

# Louise Fitzhugh

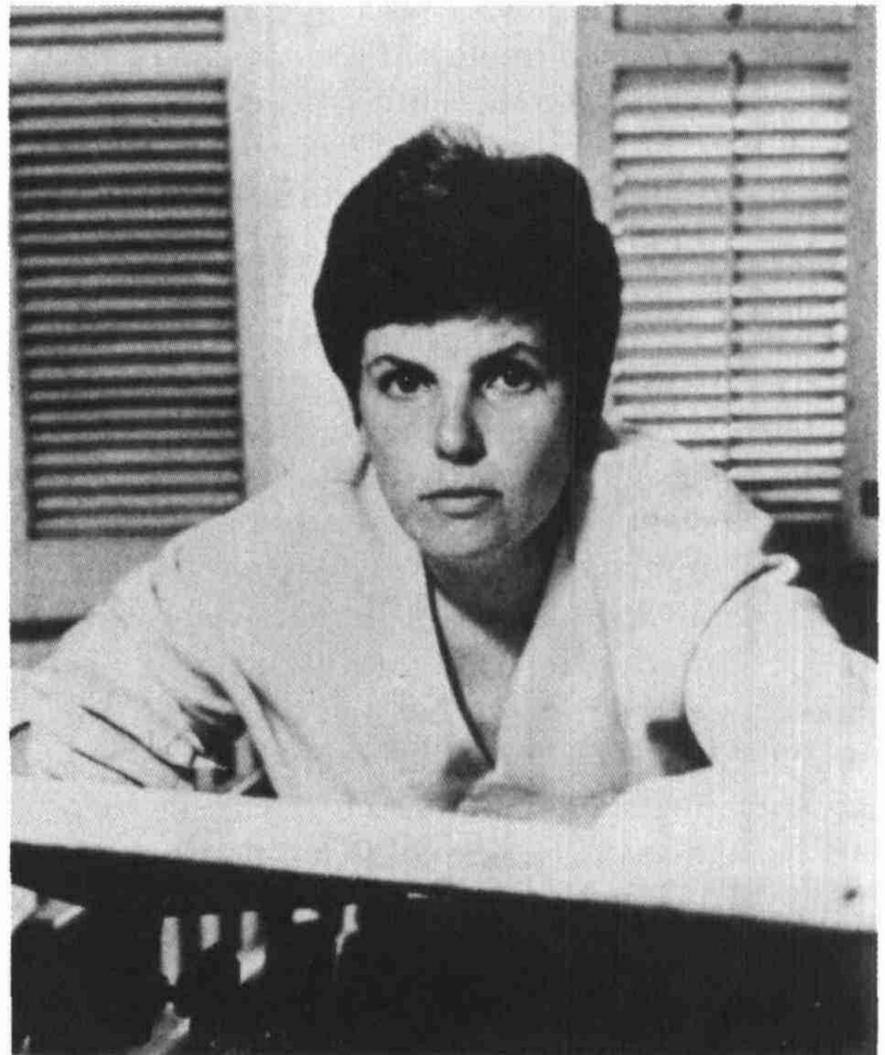
(5 October 1928-19 November 1974)

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**BOOKS:** *Suzuki Beame*, by Fitzhugh and Sandra Scoppettone (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961); *Harriet the Spy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964; London: Gollancz, 1974); *The Long Secret* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965; London: Gollancz, 1975); *Bang, Bang, You're Dead*, by Fitzhugh and Scoppettone (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974; London: Gollancz, 1976); *I Am Five* (New York: Delacorte, 1978); *Sport* (New York: Delacorte, 1979); *I Am Three*, illustrated by Susanna Natti (New York: Delacorte, 1982); *I Am Four*, illustrated by Susan Bonner (New York: Delacorte, 1982).

"At times I refuse to be moved"; so says the five-year-old heroine of Louise Fitzhugh's posthumous picture book *I Am Five* (1978). She shares her obstinacy with many of Fitzhugh's characters. The people in Fitzhugh's darkly satiric (and often hilarious) novels are unyielding eccentrics, condemned by their temperaments to repeat the same actions again and again. Fitzhugh savagely criticized the self-indulgence of their inflexibility; but she also sympathized with her young protagonists' growing acceptance of their own rigidity, and of the tragic but exhilarating inability of human beings to ever be anything but themselves. 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. As her treatment of once-controversial issues becomes less shocking, Fitzhugh's merit as a tough-minded satirist becomes more apparent.

The daughter of Millsaps Fitzhugh and Louise Perkins Fitzhugh, Louise Fitzhugh was born on 5 October 1928 in Memphis, Tennessee. While her father was a wealthy man with an important position in state government, her childhood was not happy. As Ursula Nordstrom, former editorial



*Louise Fitzhugh (photo by Susanne Singer)*

director of Harper junior books, remembers, "There were many things in Louise's well-born southern upbringing and experiences that she did not like, including her horrified remembrance of teenage friends who, after a date, decided it would be fun to go down to 'coon town' and throw rocks at the heads of young Negro boys and girls. 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."

Louise Fitzhugh attended numerous schools in addition to Bard, including Hutchison School and Southwestern College in Memphis, Florida Southern College in Lakeland, and the School of Education at New York University. 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. She majored in literature in college, but when her interest in art temporarily won out, she stopped her literary studies six months short of a degree. She enrolled at the Art Students League in New York, then studied at Cooper Union. But even after a successful show of realistic oil paintings in New York in May 1963, Fitzhugh continued to express herself in diverse ways. While she kept painting, she also wrote plays and adult novels (which were never published). She relaxed by dancing and playing tennis, and she continued to play the flute. She also continued her extensive travels. She had spent six months in Europe in 1954, and a year in Bologna, Italy, studying painting in 1957; she also lived at various times in Washington, D.C., New York City, the north shore of Long Island, and Bridgewater, Connecticut. After her death in 1974 from a ruptured aneurysm she was buried in Bridgewater, in accord with her instructions that she be buried north of the Mason-Dixon line.

Fitzhugh's career as a writer for children was brilliant but spotty; she did not pursue it constantly or consistently. Her first illustrations for a picture book appeared in 1961, her first and second novels in 1964 and 1965. She collaborated on the text for another picture book in 1969. When she died on 19 November 1974 her third novel was set to be published; it appeared eight days later. Another novel and a series of shorter books were still to come.

Fitzhugh's first book was *Suzuki Beame* (1961), for which she illustrated a text by Sandra Scopettone. Two decades later, this book seems very much a creature of its time—and a little silly. Suzuki's parents are beatniks who live in a pad in the Village and devote themselves to art; according to Suzuki,

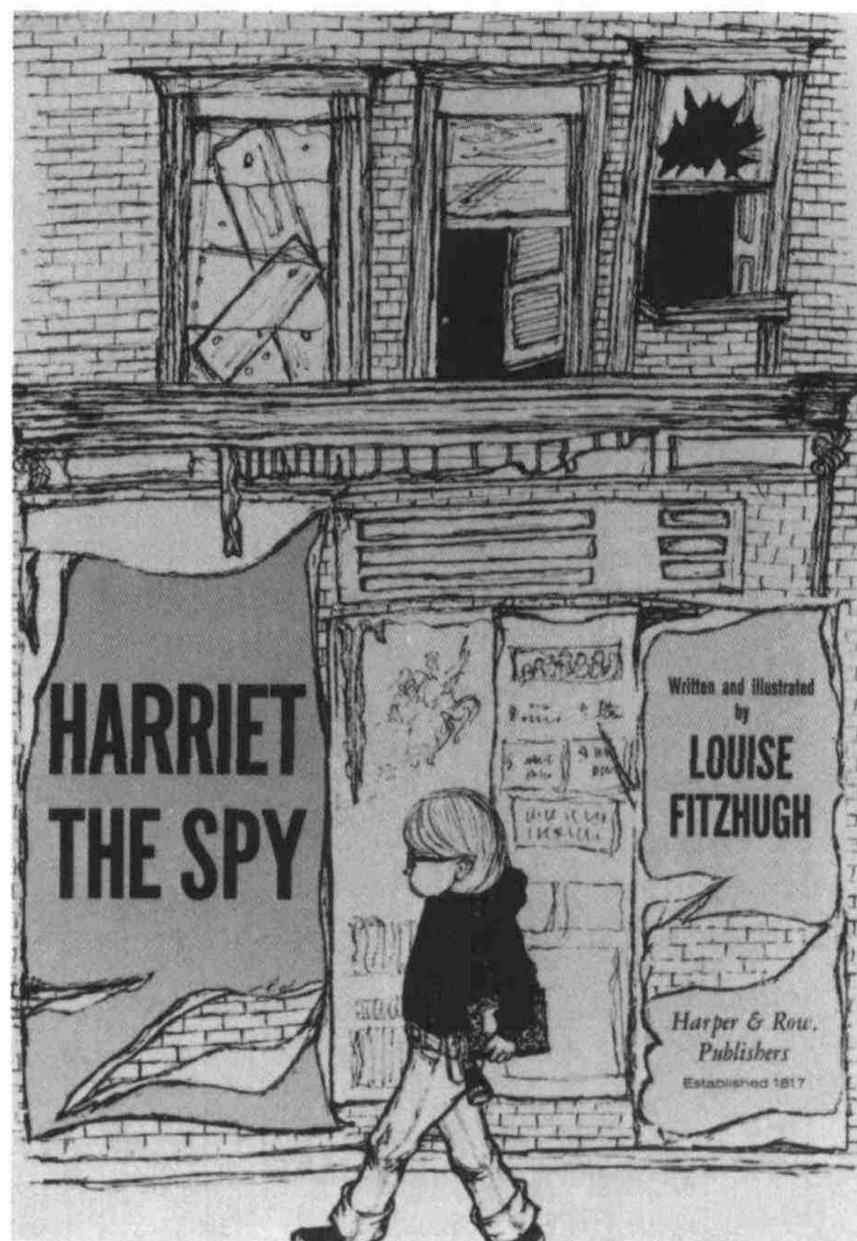
we all have a ball here  
we don't have much bread but  
bread is not very important  
when you have good relationships

This was obviously written a long time ago; Suzuki's tongue is nowhere near her cheek when she says, "I dig life the most—I mean like it really swings."

While Fitzhugh did not write this text, it is like much of her later work. The characters, particularly the adult ones, are exaggerated caricatures. They are so self-centered they do not even realize how cruel they are, and they are cruel because they believe people unlike themselves are not quite real. Confronted by this blind self-indul-

gence, Suzuki and her "square" friend Henry Martin do what most of Fitzhugh's children do: they realize that people around them are too rigid to change, and move beyond them. As the book ends, Suzuki and Henry are in the process of running away from home together. In Fitzhugh's illustrations for this attack on anti-individuality her distaste for any sort of prejudice is already apparent. The drawings present a satiric portrait gallery of early 1960s types—beatniks, society poets, dancing teachers. Like all her drawings, they use a strong, definite line to wickedly unmask human silliness.

Fitzhugh had little financial backing from her family (although she inherited a great deal of money after her father's death); the advance from Harper and Row, based on the first few pages of what became *Harriet the Spy*, meant a great deal to her. According to Ursula Nordstrom, "The first material on this book, submitted to Harper by an agent, eventually became the contents of Harriet's notebook." In her report on this manuscript, Charlotte Zolotow, then a senior editor of the depart-



Dust jacket for Fitzhugh's popular story of a young girl's innocent but unflinchingly honest perception of human weakness (Harper & Row)

ment, wrote, "You have to get this writer to come in and talk. This isn't a book but it could be." Fitzhugh expanded the book under editorial guidance, particularly the role and character of the nursemaid Ole Golly.

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. Reviewers hated its supposedly unchildlike cynicism and its obvious lack of faith in the supposed delights of childhood innocence. *Harriet the Spy* is just not *nice*; the book won no awards. But like many pioneering books, it was and continues to be an immense success with young readers.

