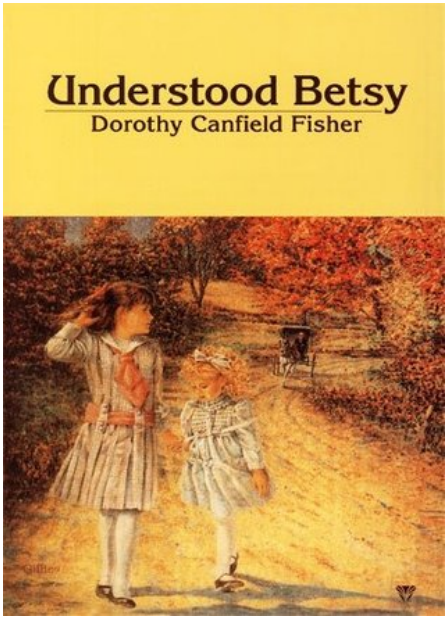

Understood Betsy

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

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For all of her nine years, fragile Elizabeth Ann has heard her Aunt Frances refer in whispers to her "horrid Putney cousins." But when her aunt can no longer care for her, Elizabeth Ann must leave her sheltered life to live in the wilds of Vermont with those distant relatives.

In the beginning, Elizabeth Ann is shocked by country living--pets are allowed to sleep in the house and children are expected to do chores! But with country living comes independence and responsibility, and in time, Elizabeth Ann finds herself making friends and enjoying her new family. When the year is up and Aunt Frances comes to get her niece, she finds a healthier, prouder girl with a new name--Betsy--and a new outlook on life.

Understood Betsy has delighted generations of young readers since it was first published by Henry Holt and Company in 1917.

Understood Betsy Details

Date	:	Published 1996 by Sonlight Curriculum (first published 1916)
ISBN	:	9781887840132
Author	:	Dorothy Canfield Fisher
Format	:	Paperback 176 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, Childrens, Historical, Historical Fiction

From Reader Review Understood Betsy for online ebook

Sara says

Such an interesting little read. This book felt like Little House On The Prairie meets Anne of Green Gables meets Betsy and Tacy to me. Timeless values that illustrate the resourcefulness, genuine intelligence and innate goodness of children (yes, the author is a big fan of Montessori) against a rustic rural backdrop. I cried for pages during the establishment of the sewing society and laughed joyfully over Betsy's treatment of the calf when Aunt Frances comes to the farm. I found myself half wishing that I could go and live on the Putney farm with Marilla, oh I mean Aunt Ann. This book does transport it's reader to another time and place when children were resourceful and competent and happy with the basic goodness of a loving family. The book is written in a voice that will make an adult chuckle but will resonate with a child and make them feel understood in Betsy. The best chapter title: "If You Don't Like Conversation, Skip This Chapter". And be sure to watch for the "and I won't say another word about it" and then laugh as the author goes on to describe what she promises that she won't talk about. Clever and classic. I purchased this in Kindle but will be investing in a hardback spine for my collection of literary treasures.

Matthew Mitchell says

I am such a big softie.

This morning, Isaac and I just finished reading Understood Betsy together (again).

You might guess from the cover that manly men like Isaac and I wouldn't care for this book. You'd be wrong. Understood Betsy is a book about an overprotected girl who unhappily goes to live with some extended family who actually understand what a little girl needs to thrive.

Betsy learns how to do things for herself, how to make friends (and be a true one), how to be a productive member of a family, how to make decisions, etc, and she learns the best way--by doing it. Along the way, she grows up, learning to care for others (not just be cared for) and doesn't want to leave her new home.

I get a lump in my throat every time I read it.

Understood Betsy was the first book I read to the family as a homeschooling dad, so it has a special place in my heart. But it's not just nostalgia--it's good writing. Dorothy Canfield Fisher understands how people tick and knows how to write about it. I'll read it again soon to whatever kids want to listen to it, and I'm sure I'll choke up at all the right places.

Shannon says

After my ten year old read this book, she said to me, "Mom, this might be my favorite book EVER." This is high praise from a child who averages more than three books weekly, so I decided to see why she loved it. After finishing the book this morning, I asked her exactly what she loved about it and was told, "Oh... I love the way Betsy transforms from a weak girl to a strong one and the way she helps the little boy in the book

and well, everything about it."

I have to agree with my daughter that Betsy's transformation was the star of this story, followed closely by the wonderful writing. Dorothy Canfield Fisher is my favorite type of chidren's author - the kind that writes for children without writing down to them. The writing throughout this book is engaging, lighthearted and draws the reader in at every turn. Fisher clearly knows and understands children. The scenes where Betsy begins to understand that history is not just facts on a page, but actually happened to people in her family, is the best illustration I've ever read of how our brains eventually make the leap from learning as abstract concept to real, applicable fact.

