

“Children Must Lead Big Lives”

The Books of Eva Ibbotson

These rich, humorous middle-grade novels offer meaningful messages, memorable characterizations, and heartfelt storytelling. **By Monika Schröder**

The British author Eva Ibbotson, who died in October 2010 at the age of 85, was best known for her witty fantasy stories. Born in Vienna, she was nearly 50 when she published her first book, *The Great Ghost Rescue*, in 1975. Ibbotson’s humorous characterizations of eccentric witches and friendly ghosts make her books a great favorite among young readers. In the classroom her books can model descriptive writing as well as provide excellent read-alouds.

Her historical fantasies often center on orphans who have an adventure and ultimately find a new family. After her parents’ divorce, young Ibbotson spent part of her early years shuttling between her father and mother, and according to Ibbotson herself, this experience resulted in her need for happy endings. In an interview quoted in the British newspaper *The Guardian* she explained: “I was always on some large train going about and wishing I had a home. So when I came to write, consciously or unconsciously I always had to make things right for the hero or the heroine.”

Ibbotson’s books model compassion and kindness. Toward the end of *Journey to the River Sea*, Miss Mardon says to Mr. Murray, “Perhaps I’m mad—and the professor, too—but I

think children must lead big lives . . . if it is in them to do so.” In Ibbotson’s books good prevails over evil, and those who show kindness toward others and are able to grow beyond their self-centeredness lead “big lives,” important messages for children and adults alike.

Ghost Stories

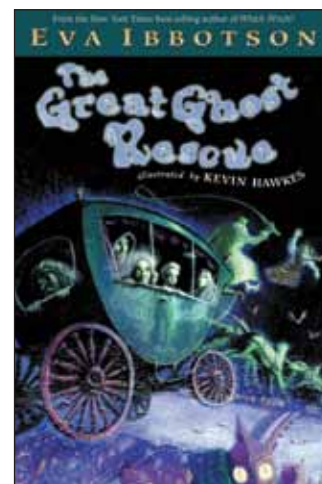
Ibbotson’s ghosts have human characteristics and form strong emotional bonds with their human counterparts. Her masterful, funny characterization through exaggeration gives students an opportunity to learn how humor is achieved in storytelling, and they can use excerpts from Ibbotson’s books as models for their own ghost stories.

In *The Great Ghost Rescue*, Ibbotson’s first novel, young Rick creates a sanctuary for a group of ghosts who lose their ancestral home due to modernization. While each floating phantom has a special disgusting characteristic, Ibbotson still manages to make them all likable, and readers will relish this macabre story.

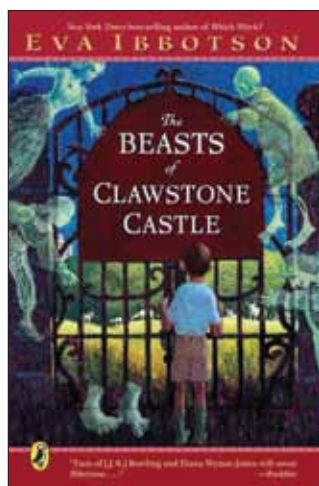
In the companion novel, *Dial-a-Ghost*, Miss Pringle and Mrs. Mannerling manage an agency that sends ghosts who need a home to people in need of haunting. A mistake

is made and the nuns who requested a family of quiet ghosts for their country abbey end up with the Shriekers, a couple who shrieks constantly, scaring the livestock. But Oliver, whose evil cousins wanted to scare him to death by sending him the Shriekers, hoping they would inherit his mansion after his demise, benefits from this error. He befriends the calm Wilkinson ghost family, and they help him to thwart his cousins’ evil plans.

The Haunting of Granite Falls also centers on the relationship between ghosts and humans. Twelve-year-old Alex’s haunted Scottish castle is sold, dismantled, and moved to Texas. The ghosts, who raised Alex, include a



Viking, a governess, and a vampire, and they have difficulties adjusting to their new environment.