*Harriet the Spy* describes Harriet M. Welsch's innocent but unflinchingly honest perception of human weakness. The hostility some readers feel toward Harriet, described by one critic as "one of the most fatiguingly ill-mannered children imaginable," is not surprising; as Harriet herself learns, few of us are large-minded enough to appreciate someone who both notices our inadequacies and is honest enough to say so, and the novel itself graphically illustrates how Harriet's talent for observation annoys others. But the way Fitzhugh tells her story engenders much sympathy for Harriet; we find ourselves enjoying in the novel the very things about Harriet we would most likely loathe if she lived next door.

While reviewers insisted on the "devastating" realism of *Harriet the Spy*, its paperback publishers market it as "the zany adventures of a child spy." Book one is undeniably wacky. The zaniest thing about it is that it accounts for almost half the novel, and almost nothing happens. Someone reading *Harriet the Spy* for the first time could easily finish book one convinced that nothing will ever happen. It describes a world comic because it is rigid, a world of "always": "They *always* did this"; "she *always* said"; "Ole Golly *never* went to the movies." This comic rigidity is heightened by exaggeration. Almost everyone in the novel is excessively rich. Neither Harriet nor any of her conveniently small group of schoolmates has brothers or sisters; nor do many of the other characters. Their lives are uncomplicated by poverty or sibling rivalry or other ordinary concerns. The characters all have only one significant, obvious trait. The outlines of their claustrophobic world are simple enough to be clear, exaggerated enough to be exact—like the outlines of a caricature. In her otherwise uncomprehending review in *Horn Book*, Ruth Hill Viguers was quite

right to "challenge the assumption that New York City harbors only people who are abnormal, ill-adjusted, and egocentric." *Harriet the Spy* is not realistic at all, and never pretended to be.

Inflicted with an insatiable curiosity, Harriet wanders through this weird world as a spy, recording in her notebook the zaniness of her New York City neighborhood. She watches total strangers like the Robinsons collect ridiculous objects merely to excite envy in their friends, and she breaks into a house and hides in a dumbwaiter to hear Mrs. Agatha Plumber announce the secret of life: "My dear, it's very simple, you just *take* to your *bed*." The intention is clearly satiric. The people in Harriet's caricatured world are all like the Robinsons, who "had only one problem. They thought they were perfect." In one clever episode, Harriet overhears two different people comment on human perfection in two separate conversations. One says, "I have to admit, I handled that case in a perfect way, a really perfect way," while the other almost simultaneously calls his father "a rat because he thinks he's perfect." Because these people are egocentric enough to think they are already perfect, they cannot change; nobody changes, and that is why nothing happens in book one.

Fitzhugh's wonderfully wicked illustrations cleverly support this comic vision of rigidity. In most of them, one of the characters stands alone, pinned in naked isolation against an uncompromisingly blank background and caught in an intense moment of being uncompromisingly him or her self. Agatha Plumber is a soft, fluffy woman drawn in soft, fluffy lines in a soft, fluffy bed. The enthusiastic dancing instructor, Miss Berry, swoons in a tangle of disconnected lines, her face looking disconnected from everything. Crazy Mrs. Golly, the mother of Harriet's nursemaid, hangs in space as if she has been punched in the stomach by reality—and found it rather enjoyable. If we enjoy these pictures and admire the wicked imagination that sees people so clearly and honestly, then we must also admire Harriet.

Harriet has the same honesty, and sees things in much the same way—and we cannot enjoy what she sees unless we approve of her seeing it that way. Satirists often show us ourselves through the eyes of an uninvolved outsider who reveals our inadequacies because he does not share our values. As a child, Harriet is unfamiliar with adult values; as a particularly curious and observant child, she sees a lot, and her attitude is interested but uninvolved. She is a little like the Greek gods she is studying in school, a comparison she implicitly

draws herself: "Talk about spies. Those gods spied on everybody all the time." The novel begins appropriately with Harriet playing God, inventing a town and the people in it and making things happen to them.

But in Harriet's town, "everybody goes to bed at nine-thirty." Harriet is herself as rigid as the people she spies on. That makes her as funny as the people she observes; so does her ingenuousness. Harriet shows us what is ridiculous in what she does not understand, but is herself ridiculous for not understanding it.

While this is all quite delightful, *Harriet the Spy* moves past comic satire. Fitzhugh chose, not just to make Harriet a satiric observer, but to explore what it means to be one. In her excellent discussion of this novel in *Children's Literature*, Virginia L. Wolf says that, "limiting us to Harriet's point of view, *Harriet the Spy* is fundamentally a thorough characterization of Harriet." Harriet becomes psychologically convincing as she confronts the tendencies in her character that make her view others so interestingly.

Harriet's desire to stand back and observe makes her arrogant about the failings of others. As she admits, she likes to hear "what peculiar things people say to each other," and she enjoys the circus because "I LOVE THE FREAKS." Thinking about brothers and sisters, she writes, "ONE THING, WHENEVER THEY YELLED IT WOULDN'T ALWAYS BE AT YOU. SOMETIMES IT WOULD BE AT YOUR BROTHER THEN YOU COULD LAUGH." While Harriet's lack of compassion allows her to see others unfiltered by kindness, it is inhumane. She treats her talent for observation the way she describes her friend Janie's treatment of chemistry experiments: "only Janie understood anything whatever about them, and she wouldn't explain but instead called everyone a cretin who asked her." Triumphant individualists both, Harriet and Janie lack respect for others. With her usual vacuous incomprehension, Ole Golly quotes a passage from Dostoyevski that makes a point about this sort of respect: "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. . . . If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things." Harriet's response to this is characteristically obtuse and self-involved: "I want to know everything." Loving only knowledge, Harriet lacks the humility to perceive her own involvement in the human condition.

Appropriately, Harriet learns about love as Ole Golly, the ultimate caricature of the self-controlled nursemaid, falls in love. The rigid caricature

turns out to be not so rigid after all; it was mostly just a figment of Ole Golly's imagination, a false picture of herself as a strong-minded intellectual. Ole Golly softens; eventually, she leaves. As book one ends, holes appear in Harriet's comfortable world. By the middle of chapter five, Harriet notes, "something was definitely happening"; a few chapters later, "SOMETHING TERRIBLE IS GOING TO HAPPEN. I KNOW IT."

