

**Catholic Formation Through Children's Literature:
The Novels of Hilda van Stockum
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The argument of this paper is that Hilda van Stockum's novels provide a welcome antidote to the anti-Catholic slant of most modern children's literature in two ways. First, they embrace the "culture of life" and promote the virtue of sacrifice required to sustain this culture. Second, they uphold the value of the Catholic sacraments, showing them to be indispensable sources of grace as well as the ultimate celebrations of our lives. For all this, her novels are never preachy or moralistic, and thus may reach children's hearts in ways that teaching texts or sermons may not.

Inez Fitzgerald Storck, in her article, "Anti-Catholic Bias in Children's Literature" (1998), presents a sobering picture of the world of children's literature today:

Good parents have always known that it is necessary to watch over their children's reading. But Catholic parents today and even Catholic educators may not be aware of the extent of the negative elements in contemporary children's literature [...] One of the most pernicious trends is blatant anti-Catholicism. A review of more than 100 mainstream children's and young adult books published or reprinted in the last two decades has yielded numerous examples of negative portrayals of Catholicism.

Fitzgerald Storck offers as examples two fairly recent Newbury Medal winners, Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* (1991) and Karen Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice* (1996). The former satirizes the protagonist's aunt and uncle who hate each other but won't get a divorce because they're Catholic; and the latter recreates a medieval society, but the only person in the society depicted as a practicing Catholic is the hateful midwife of the title.

In contrast, Hilda van Stockum's 21 storybooks and novels for children are a rich reservoir of positive Christian influences, both in terms of their underlying value-system, and in terms of the explicit portrayal of Catholicism. Before exploring these two aspects of her works, though, a brief survey of her life is in order, for those who are unfamiliar with this author. She was born on February 9th, 1908, in Rotterdam, Holland, to an agnostic naval officer and his vaguely Dutch-reformed wife. She had two younger brothers. Home-schooled until the age of ten, she eventually studied fine arts at the School of Art in Dublin and then the Dutch Academy in Amsterdam. (She is a remarkable artist whose work has received wide acclaim—especially in Ireland where she has paintings in the permanent collection of the Royal Hibernian Academy.) In 1932 she married Ervin Marlin, an American. They had six children (the third of whom, Randal, is my father). Two years into her marriage, Hilda began to write and illustrate books for children. Many of these books, particularly the Mitchell series, draw from her experiences within the family. She converted to Catholicism in her 30s—the culmination of a long spiritual search that started when she was two years old and reached a watershed with the influence of the writings of G.K. Chesterton. Now 96, she lives in Berkhamsted, England, surrounded by devoted friends and family. Her works are currently being republished by Bethlehem Books in North Dakota.

Though there are any number of ways in which HvS's children's books may play a positive role in forming children's imaginations, I want to focus primarily on the manner in which her novels promote a "culture of life," to use a phrase popularized by Pope John Paul II. That is, they present to us a world in which every human being, however small or seemingly insignificant, is welcomed as a wondrous creation, a unique individual with

innate dignity. The opening of the novel *Friendly Gables*, first published in 1948 and the third in the Mitchell series, is a case in point. Here the mother of the Mitchell family is resting at home, having just delivered a set of twins, bringing the number of Mitchell children to eight. Timmy, number five, is the first to come home from school to meet his new siblings:

Mother raised herself on an elbow and listened. "There's Timmy."

A pleased smile warmed her face. "Do you hear him?"

"No," said the nurse, folding up some towels. "I don't hear anything." But presently she did notice a faint, clear thread of sound rising from the road below and growing louder all the time.

"Good news, Mommy!" it said. "Good news!"

"Timmy is our evangelist," explained Mother. "He always has good news, and he starts shouting at the beginning of our avenue and keeps on all the way up. Sometimes it's a good mark he got at school, or a game he has won, or a friend he's made, but it's always *good* news. I wonder what it is this time?"

"You're not thinking of letting him come up here, near the babies?" asked Miss Thorpe, horrified.

"Why not?" asked Mother calmly.

"But—he'll be full of germs," warned the nurse.

Mother looked surprised. "I've always let my children see my newborn babies and no harm ever came of it," she protested.

