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# Harriet the Spy

by Louise Fitzhugh

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# Summary

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The Harriet books feature a precocious 11-year-old who uses her extraordinary talent of observation to capture people and events from her life for stories that she wants to write someday.

Eleven-year-old Harriet M. Welsh, the only child of a wealthy family, lives in New York City where she attends a private school and keeps track of the people and events in her neighborhood on her spy route. She is intelligent and curious; qualities strongly encouraged by Ole Golly, her attentive live-in nanny. Harriet's ambition is to become a spy or a writer, so she records all of her observations—including some awful things about her classmates—in her private notebook. When her notebook gets into the wrong hands, the question becomes whether Harriet can regain the trust of her friends.

**THE LONG SECRET**, **SPORT**, and the new **HARRIET SPIES AGAIN** continue the adventures begun in **HARRIET THE SPY**, and celebrate Harriet's curiosity as she interacts with family and friends.

<http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385327862&view=tg>



## About the Author

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Louise Fitzhugh was born in Memphis, Tennessee on October 5, 1928. She was the only child of attorney Millsaps Fitzhugh and Louise Perkins. Her parents were divorced soon after she was born and her father won complete custody, on the grounds that her mother was unfit. As a result, Louise grew up not knowing her mother. The loneliness of her childhood years would figure into much of her later writing.

After attending an exclusive girls' school, Miss Hutchison's, she attended three different colleges but never obtained a degree, and traveled in Europe, before finally settling down in New York City to pursue a career as a painter.

In the late 1950s she and a friend, Sandra Scoppetone, began work on a beatnik parody of Kay Thompson's **ELOISE**, which was published in 1961 as **SUZUKI BEANE**. In 1964 she published her first novel, **HARRIET THE SPY**. Although it received mixed reviews from adults at the time, today it is widely regarded as a forerunner to the sort of realistic children's fiction that would dominate the late 1960s and 1970s. Two novels about Harriet's friends followed: **THE LONG SECRET** in 1965 and **SPORT**, published posthumously in 1979. At around the time she wrote **HARRIET THE SPY**, Fitzhugh also wrote a novel about two adolescent girls who fall in love, called **AMELIA**; unfortunately her agent refused to take it on and the manuscript has since been lost.

Contemporary social issues figured prominently in much of Fitzhugh's work for children: **BANG BANG YOU'RE DEAD** was a 1969 picture book with a strong anti-war message and **NOBODY'S FAMILY IS GOING TO CHANGE** in 1975 explored both women's rights and children's rights. Ironically, it became the basis of the Broadway musical **THE TAP DANCE KID** with the book's minor male characters taking a lead role, thereby completely overshadowing Emma, the female protagonist. Needless to say, this happened after Fitzhugh's untimely death in 1974 at the age of 46. After her death, three picture books were also published: **I AM THREE**, **I AM FOUR**, and **I AM FIVE**.

<http://www.purple-socks.com/bio.htm>



# Book Review

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I have read **HARRIET THE SPY** over fifty times. During the third grade, I read it several times a month. I ate tomato and mayonnaise sandwiches every day at lunch because Harriet did; I carried a notebook around with me because Harriet did. What pleasure I felt as an adult to finally find out what an egg cream was (Harriet's beverage of choice)!

Sixth-grader Harriet attends school on the New York's Upper East Side along with her two best pals, Sport, the jock (of course!), and Janie, the mad scientist. After school every day, she takes her notebook and proceeds through her spy route. Climbing on milk crates and hoisting herself up dumbwaiters, Harriet observes the rich lady who never gets out of bed, the man with twenty-five cats, and the Italian family who runs a grocery store. She takes brutally honest notes on them all.

Harriet's downfall is that she also writes down her thoughts about people she actually knows. After a game in the park when her notebook is knocked out of her hands and read by her classmates, Harriet's deepest thoughts are revealed:

“Sometimes I can’t stand Sport. With his worrying all the time and fussing over his father. Sometimes he’s like an old woman.

If Marion Hawthorne doesn’t watch out she’s going to grow up to be a Lady Hitler.”

Harriet is quickly ostracized and all her classmates -- even the Boy With the Purple Socks -- and they all form the Spy Catcher's Club. Even former friends Sport and Janie become members!

After her parents find out what's happened, Harriet receives a final, crushing blow. She can no longer take notes! She is humiliatingly searched by her teacher, her parents, and even the cook every day for a contraband notebook.

Aided by the sage advice of nanny Ole Golly, Harriet is able to get through this difficult period, regain her friends, and get back her notebook privileges.