And this great writing allows Betsy to shine. When we meet Betsy (Elizabeth Ann), she is a nine year old who is bright, but timid. Her pampered upbringing has taught her to be fearful and made her believe she is incapable of caring for herself. By the end of the book, Betsy is a ten year old who has grown into her own skin, knows her mind and understands herself and others. Seeing Betsy take her new found skills and sew clothing for others or pull someone out of a tight situation reminds the reader WHY we learn in the first place - in order to use our gifts to bless others.

Unlike many coming of age stories, Betsy's story doesn't just apply to children. Betsy learns to think for herself and do things for herself and is transformed. Her story reminded me how empowering it is to try things and succeed - or fail. It reminded me that the trying is the important part and encouraged me to continue help my children try to do new things and to try new things myself.

If you're in the mood for an old-fashioned good book, this is the perfect read. I read this book more slowly than the slim volume lead me to expect, but that was because I wanted more time with Betsy. I wanted to give her time between chapters to grow and settle in my mind. Read this book when you have time to savor it. Have your daughter read it. Enjoy Betsy together and see if she helps you understand yourself and others better.

Elizabeth says

I always wanted to read this when I was younger, since it had my name in the title, but I just couldn't get interested. Now, with Kindle + public domain, all things are possible!

I'm not sure what Ms. Fisher was wanting to do with this book, but it really isn't so much a kids' story as an extended scenario on how adults should behave towards children. All Betsy's inner feelings are documented so very densely, but she always seems to be reacting and discovering based on what some adult around her has said. The whole trope is strongly Montessori/Waldorf, right down to the bits about mirrors, dolls, and chores. I wish I had read it as a child so I could have reacted to it on a child's level; now, I can only react to it on a parent's level, and it's a pretty fantasy but I have a hard time buying into it.

One plus: it would have taken me a week and a half when I was a kid, and now I was able to blow through the whole thing in a couple train rides. And yes, I would really like to churn butter someday too.

Jenne says

This is like totally some kind of Montessori school propaganda, those bastards!!
But it's also really sweet, it's kind of like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm or Anne of Green Gables or something, but it's all about how to be self-sufficient and be educated at your own level and have self-confidence and stuff.
Plus applesauce.

Linda says

Originally published in 1916, Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a women's rights activist, educator, wife and mother. She eventually earned a doctorate from Columbia; something almost unheard of for a woman at that time. Many of her stories were considered autobiographical in some sense including UNDERSTOOD BETSY.

This heartfelt narrative was a wonderfully gentle story about an orphaned girl who, initially, was sent to live with three single women until she was nine years old. As she grew older, she was unaware that their peculiarities and worries had enveloped her life. These three ladies affected her personality deeply and *Elizabeth Ann was sheltered to the extreme.* When a case of scarlet fever was found amongst them, she was sent to live with the *dreaded* relatives at Putney Farm in Vermont. From then on out, the story bloomed. Watch as her formal name, Elizabeth Ann, melted into Betsy.

Aunt Abigail, Uncle Henry, Cousin Ann, their dog Shep and even the farm itself only added to the innocent charm of the story. Uncle Henry was a jewel. No more, no less. Aunt Abigail had such easy manners and common-sense humor; I loved her poking fun of herself. Their adult daughter, Cousin Ann, was the sobering one of the bunch. (Watch when she takes her father to task for wanting to play checkers instead of repairing a harness.) And Shep? Well, I ask you, what would life be like living in the country without a dog?

I absolutely fell in love with this story. It was simply 'plain speaking'. The author was the narrator of the story using herself in the first person tense but relating to the reader what occurred in third person and, oddly, it worked. She put emphasis on certain words: SOMEbody, forEVER, and DIDn't to let you feel the impact of what Betsy was thinking. Mrs. Fisher's background in education peeked through the pages on more than one occasion but it blended so nicely that I never felt it was preachy.

"Then Aunt Abigail let her run the curiously shaped wooden butter-worker back and forth over the butter, squeezing out the water, and then pile it up again with her wooden paddle into a mound of gold. She weighed out the salt needed on the scales, and was very much surprised to find that there really is such a thing as an ounce. She had never met it before outside the pages of her arithmetic book and she didn't know it lived anywhere else."

This wink at the past was probably the *most wholesome and heartwarming* piece of fiction I have read in an very long time. It brought to the forefront all of the things we now take for granted. Something as simple as lighting a match and building a fire. The making of a lead pencil. And popping popcorn.

Go ahead. There is no excuse for you not to read it. It is *FREE* at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5347/5....

Ava says

It's really one of those four-point-fivers, but what can you do?

Sandy says

This superb story is sure to be loved by children and adults alike, with its clear message of the value of tolerance, understanding, affection, trust and the importance of nurturing responsibility and self-confidence in young people.

