CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Understood Betsy

Dorothy Canfield Fisher · *1917 · original English text*

When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story. The hosted text is Fisher's original English, Project Gutenberg #5347, complete. For younger readers (catalogue 3–5).

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens when a child who has been carefully "understood," and carefully shielded, is sent to a Vermont farm where she must try things for herself, and how should a school read that becoming?

"When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story;"

Chapter I, Aunt Harriet Has a Cough

Elizabeth Ann has been raised in anxious care. When Aunt Harriet has a cough, the child is sent to the Putney cousins in Vermont. There she is called Betsy, holds the reins, goes to a small school, and learns to do things she thought she could not. Teach the courage of ordinary competence, the kindness of a household that expects something of a child, and the difference between being shielded and being loved, for grades 3–5. The place, the narrator says, is not the important thing; the becoming is.

KEY CHARACTERS

Elizabeth Ann / Betsy
The nine-year-old heroine, carefully shielded at first, who becomes able on a Vermont farm

Great-aunt Harriet and Frances
The city household of anxious care, from which a cough sends her away

The Putney cousins (Uncle Henry and the farm household)
Who expect something of her, and who call her Betsy

THE PLACE IS NOT THE IMPORTANT THING

> *"When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story;"*
>
> Chapter I

Grades 3–5
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Medium-Sized City

CHAPTER I, AUNT HARRIET HAS A COUGH

Elizabeth Ann lives with Great-aunt Harriet and her daughter Frances, who gives piano lessons. They keep a "girl" named Grace, who has asthma dreadfully and isn't very much of a "girl" at all. The care around the child is anxious and close.

- The first sentence is exact, including "medium-sized city," "medium-sized State," and "that's all you need to know about the place"
- Chapter I is titled "Aunt Harriet Has a Cough."
- The cough is the hinge that will send the child away
- The narrator already tells you the place is not the important thing

> *"When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story;"*
>
> Chapter I

02

Betsy Holds the Reins

THE JOURNEY, AND THE EARLY VERMONT CHAPTERS

She is sent to the Putneys. Uncle Henry looks at her sidewise over the top of one spectacle-glass. On the way, or soon after, she is given something to do—the reins, a short morning, a share in the work of a farm.

- She begins to be called Betsy; the new name is a new expectation
- The illustration caption in this file already has Uncle Henry eyeing her sidewise; the scene is in the book
- The first doings are ordinary, and they are the point: a child trusted with a real task
- For grades 3–5; a farm household, not a fairy-tale castle

03

School, and Trying

THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

Betsy goes to school. She learns that she can try, and that other children and a small school have a life of their own. Competence grows by being used.

- The book is gentle and comic about fear, and serious about what a child can do
- Do not treat the Vermont cousins as merely "strict" or merely "kind"; they expect something, and they love her
- A short morning, chores, and school are the education
- The old anxious understanding is not the same thing as this trust

04

A Child Who Can

THE LATER CHAPTERS, AND THE CLOSE

By the close, Elizabeth Ann has become Betsy in more than name. The book does not shout the change; it shows a child who can act. Teach it as a becoming, not as a scolding of the aunt she left.

- Do not invent a last-page prize or a mere return to the city as if nothing had happened
- The point is ordinary courage: doing the next right small thing
- A class may talk about the difference between being shielded and being trusted
- The place was never the important thing; the child was

05

The Hosted File

PG #5347

The hosted text is complete, original English, 1917 (serialized 1916), by Dorothy Canfield (Fisher). For grades 3–5.

- The title page in this file may say "Understood Betsy" and "Dorothy Canfield"; both names refer to this author
- Quote "Elizabeth Ann," "Great-aunt Harriet," and "medium-sized State" as printed
- A book about a child's competence and a household's trust, not about a miracle
- The first chapter title is "Aunt Harriet Has a Cough."

Trust, not Only Shelter | Ordinary Courage | A Household's Expectation | A Child Who Can | Trying | Becoming Betsy

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 3–5

1. The book opens: "When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story." Chapter I is "Aunt Harriet Has a Cough."
2. This is Dorothy Canfield Fisher's original English, 1917, PG #5347, complete. For grades 3–5.
3. The child is sent from anxious care to a Vermont farm where she is called Betsy and is trusted with real tasks. Teach the difference between being shielded and being loved.
4. The point is ordinary courage: doing the next right small thing. Do not invent a last-page prize.
5. The place, the narrator says, is not the important thing. The becoming is.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #5347, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/understood-betsy/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.