Age range: 8 - 12 years old

Nancy Matson

<http://www.nancymatson.com/HTHESP.HTM>



## Discussion Questions

**Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!**

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1. In **HARRIET THE SPY**, Sport says, “My father says you have to catch the reader’s attention right at first and then hold it.” (p. 89) How does Fitzhugh capture the reader’s attention in the first chapter? Discuss whether the three companion novels capture the reader’s attention in the same way.
2. Contrast Harriet’s relationship with her family to Sport’s and Beth Ellen’s relationships with their families. Neither Sport nor Beth Ellen has a mother at home. Discuss how Mrs. Welsch is both present and absent in Harriet’s life.
3. Who do you think knows Harriet better, Ole Golly or Harriet’s parents? What does Harriet mean when she says Ole Golly “made herself felt in the house”? (p. 136) What does Harriet miss most about Ole Golly when she leaves? Who do you think knows you best? Whom do you know best?
4. Mr. and Mrs. Welsch fire Ole Golly when she goes on a date with Mr. Waldenstein and takes Harriet with her. Discuss why Harriet’s parents feel that Ole Golly’s behavior is “outlandish.” Explain why Mrs. Welsch changes her mind and says, “You can’t leave. What would we do without you?” (p. 128) Why does Ole Golly feel that the time has come for her to leave?
5. Ole Golly says to Harriet, “Life is a struggle and a good spy gets in there and fights.” (p. 132) How does Harriet need this advice when The Spy Catcher Club turns on her?
6. In **HARRIET THE SPY**, Harriet hates it when Ole Golly tells her that she isn’t thinking. Discuss how Harriet has matured because she realizes that she must do something for Ole Golly. Why is the ability to think essential for a good spy?
7. How would you define prejudice? Talk about the different types of prejudice expressed in Sport. Discuss Sport’s reaction to his mother’s statement about people who are of Jewish, African American, and Hispanic backgrounds. What are some ways to handle a person who makes a prejudiced statement about a cultural group in your presence? What types of prejudice have you encountered in your own world? In the news today?
8. In **HARRIET THE SPY**, Harriet says, “Something is definitely happening to me. I am changing.” (p. 241) Trace the changes in Harriet, Sport, and Beth Ellen from the time they first appear in Harriet the Spy through the three companion novels.



# Author Interview

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Despite her career as an author of children's books, Louise Fitzhugh's own childhood was not particularly happy or carefree. Although her father was a wealthy man with an important position in state government, she was eager to leave home. As Ursula Nordstrom, former editorial director of Harper junior books, remembered in *DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY*, "She got out of the South as soon as she could, came north, went to Bard College, and concentrated on losing every single trace of her southern accent--and prejudices. She attended numerous schools in addition to Bard. . . . She had many talents; throughout her life she played the flute and drew, and her interest in literature started at least as early as the age of eleven, when she first started to write."

Fitzhugh's first popular work, *HARRIET THE SPY*, is widely regarded as a milestone in children's literature. It concerns a pre-teen living in New York City who considers herself a professional sleuth. Every day after school, Harriet follows a spy route with her trusty black notebook, in which she records her comments on the people she observes. Aspiring to be a famous writer, Harriet has been keeping a notebook since she was eight, and now that she is eleven, she spies for practice. Though the book is written in the third person, the notebook entries, written in the first person, record Harriet's actual language and reveal the content and thought process of her mind. In the course of her spying, Harriet not only learns about some of the duller and sadder aspects of adult life, but also gets into trouble with classmates, teachers, and parents when her notebook is stolen and read.

Upon discovering that Horn Book had reviewed the book so harshly, critic Maggie Stern found occasion to write a rebuttal in the same publication. She wrote, "None of the reviewers . . . truly looked at what Louise Fitzhugh had so brilliantly done. Louise Fitzhugh was talking about the balance of life. And this balance, and the loss of balance, is all seen through Harriet. In a sense Harriet is within us all: that feistiness, fire, honesty, quickness to be hurt, softness, loudness, and loneliness. Ruth Hill Viguers missed the essence of the book. She missed its humor, richness, and texture. Time has shown that *HARRIET THE SPY* is still read, still loved by children. It appears that children have not found Harriet disagreeable, abnormal, ill-adjusted, or egocentric as Mrs. Viguers suggested. Harriet is a real child, living in a real world. And that is not easy. . . . Through Harriet one sees the process of life, the human struggle. From unawareness to awareness--from order to chaos to new order. Louise Fitzhugh wrote a remarkable book."

Nodelman explained opposition to the seemingly innocuous story: "When Harper and Row published *HARRIET THE SPY* in 1964, it excited a great deal of controversy. While the book is anything but realistic in style, it does discuss perfectly ordinary things that were not ordinarily discussed in children's books in the early 1960s." Despite such reactions, however, the book was generally popular with children, and led to a sequel that also featured Harriet, *THE LONG SECRET*.

"Despite the fading contemporaneity of Fitzhugh's writing, her novels still cleverly express the differences between individuality and eccentricity, and between what one owes others and what one deserves oneself," Nodelman resolves. "As her treatment of once-controversial issues becomes less shocking, Fitzhugh's merit as a tough-minded satirist becomes more apparent."



# Further Reading

If you liked **HARRIET THE SPY** by Louise Fitzhugh,  
you might like the following books, too!

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**FRIENDS FOREVER** by Miriam Chaikin  
**MOM, THE WOLF MAN, AND ME** by Norma Klein  
**AMY DUNN QUILTS SCHOOL** by Susan Shreve  
**SECRETS ON 26TH STREET** by Elizabeth McDavid Jones  
**A PLACE FOR JEREMY** by Patricia Hermes  
**IT'S LIKE THIS, CAT** by Emily Cheney Neville  
**I'VE GOT AN IDEA** by Eric A. Walters  
**HARRIET SPIES AGAIN** by Helen Ericson  
**THE TRUTH ABOUT MARY ROSE** by Marilyn Sachs  
**THE MORNING GLORY WAR** by Judy Glassman  
**RHODA, STRAIGHT AND TRUE** by Roni Schotter  
**QUIT IT** by Marcia Byalick  
**BROOKLYN DOESN'T RHYME** by Joan W. Blos  
**THE MAGIC HAT OF MORTIMER WINTERGREEN** by Myron  
Levoy  
**MY CHIMP FRIDAY: THE NANA BANANA CHRONICLES** by  
Hester Mundis  
**ROSY COLE: SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY** by Sheila Greenwald  
**WHEN PIRATES CAME TO BROOKLYN** by Phyllis Shalant  
**THE VICTORY GARDEN** by Lee Kochenderfer  
**SPORT** by Louise Fitzhugh