I listened to a delightful Librivox recording by volunteer (and professional) reader, Lee Ann Howlett, and also discovered a wonderful illustrated edition of the book at Project Gutenberg.

This story is truly a joy! I plan to read other works by this talented author. Highly recommended!

Duane says

Published in 1916. This is a charming little children's story that was quite popular in the early 20th century. It's the story of nine year old Elizabeth Ann (Betsy), orphaned and living with her aunt in the city. It's a medium size city in a medium size state in the middle of the US. (sounds like where I live). Because of her sisters illness, Betsy's aunt has to go out west to be her nurse and Betsy has to travel to Vermont to stay with her distant cousins, the Putney's, who live on a farm. It's a shocking change for Betsy, but what transpires over the next year is the heart of the story and it is as cute as it can be.

What led me to read this story though was the author, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, (1879-1958). In addition to being a writer, she was a social activist supporting women's rights, racial equality, and educational reform. Eleanor Roosevelt called her one of the 10 most influential women in the US. She was close friends with writer Willa Cather, with whom she had a decades long relationship.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

I first bought this book when I was about 10, the first book I chose for myself at a bookstore. It was magical to me; I read so many stories of little girls who were sent to the country/the mountains/the seaside "for their health" that it took me several years to realise it was never going to happen to me--the doctor was never going to look grave, shake his head, and tell my mother that I was "run down" and that I needed to take a long sea voyage "if she's going to have a chance."

In this case, Elizabeth Ann could be seen as the pampered darling of "Aunt" Frances, but we soon realise that she is more smothered than pampered. When Frances' mother is taken ill, Elizabeth Ann is sent to stay with her "dreadful" Putney cousins in a mysterious place called Vermont. At first she is terrified, having never been taught to feel any other way; but once there she becomes Betsy, learns to think and do for herself, and even acquires a sense of humour.

I'll never forget one scene in which Betsy has an "Elizabeth Ann moment" and is moaning about doing poorly in school. Her cousin Ann suddenly asks her, "Do you really *want* to tell me all this?" and Betsy realises that no, she actually doesn't--she was just trained to vent all the time. From that point she really starts to grow up.

A lovely warm read.

Luisa Knight says

The girls were "full of excitement, looking over their shoulders at nothing and pressing their hands over their mouths to keep back the giggles. There was, of course, no reason on earth why they should giggle, which is, of course, the reason why they did. If you've ever been a little girl you know about that."

This is a great family read-aloud! Fun stories for the children and for the adults, hilarious interpretations of childhood and the mixed up ways of a condescendingly doting aunt.

The writing style adds to the wit of the story, as does the occasional illustration for your young listeners. And in this book, the moral lessons and take-away aren't just for the children.

I loved it!

Cleanliness:

Children's Bad Words
Mild Obscenities & Substitutions - 5 Incidents: good land, thunderation, what in thunder, darned
Name Calling - 4 Incidents: You gump, darned old skunk
Religious Profanity - 21 Incidents: Mercy!, goodness, goodness' sakes, good gracious, gosh, Lord

Romance Related - 1 Incident: The word "breast" is used a couple of times - non-sexually.

Parent Takeaway
A sweet and entirely hilarious story about a little girl that learns she can do a lot more than she thought. She doesn't always do the right thing at first, but repents and learns great, moral lessons.

For a full cleanliness report, which includes Conversation Topics and Attitudes/Disobedience, visit my website. I have hundreds of other detailed reports too, and I also have Clean Guides (downloadable PDFs) which enable you to clean up your book before reading it! Visit my website: The Book Radar.

Melora says

What can I say about such an old favorite? A book which my mother read to me when I was little, and many years later I read to my children, and which I just finished reading to my mother, knowing it would offer a small measure of comfort and cheer as she is dying. I can easily see the book's “faults” – the passionate didacticism, the stock characters, the romanticism of country life – but those have become part of the book's charm for me. Reading “Understood Betsy” now, having homeschooled my children, I really appreciate

Canfield Fisher's passion for educational reform (she was an early proponent of Montessori education), and any mild irritation I might feel at her earnest preachiness is overcome by affection for her charm, kindness, and wisdom. Each of Betsy's adventures, in which she grows in spirit, skills, compassion, and self-confidence, has so long been part of my mental furniture that offering an objective opinion is nearly impossible. So I'll leave it at that. This will always be a cherished favorite for me, and I hope my daughter will pull out a copy (mine *may* have one last reading in it) and read it to me in my last days.