Harriet does not like what happens in book two at all. Her notebook, which represents her talent for observation, becomes a source of pain. The other children read what she has written about them, and do not like it; adults assume that Harriet's need for the notebook is evidence of abnormalcy. Harriet faces the dilemma inherent in her character: either she can be herself, lose her friends, and be considered freakish; or she can do what others expect, have friends—and stop being herself. Astonishingly, she makes the first choice. Contrary even to the expectations it sets up itself, the novel ends more or less as it began. Harriet remains her own unhumble self, still not terribly charitable, and still doing what she did at the beginning.

When the other children exclude her, Harriet's first panicky response is to consider changing: "I HAVE THE FEELING THIS MORNING THAT EVERYONE IN THIS SCHOOL IS INSANE. I MIGHT POSSIBLY BRING A HAM SANDWICH TOMORROW BUT I HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT." But even though Harriet's previous insistence on nothing but tomato sandwiches was funny, even though her notebook entries are cruel and her spying obnoxious, most readers have so much sympathy with Harriet's perceptions by this point that they do not *want* her to eat ham. As Harriet quickly realizes herself, "The world went on the same after all. The same things happened every morning. So *what* if they didn't like her? *She* would go on the same. *She* was Harriet M. Welsch, and she would continue to be Harriet M. Welsch, and that was the thing to remember." Fitzhugh supports Harriet's wish to keep on being herself by stressing the cruelty of the others' attempts to punish her, rather than the benefits she might gain by conforming. By the end of book two, Harriet is not the contrite victim of self-indulgence we might have expected, but a martyr.

Not only Harriet does not change. In the long run, nobody does, and as she finally realizes, "SOME PEOPLE ARE ONE WAY AND SOME PEOPLE ARE ANOTHER AND THAT'S THAT." Just about everyone in the novel faces a

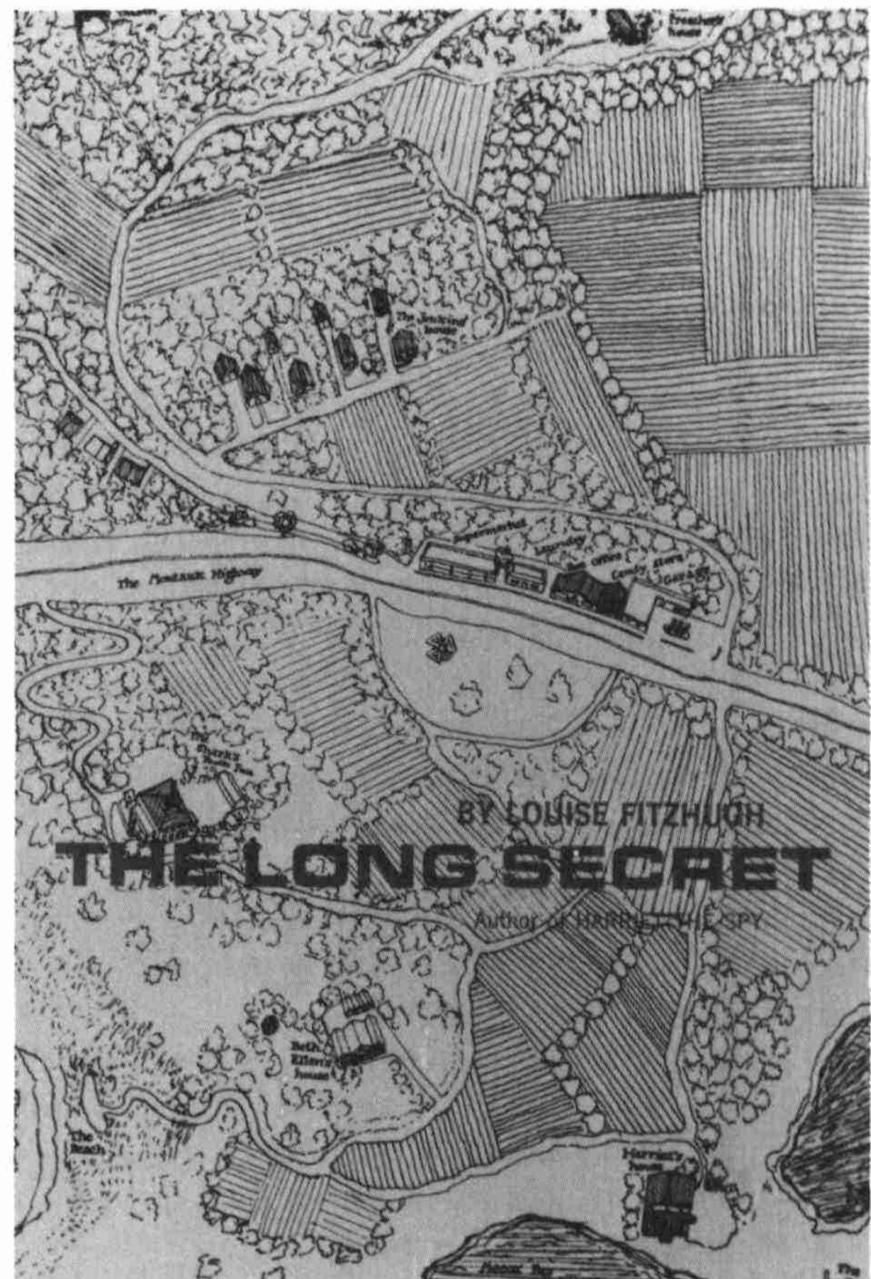
major disruption: Harriet's friends Janie and Sport become her enemies; on Harriet's spy route, Fabio Dei Santi has an accident, Little Joe Curry's food thefts are discovered, Harrison Withers loses his cats, Mrs. Plumber's doctor confines her to bed. But the irony in these apparent changes is summed up by the big event in the life of the Robinsons—the purchase of a statue of a giant baby holding a tiny mother, which merely expresses symbolically everything we already know about their “perfect” and perfectly sterile lives. The same is true of the others; what seems to be a major change actually just intensifies what went on before. In the long run, the Dei Santis continue on as they were to begin with, Mrs. Plumber keeps thinking only of Mrs. Plumber, the Robinsons are still perfect, and Harrison Withers gets a new cat. Harriet writes, “HEE HEE. THEY AIN'T GOING TO CHANGE HARRISON WITHERS.” They ain't going to change Harriet either; at the end she has her friends and her notebook back, and she has settled down to playing God just as she did at the beginning. Only now, she knows she does it, knows that she thinks of real people as if they were figments of her imagination: “They were so far away that they looked like dolls. They made her think of the way she imagined the people when she played Town. Somehow this way she could see them better than she ever had before.” Harriet needs her distance and accepts its implications in order to maintain it. Her conclusion that “THINGS ARE BACK TO NORMAL” is ironic; for Harriet, it is normal to be eccentric. She must learn, not to change, but to live with who she is.

