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Eva Ibbotson

The Secret of Platform 13

United Kingdom (1994)

TAGS: Harpies Monsters Sirens





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Secret of Platform 13
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1994
First Edition Details	Eva Ibbotson, *The Secret of Platform 13*, ill. Sue Porter. London: Macmillan Children's Books, 1994, 217 pp.
ISBN	9780330337489
Genre	Action and adventure fiction, Fiction
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Eva Ibbotson , 1925 - 2010
(Author)

Eva Ibbotson was born in Vienna, the daughter of Bertold Paul Wisner, a physician and infertility specialist, and Anna Wilhemene Gueyper, a novelist and playwright. They were non-practising Jews who were forced to flee to London prior to World War II. Ibbotson was raised in London, and studied physiology at Cambridge University, where she met her husband, Alan Ibbotson, an ecologist. She wrote romantic novels, television scripts, and children's books, and was most renowned for the last. Her work was often shortlisted for major literary awards, including the Carnegie Medal, the Romance Novelists' Association, the Smarties Prize, the Whitbread Children's Book Award, and more. Her novels are distinctive for a nostalgia for pre-war Viennese and Austrian culture, by an interest in arts and culture, and by an intertextual interweaving of myth, literature and history.

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

The Secret of Platform 13 is a portal fantasy in which characters from an idyllic realm called "The Island," travel to modern London by means of a "gump," a portal between worlds that opens for only nine days every nine years. Nine years before the main action of the story, the Queen of The Island gives birth to a baby boy: his English nannies, homesick for their life in London, take him there on a visit. On the ninth day, he is stolen from his pram by a wealthy childless woman, Mrs Trottle. The nannies only discover his loss when they are on their way back to The Island, and it is too late to return.

Nine years later, in the present of the story, a search party sets out from The Island, comprising a young hag named Odge, a wizard named Cornelius, a fey named Gerkintrude, and a giant named Hans. Their task is to find the young prince and rescue him. The ghosts who live near the gump, which is located on Platform 13 of King's Cross Station, direct them to the Trottles, where they find the son of the house, Raymond, a fat lazy selfish child, and Ben, the gentle household servant, raised by Nanny Brown, Mrs Trottle's nanny.

Encouraging Raymond to return to The Island is a challenging task. The search party seek to persuade him by staging a set of magical events in a nearby park. While Ben is enchanted, Raymond dislikes the magic, but he likes the idea of being a prince. Odge asks Ben if he would come too, but Nanny Brown is ill and in the hospital, and he refuses to leave her.

Meanwhile, Raymond tells his mother about the plan. Believing they are kidnappers, she takes him to a nearby hotel to hide out. The search party tracks him down but it is difficult to capture him, because of the many bodyguards protecting him. In the end, they take Ben, who is now alone in the world, Nanny Brown having died. It is now very close to the ninth day, and the closing of the gump: fearing that the search party has failed, the King and Queen send a group of Harpies to bring back Raymond, which they succeed in doing.

However, Nanny Brown has left a letter, explaining that Ben is the true child of the King and Queen, and that Raymond is the birth child of Mr and Mrs Trottle, having been born not long after Ben was taken. In the nick of time, Raymond is hastily sent back through the gump.

The people of the Island rejoice. Odge, fearing that her growing

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friendship with Ben is no longer possible because he is a prince, is delighted when he invites her to come and live with him and his family at the palace.

Analysis

Eva Ibbotson's fantasy novels for young readers often intertwine magic and realism (see for instance, *The Dragonfly Pool*). In *The Secret of Platform 13*, The Island presents a realm where multiple fantasy traditions are interwoven: fairies and feys, giants, wizards, hags and ogres live alongside harpies and mermaids and creatures from Ibbotson's imagination, such as the mistmakers, seal-like creatures that breathe a soft mist. This is a kind of imaginative cornucopia common in British fantasy, of the kind visible in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, whereby fantasy has multiple origins, and reveals the vibrancy of diverse traditions.

Fantasy, in *The Secret of Platform 13* is not restricted to The Island: while in London, Cornelius the Wizard conjures the appearance of a Nuckelavee, a giant centaur-like creature – a horse's body and a skinless human torso and head, who frightens unimaginative and bad-natured characters like Raymond Trottle, but who amazes the good characters – Odge's band of searchers, and Ben, the true prince of the story. If one is open to magic, the moral of the story is, all sorts of good things can happen.

Having said that, the Harpies of the story are distinctive for their unpleasantness: nasty, foul-smelling women with sharp claws clutching cheap handbags, and though they are also true citizens of The Island, they are generally disliked. The Harpies are the most strongly linked to the Classical world – Harpies appear in *The Odyssey* and *The Argonautica*, and Ibbotson's depiction is largely faithful.

Some elements of the story seem classist: while the association of imaginativeness with goodness is common in much fantasy literature for children, the emphasis on Ben as the true prince and Raymond as the false prince is somewhat elitist (drawing on ideas of gentility and size-ism that would be less acceptable these days). The presentation of the Harpies as jumped-up middle-class upstarts, as well as the Trottles as nouveau-riche boors are a case in point. However, overall, the novel is a romance of community, in which the harmonious life of The Island is restored.

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	Incidentally, *The Secret of Platform 13* is often thought of as one of the precursors to the Harry Potter novels, along with works by Diana Wynne Jones: for example, the similarity between the idea of Platform 13 as a portal in this novel, and Platform 13 ¾, which takes students to Hogwarts' School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Harpies Monsters Sirens
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Family Friendship
Further Reading	Butler, Catherine, "Modern Children's Fantasy," in Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 224–235. Mendlesohn, Farah, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

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