Josiah says

Had the Newbery Medal existed in 1917, *Understood Betsy* surely would have won it. I can't imagine there was any stronger candidate than Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel about public and personal education and the importance of developing the habit of learning while young, when one's psyche and worldview are moldable enough to adopt new form. Until age nine, orphaned Elizabeth Ann is so overprotected and micromanaged by her Aunt Frances that she's prevented from defining her own life to any extent based on her own thoughts and experiences. Elizabeth Ann has learned to pick up her aunt's cues as to what she should think on any subject. Dear Aunt Frances loves the young girl so, and feels such sorrow for her as an orphan stranded in the world without a parent's love, that she bundles Elizabeth Ann up against the world's perceived coldness and never believes she is insulated enough. She sees a timid, pale, sickly girl who's no match for the uncaring outsiders certain to harm her if she steps out from her aunt's petticoats, and Frances's fear seeps into Elizabeth Ann's subconscious from infancy, infecting her with an insidious paranoia that's been her companion so long she feels as though it were a genetic inheritance. She cowers from good-natured dogs on the street, eats little more than required to keep her alive, and would rather sit quietly with Aunt Frances indoors than risk playing with kids her age outside. Elizabeth Ann completes her lessons at school but rarely interacts with other students, and Aunt Frances ensures that won't change by her frequent trips to educate the teachers on her niece's fragile state, her special status apart from other boys and girls whose affect isn't so delicate. By the time *Understood Betsy* begins, with Elizabeth Ann having learned nine years of overcautious habits from her beloved aunt, she's hardly a real girl at all, but a synthetic replica of what Aunt Frances believes a dignified young female with a big heart should be. Elizabeth Ann's entire childhood could easily have been wiled away in the recesses of her aunt's home, shielded from doing chores or forming her own opinions or any activity that might prove overwhelming, but fate intervenes at the height of Aunt Frances's well-intended coddling. It's a good thing fate does step in, for otherwise we would not have this book.

When Great-aunt Harriet is hospitalized on account of a chronic cough, Aunt Frances's relentless attention is removed from Elizabeth Ann for the time being. Aunt Harriet's medical care must be supervised constantly by a family member, and Aunt Frances hasn't time to volunteer for duty and devote herself to Elizabeth Ann. Arrangements are made for the slender ghost of a girl to board with trusted cousins temporarily, but when that doesn't work out, she's shipped to rural Vermont to be kept by the Putney cousins, a change of which Aunt Frances is not apprised. Elizabeth Ann's formerly omnipresent companion would be aghast at the child winding up with the Putneys; Frances's limited experience with them suggests the family has no idea how to properly raise a youngster. They assign chores and aren't vigilantly attuned to the emotional whims of children, and that won't do for a sensitive girl like Elizabeth Ann. She dreads her destination at the Putney farm as she rides the rails to get there, her aunt's anxieties weighing on her poor heart. The world is a dark, unsympathetic realm indeed, and without Aunt Frances to advocate for her, Elizabeth Ann will be trampled by thoughtless rogues. How will she survive her stay with the Putneys?

Preconceived notions of Putney neglect run wild in the girl's imagination, but she soon relaxes in the presence of affable, sweet Aunt Abigail, whose rotundity Betsy (Betsy?) has never seen the like. She doesn't

mind Uncle Henry's unruffled, low-key demeanor so much, either. She remains unsure of Cousin Ann a little longer, for the physically imposing farm woman will brook no nonsense, and Elizabeth Ann's faint heart wouldn't dream of instigating any. Somehow she senses Cousin Ann won't be moved by protests that her young boarder isn't capable of performing basic chores, or going to school without a caring adult paving her way by alerting the teacher what activities Elizabeth Ann can and can't be expected to take part in. She isn't sure she likes Cousin Ann, but the woman's personality is a river with too rough a current to be resisted. To even dip her toes in the churning flow might injure tenderhearted Elizabeth Ann, so she avoids the torrent whenever possible. As Betsy relaxes her defenses to allow the Putneys influence on her, she discovers that life on a farm isn't as insufferable as she'd been brought up to believe. Betsy is given some autonomy for the first time in her life: she's asked to help with the cooking, churn butter with Aunt Abigail in the cool basement, walk to school without accompaniment, and is given freedom to make friends with whomever she takes a liking to. Not every kid in school is her friend, but Betsy will form as many rewarding relationships there as at the Putney farm, relationships we can no longer imagine her life without by the end of this book as color, light, and warmth flood the stage via a cast of characters Betsy had no idea existed before her fortuitous stay with the Vermont cousins. How could Betsy conceive what it's like to care for one younger, smaller, and more defenseless even than herself until she's given charge of the stray kitten she names Eleanor, whom none but Betsy has time to adopt as a pet? What about sweet, cuddly Molly, a supplementary little sister whose presence forces Betsy to clear her mind and come through in dicey situations when her first instinct is to cry until a grownup swoops to the rescue? With a girl needier than herself to consider, Betsy can't indulge in self-pity or give up when confronted with hardship. If she doesn't take care of Molly when it's just the two of them, no one will. The responsibility may even help Betsy understand Aunt Frances's overprotectiveness a bit better, for no setup more predictably breeds cosseting than loving a child who seems little and vulnerable, sure to be run roughshod over by inconsiderate strangers if you don't intervene.