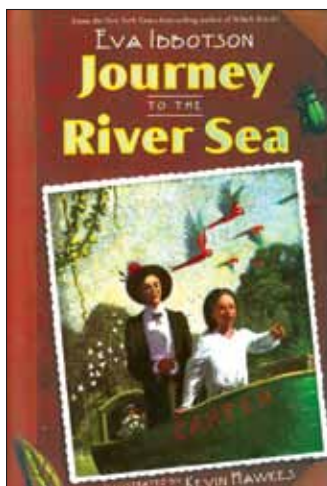
In *The Beasts of Clawstone Castle*, Rollo and Madlyn are staying with their aunt and uncle in a castle, where they help generate funds for the castle's urgently needed renovation by recruiting a group of terrifying ghosts, including a bloodstained bride and Scottish feet, who attract tourists with their frightening show. Young readers will enjoy the ghosts, but Ibbotson also weaves deeper issues, such as animal rights and land development, into the fast-paced story.

Historical Adventures

After the sudden death of her beloved husband of 49 years in 1998, Ibbotson took a break from writing funny books. Instead she tried an adventure story and wrote *Journey to the River Sea*, the story of Maia, an orphaned girl, who sets out with her stern governess to live with distant relatives in the Brazilian rain forest city of Manaus. Masterfully weaving many plotlines together, Ibbotson shows her talent for characterization and also vividly describes the Amazon setting; this is a wonderful read-aloud for the classroom.

Ibbotson continued to write longer, well-researched historical fiction novels. *The Star of Kazan*, set in Vienna, the city where Ibbotson lived

until the age of seven, tells the story of 11-year-old orphan Annika, who has been raised by two servants and lives happily in the household of their employers, two professors. A rich German lady arrives and claims to be Annika's mother and takes her to a decrepit German estate. Here a mystery around a Russian gem unfolds, and Annika helps to solve it. Lovely and innocent, Annika, like many of Ibbotson's other main characters, is likable despite her too-good-to-be-true nature.



The Dragonfly Pool is set in England in 1939. Tally doesn't want to go to boarding school, but once she arrives at Delderton, a progressive co-ed institution modeled after the boarding school Ibbotson attended, she enjoys the freedom granted to the children there. Tally watches a newsreel about the tiny country of Bergania, whose king stands up to the Nazis' demands, and soon after organizes a group of students to participate in a folk-dance competition in Bergania, chaperoned by their gentle teacher Matteo. Tally and her friends meet the lonely Prince of Bergania, Karil, and help him flee to England. Here, Ibbotson mixes history and fantasy with great skill. The children pursue idealistic goals, and their sense of solidarity and friendship prevail over evil; the epilogue, set six years later, provides a touching conclusion.

As part of an author study, teachers could ask students to extract common themes in Ibbotson's historical adventures. A guided reading question might be to look at how the author creates a sense of place while entwining fiction and fantasy elements.

Witches, Wizards, and Aunts

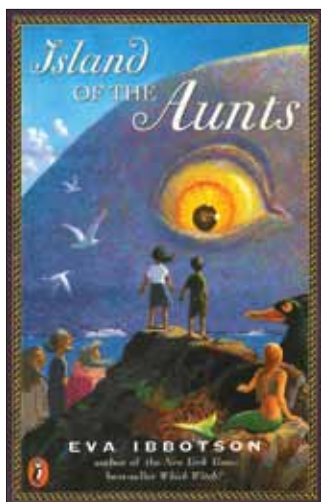
My favorite of Ibbotson's books, *Which Witch?* was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal in 1978. When magician Arriman wants to get married, he holds a contest for the local witches. And what a contest it is! The ladies show off their specialties, and readers expect that Belladonna will win, as she can rely on the magic powers of her pet earthworm, Rover. But when Madame Olympia, a skilled witch from London, arrives, things take a different turn. Drawing Arriman and the witches according to their descriptions is a fun activity to accompany a reading of the book.

Another witch-centric title is *Not Just a Witch*, in which two longtime best witch friends feud at their school graduation, then go their separate ways until a dastardly villain tricks them into casting wicked spells for his benefit. As in many of Ibbotson's titles, Kevin Hawkes' skillful, imaginative ink drawings add to the atmosphere and the fun.

