



The White Witch

Elizabeth Goudge

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Romantic tale set in 17th-century England, when Cavaliers struggle with Puritans to keep the throne safe for King Charles 1st.

At the beginning of the English Civil War and the men and women drawn into it on both sides. Robert Haslewood, the local squire turns puritan and follows his boyhood hero to war leaving his children and wife behind him. His cousin Froniga, half gypsy and the White Witch of the title, a wise woman with the power of healing lives in danger. Her gypsy cousins sometimes camp near her but will always move on. They have befriended Yomen, who conceals a grand past but is now a tinker and royalist spy. He loves the puritan Froniga. A journey man painter, Francis, delights in painting the Haslewood children while spying too for the royalist cause. Their lives entwine until the bloodiness of war forces them to be loyal to their side whatever their personal ties, threatening to destroy friendships and humanity and kindness in the process.

The White Witch Details

Date : Published 1973 by Pyramid Books (first published 1952)

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Author : Elizabeth Goudge

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From Reader Review The White Witch for online ebook

Cphe says

This novel is set amidst a turbulent time in history, the English Civil War. The main character Froniga is a healer, an independent woman in tune with nature. Froniga is "The White Witch" of the title.

This is a beautifully written, gently unfolding novel of good versus evil, spirituality, and the immeasurable toll of a Civil War that divided families and communities. The prose, as others have noted already is lyrical and emotive.

If you enjoy this period in history, then this is well worth a look at.

Angela Mortimer says

Set in the English civil war this is one of my most favourite historical fiction books. I've read it many times and will again. The main character Jenny is both a product of the old establishment, and another much stranger people and it shows, for she has the best of both worlds. She lives in her little cottage with her cat and her wondrous garden that she uses to help treat the locals. That in itself make us fear for her for this was a time of rejection of anything but the staunchest Christianity. The fear grows as we meet those willing to die for their convictions. A great read.

Judy says

Gave up on this one - I remember enjoying Goudge as a youngster, but I was just finding the writing style too long-winded and sentimental. I might try another book by her, though, as I don't think this is one of her best.

Melanie says

I've been reading this book (almost) yearly since I was sixteen, and it never has lost its magic. Goudge's writing style is simultaneously descriptive and spare, conjuring the intimacy of half-gypsy Froniga's herb-filled cottage, as well as the violent world during the time of Cromwell. To this day, the scent of rose or lavender brings me back to the first time I read the book, and I imagine myself in another life, creating rose-petal conserve, perhaps.

Mary Hawley says

I read and reread the novels of Elizabeth Goudge early in my teens, and I loved the way she wrote about

good and evil, faith and doubt in historical settings and in her own context of World Wars I and II. The backdrop of "The White Witch" is the grim era when Puritans and Royalists fought for political and religious control of England. Her characters, an assortment of Puritans, Catholics, Anglicans, gypsies, and witches, face inner turmoil as they are caught up in the larger war. Through her characters Goudge challenges any adherence to blind dogma and focuses instead on the centrality of love, mercy, and nature's beauty and divinity. Rereading this book after many years, I still enjoy the magic and mystery and her probing exploration of human nature.

Rosemary Morris says

The White Witch by Elizabeth Goudge

"A Dream of England
The Nightmare of War"

From the first page to the last The White Witch, which commences at the beginning of the Civil War, in 1642 when King Charles I raised his standard in Nottingham, the novel held my attention from beginning to the end.

The White Witch opens when eight-year old Will Haslewood is eagerly awaiting the day on which he will be breeched. He can barely wait to have his hair shorn, receive his doublet and breeches and, best of all, for his father to bring a sword from London.

His parents, and the white witch, Froniga, who is half gypsy, will be present at Will's breeching and so will his sister, Jenny,

Elizabeth Goudge leads us through events great and small in which the Haslewoods, the man of many parts, Yoben, who loves and is loved by Froniga Squire Haselwood's cousin, and Francis, the mysterious itinerant artist, make their exits and entrances.

The White Witch is a tale of civilians, the ill-fated Charles I, courtiers, soldiers, battles, Anglicans Puritans, and gypsies, including three small children who are protected by their grandmother and Yoben.

Elizabeth Goudge is to be complimented on her historical research, imagination and lyrical prose.

Every character, minor and major, is skilfully portrayed and so is the countryside and cities.

I keep The White Witch on a bookcase with treasured books I will not part with.

