

The Washington Post

Betsy Ray, BGG (before gossip girls)

By Nora Krug
Wednesday, November 4, 2009

Books we missed, books we raved about, and books that have been revived in print.

Today's teenage girls may swoon over hunky vampires and snarky gossip girls, but some 60 years ago, a more wholesome character captured the imaginations of literary-minded young women. Her name was Betsy Ray, and this plucky girl growing up in a small Minnesota town at the turn of the 20th century was the star of a beloved series known as the Betsy-Tacy books. The creation of Maud Hart Lovelace, the 10-book collection still has a loyal following, including a society with a Facebook page. Ardent Betsy lovers can even visit the Mankato, Minn. Houses that Lovelace fictionalized in the books. Despite this, over the years the books have fallen in and out of print. Recently, six of the volumes -- *Heaven to Betsy & Betsy in Spite of Herself*, *Betsy Was a Junior & Betsy and Joe* and *Betsy and the Great World & Betsy's Wedding* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, \$14.99 each) -- were resurrected and repackaged. The rejuvenated series comes complete with forewords by Anna Quindlen, Meg Cabot and Laura Lippman.

Over the course of these six stories, Betsy grows from a teenager with an "Ethel Barrymore droop," fussing over her freckles and the curl in her hair, to a married woman who not only cooks and cleans (if not very well), but also finds time to write. It is this latter pursuit that has turned Betsy Ray into something of a feminist icon; Betsy has been likened to everyone from Jo March to Anne of Green Gables to Laura Ingalls Wilder. (Never mind her retro advice on how to act with boys: "Just curl your hair and use a lot of perfume and act plagued when they tease you.") Icon or not, this charming Every girl is easy to like, and readers can lose themselves in the quaintness of her old-fashioned life, where after-school activities feature banana splits and singalongs at the piano. The Betsy-Tacy books may have been written for a young-adult audience of yesteryear, but their message -- staying true to one's self no matter the circumstances -- couldn't be more universal, or current.

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