They heard the clomp-clomp-clomp of boots on the stairs, and then the door of the bedroom was flung open and a six-year-old boy tramped in, snow still melting on his blond hair, his cheeks red, his hazel eyes shining. He was breathing out the frosty air and brought a fresh smell into the room.

"Good news, Mommy," he began. Then he stopped as he noticed the bundles on either side of Mother.

"Two!!" he cried. Two *babies*! You've got *two*! They came! Two of them!"

"Yes, twins, isn't it wonderful?" Mother smiled.

"Oooooh—twins," breathed Timmy, tiptoeing nearer, a holy awe on his face. "*Real* twins. I thought they only happened in books." He touched the bundles gently with his finger. "They're rather small, though, aren't they?" he said in a worried way. "I don't think you rested enough, Mother. They don't look quite finished."

"They'll grow," Mother assured him. (15-17)

(Timmy's original good news, by the way, is that there is a new girl in his class whose name is 'Philosophy'—well, actually, Felicity.)

The joy with which the Mitchells welcome the newcomers into their already large family is a sign of their openness to life, their recognition of the wonder and mystery of each child. The opposing view is presented, for contrast, two pages later, when Timmy goes to spread the news about the twins to the neighbourhood.

Timmy felt very important. None of the others knew about the twins. He would have to tell them. Their schools got out much later than his. He put on his ski jacket and boots again and stood outside. The snow was still falling in feathery flakes. Timmy saw Mrs. Garneau pass. She was an aristocratic French lady who lived in the brick mansion opposite Friendly Gables [the name of the Mitchells' house in Montreal].

“We’ve twins!” he shouted.

The lady stopped. “*Comment?*” she asked.

Timmy searched for the right French word. “*Deux bébés,*” he said, holding up two fingers.

“*Tiens!*” Madame Garneau didn’t look happy. Already there were too many young Mitchells so far as she was concerned. Two more seemed an imposition. How much extra noise would that make? She hurried into her house. (18-19)

This passage exposes the anti-life culture that despises babies as mere nuisances, and shows it to be selfish and fearful—and not very appealing. It is interesting to note that after HvS’s own sixth child was born, she had a miscarriage. The year would have been around 1948 – the year she began the Mitchell series. This miscarriage was devastating to her, sending her into what amounted to a nervous breakdown. I can’t help but see these fictional twins in *Friendly Gables* as a creative compensation for the loss of her real baby—lending another dimension to the life-affirming aspect of these novels!

Another feature of the pro-life aspect of HvS’s novels is the realistic manner in which she shows that embracing life does indeed have a cost (which is why it is an unpopular position in modern society). Without a willingness to sacrifice, families cannot function; but it is precisely this virtue of self-sacrifice that creates the bonds of love that make the

family so precious. There are numerous examples in HvS's novels of sacrifices that both endear people to one another and enrich the character who performs them. I will select but one. In *Friendly Gables*, the children are frequently willful and troublesome—in short, real children. In one episode, Peter gets into a fist fight with a French-Canadian boy named Paul, and the two of them manage to knock over a valuable statue inside their classroom. Peter agonizes over how he will find the money to replace the statue; he doesn't want to burden his parents when he knows they are already struggling to make ends meet. He tells his older sister Joan, who engages in some similar soul-searching:

Joan had been struggling with herself ever since she had heard of Peter's problem. She knew Daddy and Mother couldn't afford any extra expense at present. Miss Thorpe [the nurse] was staying on longer than had been originally planned, because of Mother's slow recovery. As the oldest, Joan knew more about her mother's and father's financial worries than the others did, and to ask Daddy to replace the broken statue at this moment was out of the question.

But where was the money to come from, then? The children talked about earning, but how much earning could they do in three weeks? Even if Joan herself went baby-sitting (and she had no time for that now) she wouldn't manage to earn more than a few dollars at the most. Peter had mentioned that Pierre might help. But Pierre couldn't do miracles. Joan could see no other way out than to offer her dress money. If it had just been the money, she would not have minded. But it was the dreams, too, that she had to offer. No use thinking about going to a dance if she didn't have a dress! It would take her ages to earn all that money over again—she might be an old maid of eighteen before she finally got to a dance! It was a hard struggle, and Joan hadn't quite decided the next morning, when Peter got a letter.

