

## THE ELIZABETH STORIES

Isabel Huggan. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1984.

*Susan Hughes*

Childhood and adolescence are times of life we look back on with mixed feelings. We try to remember events with fondness and cheerful maturity, but deep down realize we are simply applying objectivity to those vividly painful years of growing up. *The Elizabeth Stories* explores these important early years through the voice of Elizabeth. A sensitive and blunt narrator, Elizabeth forces us to experience with her the significant agonies of sex, love, misunderstanding, and the beginnings of compassion.

We cannot remain objective and uninvolved in Elizabeth's narrative. Why? Because her narrative is so detailed and matter-of-factly personal, so much *not* a plea for pity and involvement, that we begin to empathize, to remember and recognize and feel. Her stories are deliberate explorations of the forces that shaped her, told in a way that evokes a sense of sharing. And the more we hear her stories, the more we become aware of the quiet desperation that lies behind Elizabeth's words.

Elizabeth's methods of survival are childish, selfish, and disturbingly practical. The first story is of Elizabeth at age nine. Her blunt and ruthlessly untempered observations are certainly those of a child: "Celia's head was so round and she seemed so bland and stupid and fruit-like . . . I hated Celia with a dreadful and absolute passion." These are the feelings

that we, as adults, have learned to deny ourselves. Elizabeth's easy, honest hatred alarms us and yet attracts us. We envy her her freedom from guilt and yet this is what she must learn in order to mature and adapt within society.

It does not come easily for Elizabeth. She and a friend are caught as they experiment with sexual intercourse for the first time. Fearing the end of the world which she knows will come with all the force of her mother's wrath, Elizabeth lies. She insists that her friend, Rudy, had made her lie down, that she didn't understand what he wanted. It is Rudy who must suffer and it is Elizabeth who feels regret, not for lying, which was a necessity, but for this situation which has caused her to lose Rudy's friendship.

Elizabeth struggles to survive in her world of peers who are judgmental and fickle. They play by children's rules, unfair and cruel – rules which Elizabeth does not rebel against but feels compelled to play by. Much of her agony also springs from a belief that her parents are disappointed in her and never show her affection. In one story, Elizabeth sacrifices a friend's trust because she feels she must prove her innocence to her mother. She suffers from hurting her friend but again feels she had no choice. She regrets only the necessity of her action.

Most of Elizabeth's decisions are made in an effort to gain her parents' approval, for at this stage in her young life it is still only they who can give her a sense of worthiness, of integrity. In a sense, she has no conscience because her parents are her conscience and her judges. And they judge only what they see, the ends and not the means. They are not close enough

nor care enough for their daughter to investigate beyond the face she presents to them. Elizabeth does not trust their love for her and so cannot reveal her secrets. Though sensing that her decisions to mislead or conceal are not "right," Elizabeth feels they must have merit because they lead to ultimate approval.

As Elizabeth grows older, she begins to learn that others, too, conceal. She says that "my mother and her friends had secret lives . . . I learned that duplicity was as necessary, as natural to their existence as breathing." But she also learns that these secret lives were necessary as an escape from an unbearable reality of a mundane life. She is startled to find that adults also feel this life is stale and frustrating.

Later, Elizabeth learns that her mother has a real secret, another man in her life. Suddenly, given this power of knowledge, Elizabeth must decide whether to tell her father. Does her mother deserve punishment? The decision is difficult, but showing a maturity which she has not had before, Elizabeth resigns herself to keeping a secret she does not want and to feeling compassion that she would rather not feel.

Isabel Huggan's *The Elizabeth Stories* is a disturbing, compelling book of stories, disturbing in their revelation of the slow and inevitably painful gaining of experience and maturity, compelling in their subtle optimism that one survives and learns and grows in spite of it all. We are left with the certainty that Elizabeth will overcome and will keep growing; we are left liking Elizabeth and hoping for the best for her. We are left reevaluating ourselves.

## Book notes

*Beth Light*

### DISCOVERING WOMEN'S HISTORY: A PRACTICAL MANUAL

Deirdre Beddoe. London: Pandora Press, 1983.

This book is a practical and extremely useful guide designed for non-

professional historians who are interested in exploring the past experiences of women in Britain from about 1800 to 1945. However, the time frame and the geographic specificity do not limit its instructiveness for researchers in other locales or for those concerned with women in other times. The introductory essay, "Why Should We Study Women's History?," presents arguments applicable to all researchers. The subsequent six chapters address key themes essential for the reconstruction of women's experiences in the past by providing factual background and by suggesting research questions and published and other sources. A final chapter describes methods for publicizing the results of the research.

### THE DORA RUSSELL READER: 57 YEARS OF WRITING AND JOURNALISM, 1925-1982

Dora Russell. Forward by Dale Spender. London: Pandora Press. 1983.

Throughout her life in Britain, Dora Russell campaigned tirelessly for birth control, women's sexual freedom, progressive education, world peace and other social changes. This book presents a selection of her published writings from the mid-1920s to 1982 in which she analyzed sexual politics in modern times.