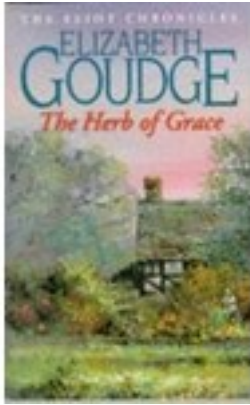


The Herb of Grace



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著者:Elizabeth Goudge

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Sally Adair, in her early twenties, is conscious both of a deep contentment about her life and a shame that she has been so fortunate. She keeps house for her father, a well-known artist, and her only wish is - eventually - to have a husband and children. One of the delights of her daily life is to meet the five Eliot children and their dog in the grocery shop.

Nadine Eliot, in her late thirties, is not contented. She is a beautiful woman married to George, a rather older man who adores her, but she still clings deep in her heart to another love. While she has never met Sally, hers are the five children who run errands for her daily. While she does her best for them and cares about them all, she has never been truly maternal.

George's mother Lucilla Eliot, who is eighty-five, is - despite her frail appearance - the centre and the driving force of her large family. She lives at Damerosehay, a beautiful old house near the Hampshire coast, with her spinster daughter Margaret. Lucilla is sensitive and deeply emotional, but also cannot help sometimes being rather manipulative when she believes she knows what is best for her loved ones.

When Lucilla hears of an old inn (the 'Herb of Grace') for sale not far from her own home, she is convinced that it would be the ideal place for George and his children, particularly the sensitive and asthmatic Ben. Lucilla knows that Nadine likes her smart house in Chelsea and would be horrified at the lack of amenities in the inn, so she arranges that George and the children should see the old inn first. They are all enchanted by it, by its welcoming appearance and also by the surrounding woods. And so Nadine, who really wants to be nicer to George, agrees reluctantly to move there.

The rest of the book is about growth and healing, about wholeness and integrity, about falling in love and self-sacrifice. It's almost entirely character-driven, with such delightful and distinct people that I think of them as close friends when I read this book. It was written in the 1940s, and is a forerunner of today's generational sagas in a slow-moving, almost philosophical style.

'The Herb of Grace' is the second in a trilogy of books about the Eliots of Damerosehay, but when I first read it in my teens I had no idea that it was part of a series. It stands alone without any difficulty, and isn't plagued with a huge amount of flashback to the first book ('The Bird in the Tree'). Later on when I discovered the series, however, it added greatly to my understanding and enjoyment to read the three together.

This isn't a book for anyone who likes fast action and complex plotting. Nor is it a book to read in a hurry. There's a wealth of description; I'm the kind of person who usually skips descriptive paragraphs, but in Elizabeth Goudge's writing they add a three-dimensional aspect to both the story and (more importantly) the people. As I slow down to savour the language and the images, I find myself in the minds of the different characters, experiencing their hopes and fears, seeing the inn come to life as once again it hosts residents and visitors.

The book has tensions and subplots, cleverly intertwined in the life of the inn and that of George and Nadine. Inevitably Sally and her father, mentioned in the first chapter and then left for a while, become deeply involved too. This happens through a series of coincidences which don't seem unbelievable because the characters themselves comment upon them. Sally's father takes Ben - a promising artist - under his wing; Sally helps with the younger children. David, Lucilla's favourite grandson, is staying at Damerosehay recovering from a nervous breakdown which was brought on by his role in World War II, and he too has a major part to play in the book. Ben researches the history of the house, and with the aid of his young twin siblings Jerry and José makes a wonderful discovery in one of the rooms.

It's a book to read and to re-read. I suppose I've read it five or six times in all, and it never fails to move me deeply. There are moments of gentle humour, moments of increased understanding about human nature, moments when my eyes are moist with tears. I don't know any other author who has such a great empathy with so many facets of personality, and such an awareness of what makes people the way they are, through both inborn nature and childhood experiences. It's a book that helps me find perspective in the minor irritations of life, where I can identify in turn with several of the characters and understand their viewpoints as they deal with different situations.

The only disadvantage is that it's rather long-winded at times, and some of the conversations are over-philosophical, exploring deep issues at a level not common in daily chit-chat. Elizabeth Goudge always has a little mysticism running through her books too: a sense of each human life being just one thread in the tapestry of eternity. As Lucilla grows older, so she becomes more able to read her family's faces, to know what they're thinking as well as what they're saying. She's also aware of the spirits of

those who have died - not as ghosts, more as imprints on the places they loved.

I'd recommend this to anyone who enjoys a thoughtful character-driven novel. There's nothing unsuitable for children in it, but the concepts are probably beyond all but the most intuitive under the age of about eleven or twelve. It's a book to savour, to curl up with on a wet afternoon, or to escape for a while from the noise and overwhelm of everyday life.

作者介绍:

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书评

两个月以来，像蚂蚁搬家一样，一点一点把这本书看完。看到最后，我竟然有依依不舍的感觉，就如朋友要离去，虽然不舍，但是却知道必须分别。这个故事给我的感觉就像一个一望无际的草原，草原里的每一个人都有那么的秘密和忧愁，但还是如风吹过草原，有颤抖，有摇摆，有起伏不定...

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