Joanne says

The White Witch is probably one of the most beautiful and unusual books I've ever read. It is not a terribly thrilling story, nor is it a page-turner. It is a very quiet, gentle story with gorgeous prose and phrases that

literally delight your senses. I savored each chapter and description, delighting in the author's charming descriptions of an English village before the English Civil War, the beautiful white witch and healer, Froniga, and the gypsy groups in colorful wagons which inhabited the woods. I almost expected to open the book and have the scent of apple wood smoke, lavender, and mint to emanate from the pages! It may not be for everyone, but I think this book will appeal to those who enjoy old-fashioned tales and elegant writing with a nod to Beauty and the Beast.

3.5 stars

Sophist says

I'm only about 1/3 of the way through this particular book, but Goudge has once again managed to write things that I thought only I knew. Her descriptions of communication with nature are so completely aligned with my experience that it makes me uneasy. Thrilled, but uneasy. I've spent so long seeing the world the way she did, not knowing there was anyone else who understood, and to find this... it's unsettling.

I've also read Gentian Hill and Green Dolphin Street, as well as some of her collections. Having seen her tolerance and absolute reverence for nature, I'm starting to wonder if her character Froniga isn't meant to be Goudge herself in some way, perhaps with slightly less self-awareness. Of course, her characters are for the most part not modern, and so they are even further removed from the understanding of their situation that Goudge, as a creator, can claim.

Don't let the title fool you. Goudge is devotedly religious, but not in the dogmatic, traditional way. She's edited and published several collections of various religious works, mostly poetry.

My agnosticism and skepticism occasionally verge on cynicism. However, I have never been able to find any for Elizabeth Goudge's work. Her writing assumes an understanding between people, nature, and any sort of spirit that precludes meaningful conflict. Though I think most people could find something to love in this book, I would particularly recommend her work to any Wiccan, especially one that wishes to combine some elements of Christianity or Judaism or any monotheistic religion with Paganism in any form.

She is all peace and harmony, and though I know little of her life, her ability to comfort makes me wish I'd known her, even a little.

Lucy Winnowski says

--sigh-- Again, one of the most romantic books I've read in my short life.

For those of you who like the classy (not to be confused with Tacky) Romance Novels, this is the book for you. Mixing humorous situations with heart warming friendship, this book gives the reader something to actually think about, not just a piece of mindless literature made only to amuse.

One of my most beloved books-- the cover is practically in tatters.

Hannah says

This is a beautifully evocative novel that is lyrical in places, contemplative, and altogether lovely. Goudge's sense of place is wonderfully explored through her writing style. Her religious philosophy is laid out with a deft hand, but is never heavy handed. I loved her characters, especially her depiction of the gypsy peoples. Most of her characters were multi-layered, and you always felt like they were more than just black and white, but all the shades of grey that make up the human condition.

I would have rated it 4 stars but for the fact that I felt Goudge got off track with her depictions of battles. Personally, I'm not a fan of reading battle scenes, and I felt that she took the emphasis away from the main story of Froniga when she diverted the plot away from the main character.

Otherwise, a wonderful novel. I will be reading more Goudge.

Carol She's So Novel?? says

The blurb on the back jacket of my copy threw me for a bit & I enjoyed the book far more when I realised this wasn't a historical romance in the conventional sense of the genre. While many characters have their turn centre stage, the main character is actually Froniga, the "White Witch" of the title. My jacket gives the impression the heroine is Jenny, one of the many magical children that Goudge created over the years.

The start of the story was quite wonderful, if somewhat slow moving, showing a Goudge world with the half Gypsy Froniga, as a central source of comfort for everyone when their worlds spun out of control. I soon stopped looking up the names of plants & other unfamiliar terms and let the beautiful language wash over me. Where the book lost me for a while was when it left the children and depicted some of the Roundhead battles for control of England. But Goudge draws me back in and shows a remarkable ability to make me sympathise with unsympathetic behaviour. I get the feeling that Goudge *loved* all her characters, flawed or not and wanted them to succeed on their journey through life. There is a scene of self sacrifice that moved me as much as a similar scene in .

Just one thing (view spoiler)

And Goudge had her own Froniga's well

A beautiful woman.

Mary T says

I started reading this book 50 years ago and should have finished it then for I would have liked the book so much more when the magic of Elizabeth Goudge's The Little White Horse was still fresh in my mind. But now I found only cardboard characters in a overly sentimental g-rated book. Still, even I was touched by the epilogue, and every now and then throughout the book could catch a glimpse of Goudge's trademark unicorn.

