Beyond the book: Historical Fiction, “Images of Life,” and the Scene of Reading in the Dear America and American Girl Series

Abstract

Kit’s Surprise: A Christmas Story is the third book in the American Girl series that follows the life of Kit, a nine-year-old girl growing up during the Great Depression. Throughout this chapter book, Kit negotiates the relationship between reality and fantasy. Kit’s realistic outlook, prompted by her family’s financial woes in the Great Depression, contrasts with her well-off best friend Ruthie’s penchant for princess and ogre stories. Ruthie attempts to give Kit one of her old Christmas dresses and free ballet tickets so they can continue their holiday tradition of going out with their mothers. When Kit refuses to accept Ruthie’s gift out of pride and shame, an ensuing fight between them dramatizes this conflict between reality and fantasy. Kit yells: “You’re always talking about wishes and wicked ogres and make-believe. You don’t know what’s real. Your father still has his job. You can do whatever you want. You have everything, except you don’t have any idea what the world is really like” (34). Kit refuses to believe that the imaginary can have any benefit until she begins to write one afternoon: Once upon a time, she began. And then the story seemed to sweep her away. It wasn’t the kind of story she usually wrote for her newspaper. This story was not about facts. This story was about a completely different world, the kind of world Ruthie liked, a world that was imaginary. In this world, Kit could make anything she wanted to happen happen. She soon realizes how the imaginary can make her worries prompted by the Great Depression disappear. Moreover, she discovers a power and freedom in fantasy, which is not a mere luxury. She actually needs this other world in order to cope with the great problems that she, as a child, suffers due to the Depression. The Dear America chapter-book series, another historical fiction series for girl-readers, also thematizes the tie between the real and the imaginary, though it approaches the theme by representing fantasy as more than a creation of the individual imagination. As per the series’ trademark, Christmas After All: The Great Depression Diary of Minnie Swift presents a fictional girl’s diary “written” during the Great Depression.

Description

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