(The letter is from a sculptor friend of theirs, Pierre, asking Peter to pay a visit to the shop at which Pierre is a junior apprentice. After they read the letter, Joan reacts:)

“Oh, that *is* nice,” cried Joan, a flush spreading on her cheeks. “Do you think I could go with you, Peter? We could take the four o'clock train.”

“I want to go too, said Patsy [the second daughter].

“Well, let's all three go—

“And how will we explain that to Mommy?” asked Peter.

“We'll say we're going to look at Pierre's shop,” said Joan. “She'll understand that. We've just told her about Pierre and his wonderful work! But we'll have to bring money.”

“I have five dollars,” said Patsy.

“I’ve two,” added Peter shamefacedly.

“Well, I’ll bring my money,” said Joan, deciding her private battle with a bang.

“Oh, but Joan—your *dress!*” cried Patsy.

“It can’t be helped,” said Joan. Somehow the idea of visiting Pierre’s shop had cheered her. (105-107)

Joan’s decision is not an easy or snap one; the internal battle she wages is real. But in the end what she is willing to sacrifice comes back to her in abundance. Peter, of course, is forever grateful. What’s more, though, Pierre, the handsome sculptor, later invites her to a dance, and at the last moment Paul’s family comes through with some money to buy Joan a ball-dress to compensate for the price of the replacement statue. The virtue of sacrifice, then, without which the culture of life collapses through selfishness, is rewarded many times over in this novel and others.

Against this background of a pro-life ethic, a specific endorsement of Catholicism emerges organically. In *The Mitchells*, the first in the Mitchell trilogy, there are virtually no references to Catholicism. In the second, *Canadian Summer*, Catholic references pop up naturally as the Mitchell family moves from Washington D.C. to the then-strongly-Catholic province of Quebec, where Father has a new job after the war (WWII). As they drive through the countryside to their cottage in the woods, the sights they behold serve as a text for a lesson in geography, culture, language—and religion.

All the children gazed rapturously out of the windows at this foreign city with French words painted on shops. Its streets were narrow and winding, its buildings dark, quite unlike Washington. Joan admired the policemen in their white caps most.

Soon they left the city and crossed a wide river. Then came flat country, sprinkled with little wooden villages, not much to look at, but with sweet names like Ste.-Rose and Ste. Thérèse.

“Did all these saints live here?” asked Patsy, surprised.

Daddy explained that the early French settlers had named those places, perhaps after their patron saints. (19)

Two chapters later, in an episode entitled “The First Sunday”, we encounter the first extended treatment in this series of the celebration of one of the Catholic sacraments—the Eucharist—as the Mitchells go to Mass. Even here, though, the narrative touches lightly on religious details, emphasizing instead the human drama involved in getting a large family (six children, two parents and one grandmother at this point) off to church in a remote area.

It is only in *Friendly Gables*, the third book, that the spiritual importance of the sacraments—in this case baptism—is emphasized. The event is the baptism of the twins, and it takes place in the last chapter of this book, and therefore the culmination of the whole series:

It was a proud moment when Joan and Patsy when each held a beautifully gowned three-and-a-half-weeks'-old brother in her arms at the baptismal font. Joan had begged for Jimmy, he was her favorite, and Patsy had Johnny instead. He was more serious than Jimmy but had a very gentle look.

The guests were all grouped around as Monsieur le Curé poured water on the two little heads and solemnly baptized them James Michael and John William.

Mother had tears in her eyes. It was part of the joy of giving birth, to bring her babies back to God afterward. Daddy shared her feelings. He had put his arm through hers and she leaned against him.” (161)

The placement of the baptismal celebration at the end of the whole series gives a sense that this convergence of the human and the divine is the moment toward which the whole story, and indeed the story of each of our lives, is journeying.

To conclude, then, the underlying vision of HvS's novels—a promotion of the culture of life—sets the stage for the more overtly religious message, so that the latter is an organic development, not something artificial or superimposed. The formative Catholic influence

these novels may have on young readers is thus both subtle and powerful, because the religious references in them sprout naturally from the ground of a life-affirming vision.

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And see www.bethlehembooks.com for a list of recently republished books by HvS.