Harriet learns that in a letter from Ole Golly that infuriates many adult readers of the novel. Ole Golly tells Harriet that in order to regain her friends, “you are going to have to do two things, and you don't like either one of them: 1) You have to apologize. 2) You have to lie.” But this recommendation of hypocrisy is good advice; the only humane way to allow yourself honest perceptions of those you care for is to lie about them, to not always announce what you know or see or understand—to have charity. Ole Golly adds, “Remember that writing is to put love in the world, not to use against your friends. But to yourself you must always tell the truth.” What Harriet learns is the difference between writing and mere spying, between a social act and a self-indulgent one. The difference is not in what she does or who she is, but in her reasons for doing what comes so naturally and uncontrollably. As editor of the sixth-grade page of the school newspaper, Harriet gath-

ers information, not just to satisfy her curiosity, but also for the pleasure of others, and that means she is no longer an arrogant observer.

Everyone in *Harriet the Spy* has the quality Harriet admires in her friend Janie: they are “definite”—with one exception. Beth Ellen Hansen, a “mouse” who sometimes acts bravely, is the only person who ever surprises Harriet; her character is the one real mystery in the novel. *The Long Secret*, published in 1965, is a sort of sequel to *Harriet the Spy* that solves the mystery, and reveals who Beth Ellen is both to readers and to Beth Ellen, as it describes the summer after sixth grade that the girls spend in their families' cottages on Long Island.

*The Long Secret* also reveals who others think Harriet is. Readers who felt compassion for Harriet as perceived by Harriet in *Harriet the Spy*, now see her from the outside, through Beth Ellen's eyes, and understand how difficult she is. Even though Beth Ellen finds Harriet's self-assuredness comforting, “the principle feeling she felt when with



Dust jacket for Fitzhugh's 1965 sequel to *Harriet the Spy* (Harper & Row)

Harriet was one of being continually jarred." In *The Long Secret*, Harriet fluctuates between being an agitating caricature—the person seen by others—and an interesting, sensitive person, seen by herself.

That fluctuation is central both to the shape and the meaning of *The Long Secret*. Harriet always thinks she understands everybody; in this second novel Fitzhugh continually points out that all she understands of others is all anybody ever understands—what we make of them. Not only do we find out that Beth Ellen's idea of Harriet is different from Harriet's; we also learn that Beth Ellen's idea of Beth Ellen is different from Harriet's. Harriet's version of Beth Ellen as reported in *Harriet the Spy* turns out to have been based on incomplete information; here, and again in the later novel *Sport*, Fitzhugh returns to characters from an earlier novel we thought we knew completely, and reveals unexpected facets both of their lives and of their personalities.

Fitzhugh's insistence that we have the humility to acknowledge the limitations of our ideas about other people is expressed constantly in *The Long Secret*; characters repeatedly thwart our expectations of them. Beth Ellen's grandmother, who at first seems strict and unloving, shows real concern for her granddaughter. Jessie Mae Jenkins, an ever-so-born-again and ever-so-dismissable girl from the South who lives with her sizable family in a house nearby, admits she is lonely and merely hiding in her exaggerated sanctity; in fact, the portrait of Jessie Mae and her archotypically southern family is surprisingly sympathetic, considering Fitzhugh's avowed hatred for the South. But above all, Beth Ellen turns out to have kept her own secret so well that readers may be almost as angry when it is revealed as Harriet is.

On first reading, *The Long Secret* seems shapeless. It includes bitter criticism of the sterile inhumanity of international café society, the low comedy of the despicably southern Jenkins getting rich quick by making "toe medicine" out of watermelons, a controversial technical discussion of menstruation, the highly charged melodrama of Beth Ellen's blatantly cruel parents. Fitzhugh gets away with including so many different kinds of characters by focusing on the different ways Harriet and Beth Ellen see them; she alternates between telling the story as Beth Ellen sees it and as Harriet sees it, so that comparisons are inevitable.

At one point, Beth Ellen even has the same fantasy Harriet had in *Harriet the Spy*. Harriet imagined what would happen if the world exploded:

"WHAT WOULD HAPPEN? WOULD WE FLY THROUGH THE AIR? IN SPACE YOU JUST FLOAT AROUND. I WOULD BE LONELY." Harriet fears loneliness because her curiosity feeds on other people; Beth Ellen's reaction to the same idea is quite different: "was that what happened when the bomb dropped and the world was destroyed? Did it split in half like an orange and everyone just float around? Lonely, so lonely it would be. And kind of embarrassing, humiliating for some reason, to be there all alone and no place to put your feet down and walk around." For Beth Ellen, this fantasy is symbolic of her own state of mind. Surrounded by "definite" people like her own mother and like Harriet, and embarrassed by her own inability to be like them, she thinks she has no place to stand.