Helen McCabe says

Re-reading The White Witch, I was surprised how much more I liked it than I did when I first read it many years ago. I love historical books and The White Witch fits the bill in every way. However, it is not easy reading as the author had her own ideas on what historical means to her. One example, she is a specialist in 17th century plants and these are mentioned a lot. She also has her own view of the English Civil War which she shows quite forcefully in many ways, even as if she herself had witnessed it and even fought in the battles. The story itself is very good and is written in a way in which we are hardly familiar with today. The book is divided into chapters that each deal with a particular character and the story continues through those. First, the children and their thoughts and then on through spies and executions to lords and their vices as well as their goodnesses. The author has a masterly way of looking at the kind of war which again we could hardly recognise today, brutal skirmishes and then stopping for a month or so or even a winter, then starting again and ending in further cruelties. However, I recommend that everyone reads The White Witch through and does not put it down until they have read it, because once they have done so, it will not be forgotten. Its end will be remembered always and then the reader will be sad that it does not continue. In all, I think it is a wonderful book which with patience brings us a world of familiarity and infamiliarity, bound together with purely wonderful descriptions of the English countryside and its inhabitants.

Heather says

Wow. I had heard of Goudge's book "The Little White Horse," so when I saw this other book by her in my Grandma's basement, I decided to borrow it. This copy belonged to my great grandmother.

It took a long time for me to get into the story--I felt the first 200 pages or so could have been condensed. My modern attention span suffered under the snail-paced building of the action and the gradual revelation of any unifying theme, but I persevered and was rewarded for it.

This is a great meditation on mercy, forgiveness, love, the dangers of religious fanaticism, and the horrors of war. Most of it takes place during the British civil war of 1642. Froniga (the "white witch" of the title) is a half-gypsy woman who lives on her cousin Robert Haslewood's estate. The story follows her struggles between her pride in her powers and her acceptance of God and humility, her gypsy and English loyalties, and her desire for Yoben, the man she loves, and the need to set him free. This all plays out against the backdrop of the war, in which Robert fights on the side of Parliament while Yoben and another main character, Francis Lord Leyland, are fighting on the side of the king. Altogether the story had sadnesses that seemed inevitable, but also the undercurrent of joy and truth that most of us experience in our lives.

I would have liked to have known Ms. Goudge--she has an eloquent and magical writing style that captures the essence of Christian spirituality and the beauty of the natural world while managing to be objective and non-judgmental. The story was beautiful, completely unpretentious, and non-didactic, yet revealed a gentle truth of the mercy and love of God shining through the cracks of the sorrows of life. All of the characters were well-rounded and seemed realistic to me--I ended up liking all of them despite their mistakes and flaws. I think this must reflect in some way the mercy that Goudge felt toward other people. As other reviewers have mentioned, I think it's too bad that many of her books are currently out of print.

Abigail Bok says

Don't be deceived by the title into thinking this is a spooky Halloween tale; there is nothing Halloween about it. *The White Witch* is a serious historical novel that addresses weighty spiritual themes. But please don't get scared off by that description: it is also beautifully written, rich in character and description, and all-around rewarding.

The story is set at the start of the English Civil War and spends quality time with a wide range of characters, ranging from young children through Romany (Gypsies) to an aristocrat-spy. The conflict between the royalists (Anglican and Catholic) and the Parliamentarians (mostly Puritan) has pitted Englishman against Englishman and poisoned human relations at every level, from the government to the village. People who might muddle through life just fine in ordinary times are tested to the limits of their character, with mixed results.

The central family is the Haslewoods, husband, wife, and twin children of eight years, along with their sister-in-law Froniga, the white witch of the title. She is witchly only in the sense of being a village healer steeped in herbal traditions—no enemy to Christianity. She is half Gypsy and in love with a mysterious man, Yoben, from the Gypsy world who cannot marry her but will not say why. He is associated with an itinerant portrait painter who is actually an aristocrat in disguise, spying for the king. The Haslewoods are on the side of Parliament, and it is his job to learn through them what the Parliamentarians are up to. But he finds himself loving the Haslewoods and becomes deeply conflicted about his mission.

The surface story proceeds through military conflicts and the events of village life, but that's only a pretext for the real subject. *The White Witch* is a study of Christian spiritual values (in the New Testament sense, not the Evangelical), focusing on questions of mercy, grace, and sacrifice. These themes cut across the warring parties and challenge each character in different ways. It is truly a novel about the spirit and how the ethical challenges of our lives either ennoble or damage us.

I am a huge fan of Elizabeth Goudge, who wrote accessible novels that make you think—precisely the challenge I set myself in my own writing. Her books, written more than fifty years ago, may be dated around the edges, but in the ways that matter they are timeless. This one had its sentimental moments but for me they did not deter from the rich reading experience.
