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The Ghost on the Hearth

Susan Milord
Lydia Dabcovich, illustrator
Vermont Folklife Center (Aug 25, 2008)
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“I’m afraid there’s nothing more we can do for your Emily,” the doctor told them. “She’s in God’s hands now.”

These words echo through a quaint farmhouse in rural Québec as twelve-year-old Emily, victim of a winter illness, nears the end of her life with her family at her side. She spent her days in the service of a busy housewife on a nearby farm-cleaning, cooking, and mending-where work was never lacking. Every evening before bed, she knelt before the fireplace on the rugged stone hearth to scrape away the wax drippings from a well-used candle.

Soon after Emily’s passing, the farmer’s wife hires another young girl. When the wife rises one morning and finds hardened wax on the hearthstone, she chastises her servant for her negligence. The girl vehemently denies the charges and meticulously recounts her daily movements. The farmer’s wife asks her husband to oversee the servant’s chores. Although he sees the young girl scrape the wax drippings, the household rises to find hardened wax on the hearthstone. The farmer’s wife keeps watch through the night, and her discovery makes a story still told in Canadian homes today!

The author’s previous book, Tales of the Shimmering Sky was awarded the Benjamin Franklin Best Juvenile Fiction Award, and her Tales Alive!, won both the Parents’ Choice Award and the Stepping Stones Multicultural Honor Award. Here, recounts an 1830s tale of the supernatural kept alive through generations of traditional oral storytellers. She unfolds the story through a cautious progression of page turns, steadily building the hair-prickling tension to an optimum dramatic level, and yet she skillfully treats each ghostly event with an air of calm that keeps the fear factor pulsating at a low pitch for younger ears.

The illustrator, who provided artwork for the popular classic immigrant tale Annushka’s Voyage, and who wrote and illustrated The Polar Bear Son: An Inuit Tale, which was honored as a Notable Social Studies Book for Young People, paints the charm of rural life in historical detail with scenes that move and speak and react far beyond the text.

The Ghost on the Hearth, for ages four through eight, will appeal to both the young and the old. A memorable classroom application might include a reader’s theater, a guest storyteller, or a retelling of treasured family stories in a structured story hour. The author includes straightforward directions for creating a basic story-starter kit, along with adaptable suggestions for enhancing the storytelling experience.

CHARISSE FLOYD (November / December 2003)

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