Modern technology, even of the era, isn't part of life at the Putney farm. Decent mirrors are scarce, so Betsy is taken aback on the day at the fair when she sees her reflection and almost doesn't recognize herself: strong, tan, and looking much more confident than the frail girl she was with Aunt Frances in the city. Nothing about the girl she sees reflected now suggests sickliness. She's come into her own on the farm, a country girl ready to seize what opportunities come her way and not back down from the challenges of real life, which seems to manifest itself around here more obviously than in the shelter of Aunt Frances's wings. Yet Betsy's tenure with the Putneys was never a permanent arrangement, though we the reader stew more over her inevitable departure than Betsy does in the book's dwindling chapters. The life she's made in Vermont is ever so more richly rewarding than what she knew in her first nine years, and Betsy finds herself in the surprising predicament of not wanting to leave her new family for the hermetically sealed existence Aunt Frances still offers. What is she to do? When you don't shy from the difficult moments of life, sometimes solutions materialize out of thin air as if they hovered there all along waiting to be snatched, though we couldn't see them until the moment they were needed. Betsy's future may turn out differently than she expected or hoped, but it's a joyous adventure she's starting out on either way, full of humor, gladness, and the awareness of what we have in one another and how fortunate that makes us. At last, Betsy has grown to understand herself.

"Not a thing had happened the way she had planned, no, not a single thing! But it seemed to her she had never been so happy in her life."

—*Understood Betsy*, P. 166

The excellence of this novel is its many multi-layered, soul-affirming episodes. I could write for hours of Betsy's escapades with the Putneys and her peers at school and what she learns from them. Her education in

self-sufficiency commences on the wagon ride home from the train depot with Uncle Henry, as Elizabeth Ann sits in frightened silence and imagines falling off the wagon and being stomped by the horses. Uncle Henry knows she has no reason to fear, and distracts her from her visions of doom by shifting partial responsibility for directing the horses to Elizabeth Ann right away, nonchalantly handing her the reins so he can do some figuring on paper. Elizabeth Ann is horrified at being given control of the beasts, but self-preservation forces her to exercise command over her equine escort. She commits errors in driving the team, but nothing life-threatening, and for the first time ever she's taken charge in an unfamiliar situation. What a thrill to manage such large, powerful animals. As Betsy proceeds to exercise occasional authority in small ways around the farm, she realizes that just because she hasn't done something before is no reason she can't do it now. It's the beginning of her empowerment as she engages with the real world for the first time.

Betsy's view of history is turned upside down by a talk with Aunt Abigail, who frames a story about her own grandmother by mentioning she was born the year America's Declaration of Independence was signed. For Betsy, there always seemed a divorce between people of history and us today, as if humans of the past weren't alive and conscious in the same way as us. But when Aunt Abigail tells of her grandmother living contemporaneous to the birth of America, this illusion is swept aside. "Why! There were real people living when the Declaration of Independence was signed—real people, not just history people—old women teaching little girls how to do things—right in this very room, on this very floor—and the Declaration of Independence just signed!...To tell the honest truth, although she had passed a very good examination in the little book on American history they had studied in school, Elizabeth Ann had never to that moment had any notion that there ever had been really and truly any Declaration of Independence at all. It had been like the ounce, living only inside her schoolbooks for little girls to be examined about." We don't realize it, but most of us feel this way about history. It boggles the mind to think of people hundreds or thousands of years ago living and feeling just as we do now. We're so removed from their dramas that we subconsciously categorize them as legend, fictions from which we presumably can learn. Real education begins when we see the lives of past individuals as at least as relevant in the grand scheme of things as our own, perceiving that their accomplishments and tragedies felt as immediate and earth-shattering to them as ours feel to us. Once we view history this way, we'll never again dismiss it as insignificant.

Cousin Ann's forceful demeanor shapes Betsy's initial response to the Putney lifestyle, and gives insight into the mysteries of human personality and how widely it influences the events of our lives. "(P)ersonality...is perhaps the very most important thing in the world. Yet we know only one or two things about it. We know that anybody's personality is made up of the sum total of all the actions and thoughts and desires of his life. And we know that though there aren't any words or any figures in any languages to set down that sum total accurately, still it is one of the first things that everybody knows about anybody else. And that really is all we know!" Betsy's personality, too, is an enigma. How much of her wallflower mentality is an unintended side-effect of her upbringing by Aunt Frances, who meant only good by insulating her niece from harm? When removed from her aunt's fastidiously maintained environment, Elizabeth Ann soon changes into another sort of girl, revealing new layers of personality that thrive under a different set of external conditions. Portions of Betsy's personality clearly were obscured by Aunt Frances, but she isn't an *entirely* different girl with the Putneys. *Understood Betsy* gives us a lot to mull over regarding personalities.