But the indefinite Beth Ellen she lets herself and others know about is not the real one. Harriet says, "You know, sometimes, Beth Ellen, I wonder where you keep yourself." Beth Ellen is more than she usually shows; since her mother has deserted her, she thinks she must be unlovable, and she has hidden away that unlovable self in order to protect it. It is so well protected that she seems unable to find it, and she says, "I am truly a mouse. I have no desire at all to be me."

But that is not true; she does wish to be herself, if only she can rediscover what that means: "where do I live, she thought, and began to cry." When her mother returns from Europe and turns out to be cruel and self-indulgent, Beth Ellen rediscovers the intense and very definitive feelings she has buried. She finds herself, and she finally exults, "I live somewhere, I live somewhere, I live somewhere." She has a place to stand.

The "long secret" of the title is that it is Beth Ellen, the mouse, who has been distributing anonymous notes to the townspeople. Her grandmother explains why: "shy people are angry people. . . . You're a very angry little girl." Beth Ellen's notes use familiar quotations, often biblical, to describe the "secret" desires that control other people. Since the notes create immediate recognition in everyone but the person who receives them, they comment on our willingness to ignore our failings. Ironically, a secret Beth Ellen, hidden even from Beth Ellen, has been telling other people where *they* live. Unlike Harriet's self-regarding notes to herself in her notebook, Beth Ellen's notes are an attempt to communicate.

Fitzhugh gets away with something tricky here; the person from whose point of view much of the story is told turns out to be the perpetrator

of the mystery of the notes at the heart of the plot. She gets away with that because the double point of view allows her to switch off to Harriet whenever Beth Ellen might be thinking of leaving notes. In any case, the point of the book is that there is much Beth Ellen will not admit, even to herself. For a whole day, she is sick and lazy, and we learn all her thoughts but the important one—that, as she eventually tells Harriet, she is menstruating for the first time. Apparently she has been willing to think about that no more than she thinks about her secret note-leaving.

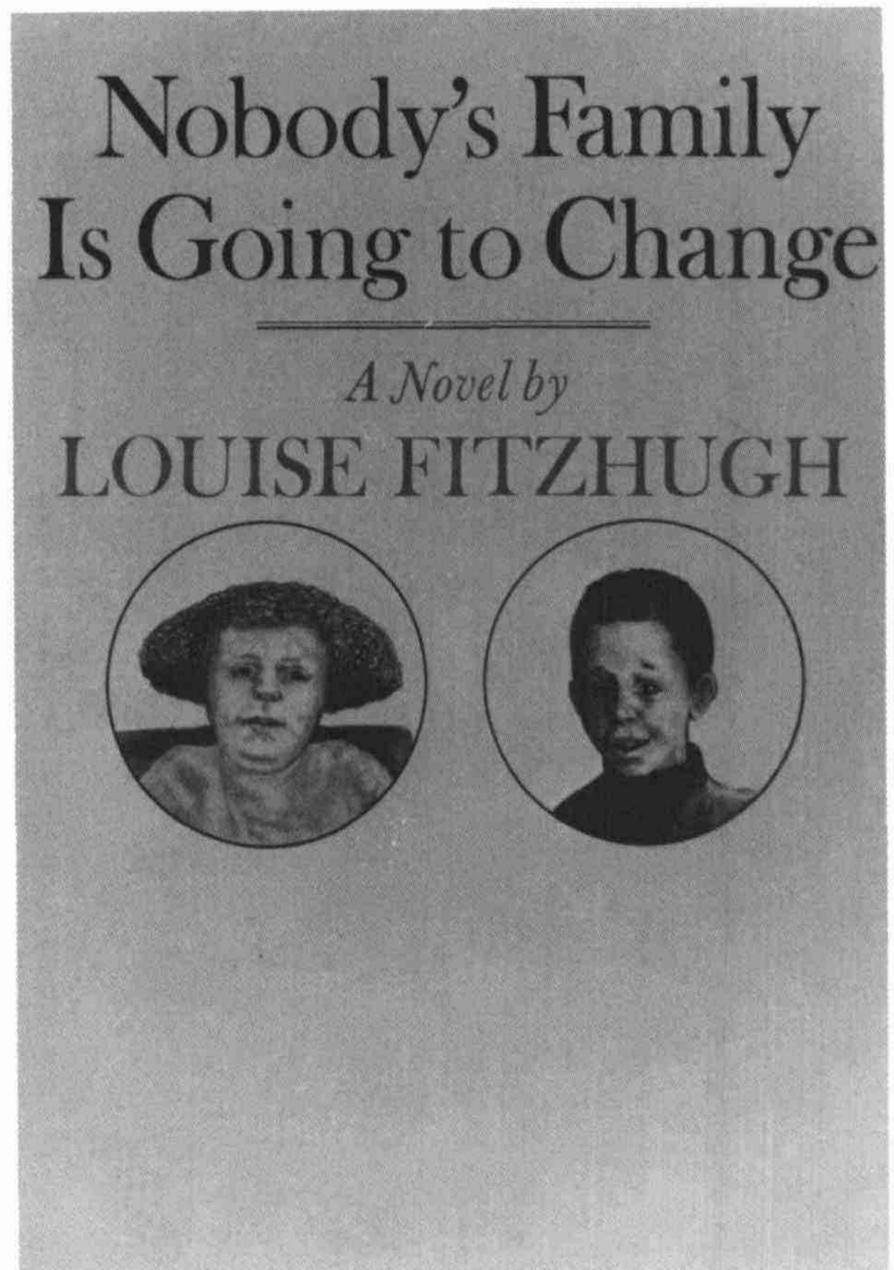
Symbolically speaking, the secrets we keep longest are the things at the heart of our being—what we really are. Beth Ellen's mother thinks such secrets are dangerous: "It's very hard to tell one fanatic from another these days. They look like ordinary people until you get to know them, and then you find out they're obsessed." But the real secret, which everyone else shares and Beth Ellen eventually learns, is that no one is "ordinary," and everyone is "obsessed." Beth Ellen says that more positively than her mother: "Everyone I know has something like this. Something to love. I need something to love." Fanaticism is merely knowing who you are, being positive about it, and being humble enough to accept the fanaticism of others. By the end of the novel, Beth Ellen is able to admit that, through her secret notes, she was always just as fanatical and just as definite as everybody else. She arrives at exactly the same balanced place Harriet reached, but from an opposite direction; Beth Ellen learns self-love, and Harriet charity.

