

## Books Worth Revisiting: Novels of Elizabeth George Speare

Elizabeth George Speare (1908-1994) was a writer and educator from New England, which was also the setting for most of the novels that she wrote. Four of her novels are written for young adults, and she is one of only a few authors to win two John Newbery Medals, a prestigious award given annually for that year's outstanding American novel written for young people; a third novel received a Newbery Honor citation. All of Speare's novels are historical and, with the exception of *The Bronze Bow*, are set in the pre-Revolutionary period of American history. While these novels are written for a young adult audience, most adult readers will find plenty to enjoy in the wealth of historical and cultural details and in characters who show ingenuity, courage, and moral integrity in the face of difficult situations.

**Calico Captive / BR 3000; CI 980; CI 3696:** Written in 1957, this novel is based on a true story. At a lonely settlement in Vermont territory on the eve of the French and Indian War, the Johnson family, including Mrs. Johnson's younger sister Miriam Willard, are taken captive in an Indian raid and then marched north towards Canada. Eventually, several members of the family are sold to the French in Montréal. Unless James Johnson can go back to New York and raise a ransom to redeem the whole family, they all face a lifetime of servitude in this hostile city. Miriam, a gifted seamstress, manages to hold the family together as they wait out the long days while the French prepare to face the approaching English army. While she waits, Miriam must decide the future course of her life. Should she return to New England and marry the young man who had begun to court her on the night of the Indian raid, or should she accept the proposal of a handsome and wealthy French fur trader who promises to give her every possession she desires?

**The Witch of Blackbird Pond / BR 1427; BR 14849; LB 4204; LB 4983; RC 22927:** In 1687, Katherine "Kit" Tyler leaves the only home she has known in Barbados and sails to the English colony of Connecticut to find the only family she has left in the world. It is hard to say who suffers a bigger culture shock: Kit who comes from the lush, tropical beauty of a Caribbean island plantation, or her aunt's Puritan family who unexpectedly find this exotic creature in their midst. Connecticut is cold, harsh, and not particularly welcoming, and Kit soon finds herself both an object of curiosity and of suspicion to the

settlement's residents. Life is made bearable by her friendships with a small child named Prudence, a young sailor named Nat Eaton, and an old Quaker woman named Hannah, whom the locals refer to as the "witch" who lives by Blackbird Pond. When a violent sickness begins to sweep through the settlement, Kit finds her life in danger. Winner of the 1959 John Newbery Medal.

**The Bronze Bow / BR 9149; RC 17367:** This novel is set in ancient Israel in the time of Jesus of Nazareth. Daniel Bar Jamin is a young blacksmith intent on exacting revenge for the deaths of his parents at the hands of the Romans. While he associates with an outlaw band up in the mountains, he also struggles to help his family in the village, especially his sister Leah who still suffers from the horrors of their father's death. Life is further complicated when he meets the twins Joel and Malthace Bar Hezron, children of a wealthy Pharisee. Joel is torn between a glittering future in Jerusalem and his desire to be a freedom-fighter. Malthace is of a more practical nature, and Daniel finds himself uncomfortably attracted to her. Meanwhile, everyone is talking about the teacher from Galilee. The young people are intrigued by Jesus. Is he the key to freedom from Roman rule? Winner of the 1962 John Newbery Medal.

**The Sign of the Beaver / BR 5697; BT 3132; LB 4233; RC 21639:** Speare returned to New England for the setting of her last novel, published in 1983 and based on an incident that she had read about. In 1768, Matt Hollowell and his father journey to the Maine territory to build a cabin on land Mr. Hollowell has purchased. Matt is left behind to occupy the cabin while Mr. Hollowell returns to Massachusetts to collect the rest of the family. Matt is only thirteen and must keep everything in good order, including tending and harvesting the garden, over the seven weeks that Mr. Hollowell expects to be gone. Of course, nothing goes quite as planned. Mr. Hollowell is gone much longer than seven weeks, and Matt must cope with a devastating loss and the oncoming winter. The assistance of a local Indian tribe proves invaluable, and Matt learns much about survival in the wilderness from Attean, the grandson of the Indian chief. A Newbery Honor Award book for 1984.