

LIFE & STYLE

OCTOBER 3, 2009

What Little Girls Are Made Of

Author Meg Cabot on why the Betsy-Tacy books give today's teen lit a run for its money

By MEG CABOT



The first four Betsy-Tacy books have been continuously in print since the 1940s.

Say the name Betsy Warrington Ray to a certain segment of the population, and you'll hear an instant gasp of delighted (and, yes, likely female) recognition. Betsy is the main character of Maud Hart Lovelace's Betsy-Tacy books, a delicious series of novels set in turn-of-the-century Mankato, Minn. Written in the 1940s and set at the turn of the 20th century, the books follow the adventures of Betsy and her best friends freckle-faced Tacy (Anastacia) and pint-sized Tib (Thelma).

The first of the 10 Betsy-Tacy books, which feature the protagonist at the age of five, are written in language five-year-olds can read (or have read to them). The words in the series get progressively harder (and the books longer) as the characters age, until Betsy and her friends hit high school, when the real action, romance-wise, begins.

The first four books in the series ("Betsy-Tacy," "Betsy-Tacy and Tib," "Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill," and "Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown") have been in print since their initial publication. HarperCollins just reissued the last six titles (known as "the High School Books"—"Heaven to Betsy," "Betsy in Spite Herself," "Betsy Was a Junior," "Betsy and Joe," "Betsy And the Great World," and "Betsy's Wedding"). The three volumes contain Vera Neville's enchanting original illustrations and forewords by series devotees Anna Quindlen, Laura Lippman and (full disclosure) myself.

I'm embarrassed to admit that, unlike many of Lovelace's most ardent fans, I didn't discover Betsy until I was in my 30s. I was introduced to her by my editor Abby McAden when I first started writing the Princess Diaries series.

Abby (who in addition to her work as an editor, also volunteered part-time as a children's librarian) felt the Betsy-Tacy books served as an example of a series that followed its heroine from occasionally flighty girlhood to mature young womanhood in a truly satisfying literary arc. As soon as I read them, Betsy's ranks of devoted fans grew by one more.

While it's easy for the uninitiated to wonder how in this day and age a series of novels in which the heroine has neither magical powers, a boyfriend who is a vampire, nor a cell phone can appeal to readers who are used to consuming racy fare such as "Gossip Girl" or "The Vampire Diaries," anyone who's gotten to know Betsy of the brown braids and front teeth that are "parted in the middle" has had her heart won over.

Though visions of Melissa Gilbert bobbing through a flower-strewn field as Laura Ingalls Wilder might be dancing in your head, these books don't contain a single scene about soap-making or Ma stitching a homespun dress. Betsy passes her time writing poems and cakewalking and—occasionally—making fudge with boys.

Betsy's journey, assisted along the way by best friends forever Tacy and Tib, and Betsy's loving, if occasionally clueless, family, is one with which girls today will easily identify. Lovelace doesn't weigh down her narrative with the kind of tedious descriptions about rabbit-skinning I always skipped over in the Little House books. Despite her lack of a car, PowerBook, or cell phone, Betsy deals with the exact same insecurities and problems as any modern teen...just circa 1910, instead of 2010. Her mind races with thoughts such as "Everyone got invited to the party but me," "He hates me," "Everybody's talking about me behind my back," "Oh, why did I do that?" or "He wants to go too far, and I'm just not ready!"

The series' appeal lies not just in its humor, vivacity, and realistic emotion, but because of Betsy's believable struggles to find her voice as an author, not to mention true love (both of which echoed my own struggles not just at Betsy's age, but through my 20s, and even beyond).

Betsy is no ordinary girl for 1910, deciding at a young age that she's not going to be a housewife like many of her friends, but a writer. And nothing—not even the distraction of being torn between two equally handsome and charming young Lotharios—is going to stop her.

And throughout the series, nothing does. Though Betsy certainly stumbles along the way, not only because of the occasional magazine rejection of her stories (about "New York debutantes") or a bad grade (she spends much of the divine "Betsy Was a Junior" starting her own sorority, partying, and then having to pull all-nighters to make up for it—then flunking anyway), or, this being a teen novel, a tearful breakup.

Romance comes into full (though chaste!) swing in the high school books. It's in the first of these, "Heaven to Betsy," where Betsy meets aloof, orphaned Joe—he of the blonde pompadour and "recklessly protruding lower lip"—who longs to be a journalist, as well as dark, dashing Tony, who spends a lot of time at the pool hall. Bestowed with this irresistible but ill-fated love triangle, the series thrums with the kind of yearning that keeps readers up at night. And yet, just like the best-selling teen vampire novel "Twilight," this story's climax contains just a single kiss.

Lovelace, who also grew up in turn-of-the-century Mankato, sold her first short story when she was 18 for \$10 to the Los Angeles Times. Her first few novels, which were positively received, were historical fiction. Perhaps it's

because of that background that she was able to so accurately capture the details of Betsy's turn-of-the-century life, and why the reader feels so strongly as if she really is being transported to Deep Valley High School, and into the Ray family living room.

Of course, as Betsy gets older, her problems become more adult: the love triangle into which she so thoughtlessly slipped back in freshman year begins to have frighteningly real repercussions. She has to choose where her heart truly lies, and when she does, someone gets seriously hurt.

But what's always made Betsy seem so real is that when she makes a mistake and falls down, she gets right back up. It's what makes her—and I hesitate to write it, because there's nothing any kid wants to read about less—such a fantastic role model to girls everywhere. It's why visiting Betsy's world is such an absolute pleasure. And why so many of us keep coming back, again and again.

—Meg Cabot is the author of the "Princess Diaries," "Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls," and "Airhead" novels.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved