Book for Children and has been reprinted numerous times in anthologies and textbooks. After being made into a short film, it was nominated for an Academy Award.

A new edition of "Evan's Corner" will be published in 1990 by Viking Penguin. "The Street Dancers," a novel Mrs. Hill recently completed, is scheduled for publication in 1991 by the same publishing house. It is a children's book about street performers in New York City.

MRS. HILL is chiefly interested in creating realistic characters with strong problems and goals, often in unusual settings. "When Christmas Comes" is set in a mobile home park, for example.

By using some of the emotionally-charged issues facing children today, such as parents' divorce, she hopes to help as well as entertain her audience.

A 200-page book such as "When Christmas Comes" can take her two years to write, working five days a week. Calling herself a perfectionist, she rewrites some passages many times until they strike just the right chord within her.

"Each sentence has to hold up ... I love language."

She rarely researches. Instead she mixes imagination, images and feelings she has picked up through her daily life.

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SHE FONDLY REMEMBERS her own childhood, which she describes as "interesting."

Her father was the late Ray Cummings, a pioneer of science fiction and author of the classic "The Girl of the Golden Atom."

"The three of us (her parents and she) traveled a lot," she says fondly. "We talked about his story ideas continually."

Living with her father's profession helped her learn about the business.

"The main thing he taught me was perseverance," she says.

Always fascinated with the people and places she observed outside of her own life, her imagination soon overflowed to paper.

By the age of 13 she sold her first story "One Man's Love" to the now non-existent Liberty magazine.

During her teens and early 20s she did a little radio acting and also published more than 100 horror and adventure stories, mostly in detective and comic magazines. She later wrote "Tiptoe Through the Toadstools," an account of her days as a teenage writer, for "The New Yorker" magazine.



Staff photo-Mark Czajkowski

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After marriage and motherhood, her stories and articles appeared in publications such as Reader's Digest, Collier's, Good Housekeeping, Seventeen, and Cricket.

While her son and daughter were growing up she began writing children's books. In addition to Viking Penguin, her books have been published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston; and E.P. Dutton; among others.

WITH ONE EXCEPTION, her fictional characters are not based on her own children, since she prefers to create new people, she says. The one exception was prompted by her daughter Andrea, when she surprised her parents with a flute solo at a school concert.

Andrea now lives in England where she is an art critic. Mrs. Hill's son Brad is a pianist and

composer who performs in the Princeton area.

Music and art are also loves of the author. She recently completed a course in music theory at Westminster Choir College, just to learn more about it. When time allows she likes to paint, as well as garden.

Other interests include reading of course and collecting old children's books.

"I read all the trivial stuff in the paper. There are a lot of little items that are the food of everyday life."

She writes in an upstairs home office. Her husband of 40 years has his office in the next room. A retired chemical engineer, Mr. Hill now works on a consulting basis.

She has conducted advanced fiction and creative writing workshops and seminars in her home, Morven, and Princeton Adult School.

But, writing takes the bulk of her time.

"It's kind of a hallucinatory process," she says of creating the people and places in her stories.

When she finishes a book, she says, "I have a great sense of loss because I was with those people all that time. I really don't mind rewriting — when an editor asks me — for that reason."