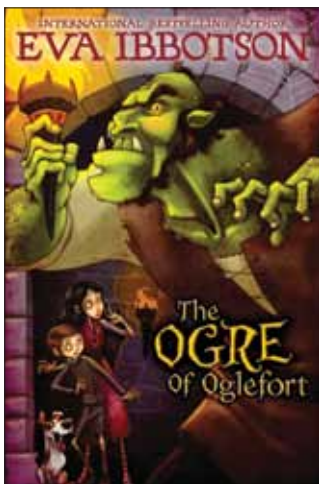
The Secret of Platform 13 was published in Great Britain in 1994, years before Harry Potter's departure from



Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Station, and it makes a hilarious read-aloud. The title refers to the "gump"—a hidden doorway under the platform in an abandoned London train station, leading to a fantastic island where magical creatures live peacefully with humans—that only opens every nine years. When the infant prince of the island is kidnapped by the odious Mrs. Trottle (whose name means *idiot* in German) and is brought to the real world, the rulers of the island send a motley crew of magical creatures to find the boy and bring him home. Young readers will enjoy creating a "Missing Person Poster" for the prince, or comparing the unpleasant Raymond Trottle, whom the rescuers believe to be the missing prince, with Ben, the sweet-natured kitchen boy.



"Kidnapping children is not a good idea. All the same, sometimes it has to be done." Who can resist an opening sentence like that of *Island of the Aunts*? Etta, Coral, and Myrtle live on a secret island, where they care for a wide variety of creatures, from chickens to exotic sea animals and even mermaids. But they are getting older, and in order to find help they decide to kidnap some children. They pose as "aunts for hire" and abduct a child. Lambert, the boy who is kidnapped, is a spoiled brat and doesn't believe in any of the island's mysteries. He uses his cell phone to call his father, who threatens to turn the island into an



amusement park. But with the help of the kraken, a larger-than-life spirit of the sea, all turns out well. Because the book touches on the theme of environmental preservation, students can discuss the different relationship each character has to the natural world and how Ibbotson uses their reactions to what they see on the island as a way to define their personalities.

In her interview with *The Guardian*, Ibbotson said, "When I get stuck in a book now, I usually try putting an aunt in. I find it difficult to write a book without aunts. With *The Ogre* I had to put in three aunts, if I remember rightly." This comment refers to her last book, *The Ogre of Oglefort*, about an orphan boy, a troll, and a hag who try to save a princess from an ogre. It has already been published in Great Britain, where it was shortlisted for *The Guardian's* Children's Fiction Prize and the Roald Dahl Funny Prize. The book will be published in the United States this summer.

Sampling Ibbotson

The Beasts of Clawstone Castle.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2006. 256p. Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780142409312). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 3–6.

Dial-a-Ghost.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2001. 224p. Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780142500187). Gr. 3–6.

The Dragonfly Pool. Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2008. 416p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525420644); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142414866). Also available in an audio edition and an e-book edition. Gr. 5–8.

The Great Ghost Rescue.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 1975; reissued 2002. 144p. Dutton, \$15.99 (9780525467694); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142500873). Gr. 3–6.

The Haunting of Granite Falls.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2004. 216p. Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142403716). Gr. 3–6.

Island of the Aunts.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2000. 304p. Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142300497). Gr. 3–6.

Journey to the River Sea.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2002. 336p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525467397); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142501849). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 5–8.

Not Just a Witch.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2003. 192p. Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142402320). Gr. 3–6.

The Ogre of Oglefort.

August 2011. 224p. Dutton, \$16.99 (9780525423829). Gr. 3–6.


The Secret of Platform 13.

Illus. by Sue Porter. 1998. 224p. Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780141302867). Gr. 5–8.

The Star of Kazan.

Illus. by Kevin Hawkes. 2004. 416p. Dutton, \$16.99 (9780525473473); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142405826). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 5–8.

Which Witch?

Illus. by Annabel Large. 1979. 256p. Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780141304274). Gr. 5–8. 

Monika Schröder's third novel for middle-grade readers, *My Brother's Shadow*, will be published in September. Visit her at www.monikaschroeder.com.