Betsy sees much of herself in six-year-old Molly at school, and Molly becomes a canvas on which to repaint her own childhood, correcting mistakes her overbearing school teachers made when she was Molly's age. Betsy clings to vestiges of her own erstwhile apprehension in the early days of her new life, but even a girl taught to fear everything can't find reason to shrink from Molly. "No, it was impossible to be frightened of such a funny little girl, who peered so earnestly into the older child's face to make sure she was doing her lesson right." Young ones are a perfect tonic for worry and fear because no one is less apt to do harm than a little kid. Betsy is able to embrace Molly without anxiety and see that she can teach the girl a thing or two,

and in so doing observes more clearly her own value. If you can't bravely engage the big, sometimes unfriendly world, first engage an impressionable child. They'll make it so much easier to grow to love the world. Betsy's empathy for how it feels to be a scared rabbit makes her a better teacher for Molly as she helps improve her reading. "Elizabeth Ann had never had anything to do with children younger than herself, and she felt very pleased and important to have anybody look up to *her*!...Elizabeth Ann (corrected) Molly gently when she made a mistake, and (waited) patiently when she hesitated. She had so fresh in her mind her own suffering from quick, nervous corrections that she took the greatest pleasure in speaking quietly and not interrupting the little girl more than was necessary. It was fun to teach, *lots* of fun!" Having an empathetic teacher does wonders, and the instructor benefits as much as the student. Much like her epiphany about history, Betsy realizes the way she views education is skewed by misplaced administrative priorities. In her city school, the reading assignments were much too easy because her math skills were below average, keeping her in a lower grade. But as her teacher in Vermont puts it, "what's the use of your reading little baby things too easy for you just because you don't know your multiplication table?" That's when the true goal of formal education dawns on Betsy. "(N)ever before had she known what she was doing in school. She had always thought she was there to pass from one grade to another, and she was ever so startled to get a glimpse of the fact that she was there to learn how to read and write and cipher and generally use her mind, so she could take care of herself when she came to be grown up." Parents and teachers often lose sight of schooling's true purpose, too, that it's about learning how to learn. When this truth is imparted to students, it's the first step in turning over control of their education to them. No part of schooling should supersede giving students the desire and ability to learn for themselves.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a passionate promotor of the Montessori education system, emphasizing the custom needs of individual children rather than peer standardization, and she recognized that community involvement is part of healthy, broad-based education. Betsy is surprised one day when a gregarious farmer joins their play at recess, hitching himself to the opposite end of the tug-of-war rope and playfully dragging all the students and teachers across the schoolyard. It's terrific fun, and Betsy marvels that an older person would condescend to play with youngsters. That wouldn't have happened in her city school. "Never, why never once, had any grown-up, passing the playground of the big brick building, *dreamed* of such a thing as stopping for a minute to play. They never even looked at the children, any more than if they were in another world." It's sad when grownups and kids isolate from each other as if they were from disparate castes and mixing would be unseemly. Diversity is a major part of what people have to offer one another, variegated perspectives enhancing our view of the world. Why create division where there is none, as if age were an impassable blockade to friendship, fun, and learning from one another, when we truly need each other so? Playing together among different age groups would be a boon to lifelong education, an untapped experiential reservoir we shouldn't continue to ignore. Consider the dimensions added to Betsy's worldview by spending time with Aunt Abigail, who's more than sixty years older than the little girl she's taken into her home. Betsy sees the world without much awareness of the past, but Aunt Abigail has seventy-two years of memories and wisdom on which to draw. Before electric clocks were affordable for farm folk, Aunt Abigail's grandmother kept track of time using a rudimentary sundial, one that was just a single gouge in the pantry windowsill. Her grandmother could instantly tell the time from the sunlight's position in relation to that gouge, but Aunt Abigail has lost the knack for it. Her forbears were able to do many things that later generations have forgotten, and she wonders if this might not be a good thing. "I declare! Sometimes it seems to me that every time a new piece of machinery comes into the door some of our wits fly out at the window! Now I couldn't any more live without matches than I could fly! And yet they all used to get along all right before they had matches. Makes me feel foolish to think I'm not smart enough to get along, if I *wanted* to, without those little snips of pine and brimstone." The more technology develops, the more we outsource our survival acumen, and there's no telling where that will lead. I have to think Aunt Abigail's right to say we're better off the more we know how to do for ourselves, whether or not we ever have to fall back on that knowledge to survive.