*The Long Secret* is a subtle and energetic novel, as good in its own way as *Harriet the Spy*. Unfortunately, Fitzhugh's undeniably brave discussion of menstruation has attracted most of the attention that *The Long Secret* has received. But the interest excited by those few pages is not surprising; commenting on her first reading of the manuscript of this novel, Ursula Nordstrom says, "When I came to the page where the onset of Beth Ellen's first menstrual period occurred, and it was written so beautifully, to such perfection, I scrawled in the margin, 'Thank you, Louise Fitzhugh.' It was the first mention in junior books of this tremendous event in a girl's life."

The emphasis on controversial, realistic issues continues in Fitzhugh's next book, another collaboration with Sandra Scoppettone. Published in 1969, *Bang, Bang, You're Dead* is a strong antiwar statement that exudes the atmosphere of its time; this is a "now" book for the "Now Generation," now past. The text, by both Fitzhugh and Scoppettone,

graphically describes a battle between two groups of children, which ends with their overstated realization that they lose more than they gain by fighting: "this isn't any fun. . . . Why did we do it?" Their violence is both verbal and physical; they lunge at each other's throats, poke at each other's eyes, and gush blood, and they say things like, "Give up, puke-face." While there is energy here, there is not much else. One reviewer of *Bang, Bang, You're Dead* made the revealing comment that Fitzhugh's pictures left the large number of characters "somewhat undifferentiated." It was only in her novels that Fitzhugh could add a sense of individual character to the satiric energy and moral conviction of her two collaborations with Scoppettone.

The heroine of *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change*, published soon after Fitzhugh's death in 1974, is Emma Sheridan, "a fat brown girl with funny hair" who thinks herself "truly and completely disgusting." Fitzhugh's profound hatred for the inhumanity of prejudice and its effects on peo-



Dust jacket for Fitzhugh's posthumously published 1974 novel in which she attacks racial and sexual stereotyping (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

ple like Emma is evident, as the book sizzles with an intense anger that makes Emma an exciting character.

While Emma eventually comes to like herself better, she must realize, like Harriet and Beth Ellen, that she will not change. *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* is Fitzhugh's most earnest and most paradoxical novel—a savage attack on the rigidity of conventional values that expresses no faith that change is possible. But it does want to change readers' attitudes; it has a point to make, and it makes it energetically and systematically.

Fitzhugh's earlier insistence on respect for individuality here becomes a general attack on discrimination of all sorts, even on shallow categorizing of all sorts. Young, black, and female, Emma is a prime target of discrimination. For Fitzhugh, Emma's father is the ultimate villain, a symbolic representative of everything in human nature that justifies power over others. He is a typical believer in middle-class values, a typical power-mad parent, a typical male chauvinist. He wants his son to be a lawyer, like he is, his daughter a lawyer's wife, like his own wife. He does not care that Emma's brother, Willie, wants to be a dancer and Emma a lawyer, for he considers Willie's pursuit unmasculine, Emma's unfeminine, and both unnecessarily unconventional. Even worse, his faith in conventional values—which, in the book, are conventional white values—makes him look down on the idea of blacks dancing: "You've got to think of all the people who have bled and died so other people don't look at you and see nothing but a minstrel show." In his fear of prejudice he despises anything that might be identified with being black, so that paradoxically, he represses Willie to protect him from repression. Given values that place him, a successful, adult male, utterly in command, Mr. Sheridan is a barrier to his children's selfhood: Emma realizes "she had never thought of her father as a man before. She thought of him rather like one thinks of Boulder Dam. He was something to scale or go over in a barrel."

When she does think of him as a man, as he tells her of his difficult early years, Emma realizes that she has dehumanized him, in her hatred of his rigidity, as much as he has dehumanized her: "Emma's sympathy careened toward her father. . . . She had never thought of her father as *feeling* anything." But the most interesting thing about this novel is its refusal to be simpleminded, even in approval of something so undeniably worthy as charitable thoughts about others. Emma soon realizes that sympathy for her father is a trap. He

has tried to get it only in order to maintain his unreasonable control over her and Willie. He will not change, and she cannot afford to change her feelings toward him. She tells him, "You never think about anybody, but just how you think they should live. You don't even know us. . . ! You just stand up here and tell us what your life was like! Who cares? You don't care what our lives are like!" He does not care—and he never will, for as the novel insists again and again, everyone is stuck with his character. Willie tells his father, "I'm not going to be any different," and Emma's schoolmate Goldin says, "My brother couldn't stop being like himself if the roof fell in on him." Emma's uncle Dipsy says to her mother, "Boy, people don't change, do they. . . ? I don't change and you don't change. You're exactly the way you were as a kid." Emma finally concludes that "fathers don't change and mothers don't change."

Emma has wanted her parents to adapt enough to accept the fact that she herself will not change; when she realizes they will not, her response is, "I can change. I can change myself." She cannot, of course, any more than Harriet could. But she can change her attitude, toward herself and others; she can accept and live with the fact that nobody will ever be anything but what they already are. When Emma's father tells her, "I think any woman who tries to be a lawyer is a damned fool," her response sums up the message of the novel: "That . . . is your problem, not mine."

*Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* is a product of its thesis. Its characters are deliberately stereotyped, deliberately contrasted with each other, in order to make points; the attempts of Emma to be a "Big Chief Looney Lady Lawyer" and Willie "the nigger Nijinsky" are presented with absolute symmetry. The astonishing thing is that a book so involved with its thesis should have so much energy. The thesis is argued passionately, and the book is saved from mere point-making by Fitzhugh's refusal to be content with easy answers. When Emma contacts the Children's Army, it seems like the solution to her problems—children wresting power from grown-ups who misuse it. But Fitzhugh makes Emma realize the harsh truth: "when it gets right down to it, the Children's Army is no different from any adult organization. Males were in control and would depend on force." While the rhetoric is inflammatory, the idea is humane: there are no easy answers. Human beings are complicated, and no organization or idea that leaves anything human out of consideration is a good one.

