

Harriet the Spy, by Louise Fitzhugh, gives a funny and honest portrait of an eleven year old girl as a young writer. The book's subject is the struggle to be candid without wounding people, to somehow avoid hypocrisy and yet still be kind.

Harriet Welsch is a precocious, rather spoiled, but likeable girl growing up in New York City, observing the world around her and recording what she sees and hears in her notebook, which she carries with her at all times. Her desire to become a writer has probably been implanted in her by her wise, quote-spouting nanny, Ole Golly, who encourages Harriet to notice things that most people miss. Next to Harriet, Ole Golly is the most important character in the novel. Harriet's parents are warm, humorous people, but they leave many of the harder parental tasks to Ole Golly.

What Harriet discovers, as the story progresses, is that being absolutely candid may prove to be painful, both to those who are being written about and to the writer herself. When her classmates, by accident, discover Harriet's notebook, they read all about themselves, and much of it isn't pretty. Harriet despises her prissy classmate, Marion Hawthorne, who is the class president every year, and Harriet says: "IF MARION HAWTHORNE DOESN'T WATCH IT, SHE'S GOING TO GROW UP INTO A LADY HITLER". (p. 184)

Harriet has bad things to say about Pinky Whitehead, and the Boy with the Purple Socks, and her teachers, and even about her best friends, Sport, the future ballplayer, and Janie, the future scientist who wants to blow up the world. The young writer also has good things to say about her friends, but no one

notices these comments.

The ostracism that Harriet endures (without help from Ole Golly, who has left the Welsch's to get married) teaches her the necessity of sometimes restraining oneself, of not always saying exactly what you think about someone. Her apology/retraction wins back the friendship of Janie and Sport.

I read this book when I was about Harriet's age, and enjoyed it very much, but I think I liked it better the second time around, because I understood many of the allusions that flew right over my head the first time. Henry James, Stanislavski's theory of "method" acting, and the German expressionist film, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari are just a few of the cultural milestones mentioned in this "children's book". My favorite writer is Dostoevski, and I got a kick out of Ole Golly quoting from The Brothers Karamazov: "'Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it . . .'" (pp.22-24)

The allusions are playful, but serious--there is a man with twenty-six cats, most of them named after either famous baseball players or writers. One of the cats is called Thomas Wolfe, a writer noted for his fantastically detailed memory, and for recording some rather unpleasant truths about the natives of Asheville, North Carolina, in thinly disguised fictional form. Wolfe, like Harriet, protested that he also showed the good side of his small town, but no one really wanted Wolfe to come back and visit after Look Homeward, Angel. I read in today's (Sunday) New York Times Book Review that Oak Park, Illinois has no monuments to its most famous native son, Ernest Hemingway. Perhaps the moral of Harriet the Spy, as far as writers are concerned, is to be subtle and discreet, when mixing fact with fiction.

People's lives become intertwined in ways that may add complications to their settled routines, but which may also bring rewards. The plot of Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!, by M.E. Kerr, is a vivid illustration of the complexity of fate. The main character, Tucker Woolf, adopts a stray cat who he names Nader (after Ralph Nader, "who had done his own time under Chevrolets"--p. 2). But because of his father's allergies, Tucker has to give away the cat. Dinky Hocker--the obese, witty, and disturbed girl who claims Nader after seeing Tucker's cat adoption ad, posted on a tree--has a cousin, Natalie, who lives with the Hockers. Dinky is gracious enough to give Tucker visitation rights with Nader, the stray that he still cares about, and through this arrangement Tucker meets Natalie and immediately falls in love with her. From this point on, the story becomes more and more elaborate.

Written in 1972, Dinky Hocker is now almost a historical novel, in the sense that the time of student unrest, Viet Nam, hawks versus doves, civil rights, the beginnings of feminism, etc., is distant enough that one seems to be reading a very funny collection of archives. In the idealistic spirit that was very much a part of the time, Dinky Hocker's parents are social workers.

Mrs. Hocker was a do-gooder. She was lately concentrating on young people who used to be dope addicts.

She once told Tucker, "In a way, my young people are all strays, just like your Nader was, only they aren't cute and cuddly like Nader, and no one wants to take them in."

"On the other hand"; Dinky had butted in, "Nader wouldn't punch you in the face and grab your purse, either." (p. 18)

Mr. and Mrs. Hocker also try to run the lives of just about everyone they come in contact with. Tucker wants to go with Natalie to a school dance (he's fifteen and this is his first

date) but he can't take Natalie, the Hockers insist, unless Dinky has a date and goes along, because the Hockers don't want Tucker alone with their niece. Tucker inwardly groans, but cleverly manages to fix the very overweight Dinky up with the fattest boy in his class, P. John, who is a smart, rather obnoxious right-winger. The Hockers do not approve of P. John's politics, though he is actually a good influence on Dinky, who he calls "Susan", her real name rather than her ironic nickname. P. John also encourages Susan to lose some weight, which he successfully manages to do.

Mr. and Mrs. Hockers' disapproval of Tucker's interest in Natalie is partly based on the fact that she is schizophrenic. They believe that she is too fragile for a love relationship, though the two main participants don't think so.

"I trust Tucker," Natalie said. "I don't think it'll make any difference to him that I've been in a special school!"

"It doesn't make any difference at all," Tucker said. (p. 38)

Tucker comes to realize that if he loves Natalie as much as he thinks he does, he will have to stand up to the pressure of people who do not approve. Much of this novel concerns the difficulties involved when one is trying to decide whether someone is being helpful or manipulative. Tucker's parents, with whom he has an affectionate, teasing relationship, also have to decide whether Tucker's Uncle Jingles, a lively, theatrical personality, is really someone they can depend on to start up a new health food business with Tucker's recently unemployed father. They worry about Jingles, and his directionless life, but they have their own interests to protect, too. And Tucker's mother, who writes under an assumed name for "Stirring Romances" magazine, decides to fulfill herself and do what she wants--study law. Set in N.Y.C., like Harriet the Spy, this book is cynical and touching.