There are so many lovely stories in this book, but I'm running out of room to write about them. The scene where Aunt Abigail, Uncle Henry, and Elizabeth Ann conspire to feed the dog scraps when Cousin Ann is out of the room is one of the most charming I've ever read. The previously overprotected little girl can't stifle her exuberant shout of laughter at the silly scene as the grownups put on straight faces to convince Cousin Ann they weren't breaking the rules by feeding the dog from the table. The scene is that ultimate rarity in literature, a true perfect moment, and I look back on it as the point when I fell unabashedly in love with Elizabeth Ann/Betsy. Her decision to start a sewing society with a few friends from school is another defining moment, after Betsy learns that six-year-old 'Lias Brewster's perpetual grunginess and ragged clothes are the result of neglect by his drunkard stepfather. To make up for the mean comments she and other girls used to whisper behind 'Lias's back, Betsy proposes they get together and make nice new clothes for him from scratch. But are their motives for helping the boy wholly selfless, or is there a hard lesson for Betsy and her sewing circle to learn about themselves from their act of charity for 'Lias? The episode takes several unexpected turns before the end, and has an emotionally resounding conclusion that adds luster to an already magnificent book.

I love *Understood Betsy*, and can't express enough admiration for what Dorothy Canfield Fisher accomplished in it. This timeless, ageless novel should touch hearts forever, one of the premier works of children's lit. It is in a class by itself.

Nickie says

Imagine you are nine years old, raised by an overly protective Aunt to the point that you have never accomplished anything on your own in your life. Then one day you are sent to the "horrible cousins" in Vermont. Immediately, without criticism, you are made to see that you can change, do things and think things for yourself. Betsy, as a nine year old discovers an amazing world of ability and excitement for living, learning, playing, eating, and actually having and being a friend.

Plus Betsy learns the value of working on the family farm, she blossoms and becomes an understanding ten year old able who finds a way to comfort others, and understand the needs of her Aunt Frances in the end.

I and the kids appreciated the writing and story pictures created by the author. I cried at moments. Understanding Betsy's fears, and the love of her "Vermont cousins" who turn out to be the greatest blessing in life.

Our kids are capable of much when given and expected to succeed.

You will not be disappointed.

Melissa says

This is one of my family's favorite read-alouds of all time. We've read it twice before; now it's 7yo Beanie's turn to hear it (she was two years old last time around), but Rose is listening in, along with anyone who happens to pass through the room and be grabbed by the story. Which is to say: anyone who happens to pass

through the room.

Updated December 2016: Read it this time to Huck and Rilla. Every bit as delicious as the times before.

Kitty says

A book written for 8-10 year old girls, but one I still enjoy rereading as an adult. I love the descriptions of Vermont and Vermonters, so much that on a vacation to Vermont, I made my family take a detour through Dorothy Canfield's hometown so I could find the farmhouse that she uses as a setting for Understood Betsy. The point she makes that children should be allowed to make their own decisions and learn to think for themselves wasn't lost on me - I only hope that I can do as good a job with my kids as the Putney cousins do.

Ivonne Rovira says

Even beyond its literary value, teachers will appreciate *Understood Betsy*, first released in 1917, as one of the first books to introduce the Montessori Method of education to America. That said, author Dorothy Canfield Fisher spins a pretty interesting yarn for fans of Daddy-Long-Legs, The Railway Children, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, or Anne of Green Gables.

Nine-year-old orphan Elizabeth Ann — the titular Betsy, of course — lives with her widowed Great-Aunt Harriet and Harriet’s middle-aged daughter Frances somewhere in an American Midwestern city. Both doted on Betsy from babyhood — too much so, in fact. So when Aunt Harriet falls very ill and the coddled child is sent to spend time with the Putney family, her late mother’s cousins, on a Vermont farm, Betsy faces just the kind of culture shock you might imagine. Readers will foresee the ending, but the story is so charming that they just won’t care.

The book is now in the public domain and available for free to read online at WikiSource, although I listened to the delightful story in its Audible edition.

Hilary says

Well this book has just taken the last free place on my top-ten-favourite-books-of-all-time shelf. If it wasn't for goodreads I would never have discovered this book as it's one of those well known in US and Canada but unknown here in England.

This was wonderful, from the first page we were hooked, the story so well told, the characters so real (in fact we know an Aunt Frances and a Elizabeth Ann - before her transformation) and the story had so much humour, and kept us guessing right up to the end as to what the outcome would be.

Elizabeth Ann, an orphan, lives with Great Aunt Harriet and Aunt Francis who are extreme worriers and fussers, they are timid and see danger everywhere and transfer all their worries to Elizabeth Ann. Elizabeth Ann lives up to all she is told, she is told she has a poor appetite so lives up to that, she is told she is scared

of dogs so becomes so. One day her Great Aunt becomes ill so she is sent to live with those 'Horrid Putney cousins' who live on a farm and provide just the no-nonsense antidote Elizabeth Ann needs.