Fitzhugh includes everything in this novel, including many things surprising in a children's book. At one point she lets Emma peruse her stool, and at another she actually allows Dipsy to admit that some dancers are indeed gay. Goldin's brother is an unrepentant transvestite; Emma herself has an understandable distaste for white skin that few other children's writers, white or black, would acknowledge: "white faces only looked weak to her, as though white people didn't have as much substance, but were so much protoplasm without much reality." While these things do not transform Fitzhugh's caricatures into believable personalities, they give them astonishing energy as caricatures, completely human eccentrics who live in an eccentric but complete world. In the early 1980s, *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* saw new life as the basis for a successful Broadway musical, *The Tap Dance Kid*.

The publication of *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* shortly after Fitzhugh's death did not put an end to the appearance of her books for children. Four years later, Delacorte Press published the first of a series of shorter books. *I Am Five* (1978) was both written and illustrated by Fitzhugh; in it, a child tells us who she is and what she does on the day after her fifth birthday. The text is slight; the child speaking seems to be intended to represent all five-year-olds and to sum up their characteristic behavior. Except for a characteristic refusal to be moved, she is so generalized that she has little individuality. But the pictures are something else again—vintage Fitzhugh sketches that say a hundred times more about who this young girl is than the words do.

Compared to Fitzhugh's earlier novels, *Sport*, which appeared in 1979, seems unfinished and rather thin. It reads like *Harriet the Spy* deprived of its heroine's subtle consideration of what it means to be human. But the boy Sport is not Harriet, and *Sport* is fun simply because it is not subtle. The feeling of the book is summed up by the fact that when Harriet appears in it, she is only a tomato-sandwich-eating and note-making freak, a funny caricature.

Sport, who was Harriet's best friend in *Harriet the Spy*, here turns out to have a whole secret (and rather zany) life of his own, stemming from the death of his grandfather and the inheritance of no less than \$32 million. We learn a lot more than the little Harriet knew about him in *Harriet the Spy*, and his personal situation turns out to be much like Beth Ellen Hansen's: both have apparently cold grandparents who actually love them and heartless

mothers who have deserted them and gone to Europe to live frivolously; both must confront the ugly fact of their mothers' despicable personalities. But a situation that allowed Beth Ellen to come to terms with herself in *The Long Secret* is only an occasion for comic melodrama in *Sport*. That happens partially because Sport, unlike Beth Ellen, knows himself, likes himself, and can take care of himself. But it is clear that Fitzhugh simply chose not to emphasize the psychological aspects of the situation here. Instead, she makes things deliciously lurid. Sport's mother is not just the thoughtless consumer Beth Ellen's mother is, nasty but dismissable because she is useless. Sport's mother is a pure force of unmitigated, self-regarding evil, who calls her son a "little jerk" to his face and callously arranges for him to be kidnapped.

Melodramatically opposed to this terminally, delightfully awful woman is the paragon Kate, whom Sport's father marries in the course of the book. Kate is pretty, kind, loving, a beacon of normalcy in a wilderness of freaks. As Sport notes: "he had long ago discovered that women who never intended to marry had very sharp, very pointed, very delicate and special shoes and far be it from baby to need anything that would deplete the shoe money. . . . Kate's shoes were just shoes." Kate is perfection—perfectly ordinary; for Sport, she represents the ordinary childhood he lusts after: "I am doing what I have seen families do in comic books, he thought quickly. This is the way they behave when there is a man, a woman, and a child. . . . He sat, feeling a kind of peace, a strange sensation of no worry that he had never felt before."

But before Sport is allowed the pleasant boredom of normal life, the traditional happy ending, he must, of course, go through hell. Fitzhugh dwells lovingly on the grotesque horror of his dying grandfather's "thin, hawklike, yellow hand that traveled crablike toward Sport," and the equally grotesque absurdity of his mother's parties:

"How old are you, dear?" said another woman, shouting above the noise.

"Forty seven," said Sport.

"You're tall for your age," trilled the woman, not having heard a thing.

*Sport* is the most Dickensian of Fitzhugh's novels; eventually, Sport achieves a typically Dickensian happy ending, as an ordinary person protected from the freakishness of everyone else by a small group of other normal people.

While this resolution is not profound, it is satisfying. Fitzhugh manages to make these undeniable excesses seem, if not contemporary, at least immediate, mostly because Sport himself is so ordinary and so convincingly contemporary. As a normal boy who wants only to ride his bicycle and hang out with the guys, Sport offers a recognizably contemporary point of view on the excess absurdities he encounters. Consequently, readers can have it both ways: both enjoy the delights of melodramatic and comic grotesquerie and affirm their faith in the pleasures of the ordinary.

Delacorte Press published *I Am Three* and *I Am Four* in 1982. They have the manuscript for "I Am Six"; unfortunately, Fitzhugh did no pictures for these books. *I Am Three* was illustrated by Susanna Natti; *I Am Four* by Susan Bonner. As yet "I Am Six" is not scheduled for publication. Delacorte also has the rights to a picture book by Fitzhugh called "My Friend John."

Ursula Nordstrom recalls that "Louise Fitzhugh adored music and was a superb dancer. She was also a brilliant painter. One of her canvases of a little girl standing alone in a meadow expressed all the essential loneliness I think Louise always felt. She was a brilliant, erratic, moody, often extremely thoughtful and endearing person. And she was intensely committed to her writing and to her drawing and painting." Not surprisingly, her writing and her drawing both express the essential horror

and the essential wonder of the inevitable loneliness of being human. Like Harriet the spy, Louise Fitzhugh had an unfailing interest in the oddities of people, an uncanny ability to describe them in words and in pictures. And like Harriet, she had a good moral for her writing: "THAT IS THAT SOME PEOPLE ARE ONE WAY AND SOME PEOPLE ARE ANOTHER AND THAT'S THAT."

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