This book was a wonderful study of child rearing, it would have been so easy to write a book about some mean people looking after an orphan followed by some nice people, but the irony was that Great Aunt Harriet and Aunt Francis were so kind and loving but doing just as much damage as someone being unkind.

The school was wonderful, great common sense teaching, if only teachers were allowed to teach according to capability today. The school scenes were wonderful, this is exactly what I would want a school to be.

I was surprised how parts of this book were so hard to read aloud, the sad and the happy, very emotional, very hard to keep a steady voice. It would be interesting to know if this story was in any way autobiographical, it seemed too real to be complete fiction. I know it's easy to romanticize about living in the past and forget about the hard parts, the lack of antibiotics or medical assistance in childbirth but this time and place seems like the ideal place to be in my opinion.

Highly recommended, wonderful story.

Cynthia Egbert says

I loved this book more deeply than I can express, I will be posting some quotes below that will give you an idea. But I love the author and what she was trying to accomplish just as much. Here is her thoughts on choosing books for our children, "There is no set rule of thumb for this or that child which can be followed by parents as a cook follows a recipe, beating her eggs and thinking about something else. To help your children to the right reading, right for them, requires everything…not only tact, self-abnegation, patience, imagination, but also utilization of every resource you can find". This woman takes reading as seriously as I do! Also, I have her to thank as one of the original "Book of the Month" panelists, she chose the books that came in my grandma's mailbox all of those years ago and sat on the shelf looking pretty until I discovered them years later and found so many things I love including what may be my favorite book…well…almost! Thanks Mrs. Fisher for being a strong woman and for your choices. You are the perfect choice for me to read as you broke new ground for women.

Now…back to the book. She wrote this book to incorporate, in a delightful story, the concepts and methods of her friend Maria Montessor. Learning that causes me to understand why I loved it so very much. This book illustrates all that needs to happen in a child's life and I love it with all of my heart. Some quotes to give you a taste.

"It is possible that what stirred inside her head at that moment was her brain, waking up. She was nine years old, and she was in the third-A grade at school, but that was the first time she had ever had a whole thought of her very own. At home, Aunt Frances had always known exactly what she was doing, and had helped her over the hard places before she even knew they were there; and at school her teachers had been carefully trained to think faster than the scholars. Somebody had always been explaining things to Elizabeth Ann so carefully that she had never found out a single thing for herself before. This was a very small discovery, but it was her own. Elizabeth Ann was as excited about it as a mother bird over the first egg that hatches."

"She weighed out the salt needed on the scales, and was very much surprised to find that there really is such a thing as an ounce. She had never met it before outside the pages of her arithmetic book and she didn't know

it lived anywhere else."

"Elizabeth Ann listened to this statement with a very queer, startled expression on her face, as though she hadn't understood the words. Now for a moment she stood staring up in Aunt Abigail's face, and yet not seeing her at all because she was thinking so hard. She was thinking! 'Why! There were real people living when the Declaration of Independence was signed - real people, not just history people - old women teaching little girls how to do things - right in this very room, on this very floor - and the Declaration of Independence just signed.' To tell the honest truth, although she had passed a very good examination in the little book on American history they had studied in school, Elizabeth Ann had never to that moment had any notion the there ever had been really and truly any Declaration of Independence at all. It had been like the ounce, living only inside her schoolbooks for little girls to be examined about."

"She felt as though she were being pulled from limb to limb. 'Why - why,' said Elizabeth Ann, 'I don't know what I am at all. If I'm second-grade arithmetic and seventh-grade reading and third-grade spelling, what grade AM I?' The teacher laughed, 'You aren't any grade at all, no matter where you are in school. You're just yourself, aren't you? What difference does it make what grade you're in?'"

"I declare! Sometimes it seems to me that every time a new piece of machinery comes into the door some of our wits fly out at the window!"

"She had said her 'Now I lay me' every night since she could remember, but she had never prayed 'til she lay there with her face on the rock, saying over and over, 'Oh God, please, please, PLEASE make Mr. Pond adopt 'Lias.'"

J. Boo says

My friends here that read turn-of-the-last-century girl's lit have all read Understood Betsy and rated it highly... and they're right! And exceptionally relevant and up-to-date feels this tale of a young girl who at the start of the story is deficient in life skills and pushed towards anxiety by helicoptering oversharing aunts.

Some great asides:

"[Betsy] weighed out the salt needed on the scales, and was very much surprised to find that there really is such a thing as an ounce. She had never met it before outside the pages of her arithmetic book and she didn't know it lived anywhere else."

A few scenes were set in a one-room schoolhouse, which, as someone who spends far too much time thinking about historical curricula, I loved. A good reminder for me to chat with my dad about his own one-room schoolhouse days.
