

## An Invitation to the Writing Game

Monica Hughes (1925-2003)

**T**he *Keeper of the Isis Light* and sequels, *The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar*, as well as *Invitation to the Game* and *The Crystal Drop* are just a few of the stellar works written by Monica Hughes. One of Canada's premiere authors for young people, she died suddenly of a stroke at the age of 77. Fans of science fiction will miss her gentle voice, clear, straight-forward style, and exploration of themes of import today presented in futuristic settings.

Monica Hughes was born in 1925 in Liverpool, England, but became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1957, with stops in Cairo, Egypt, and Edinburgh, Scotland, along the way. She also spent time in London, first for schooling at a girls' school and then later for a stint in the Women's Royal Naval Service during World War II, after which came a two-year stay in Zimbabwe.

As a child she learned to read before she started school, told stories to her younger sister, and dreamed of becoming a writer. A flood of rejection slips greeted her initial submissions of adult stories and essays. Adding novels to her output made no difference, until she discovered works written specifically for young people. After devouring a number of these in the

'50s and '60s, she knew that was what she wanted to become—a writer for young people.

What came next? With the youngest of her four children in school, she could get serious about her writing, so she set a schedule for herself – four hours a day for an entire year at the kitchen table, first with a black BIC pen and a stack of loose-leaf paper, then a

typewriter and, finally, a word processor. Fortunately for young science fiction fans, the third book she tried, set under the ocean, was accepted by an international publisher and appeared as *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* in 1975. Like so many other authors, perseverance paid off for her. After this breakthrough, she published over thirty works for young people and received numerous awards, including the Vicky Metcalf Award of the Canadian Authors Association for her body of work.

Monica Hughes wrote novels in various genres, but she was best known for her science fiction. Her *Isis Trilogy* in particular is a superb example of this genre, with its strong characters, fascinating other world setting, and scientific background that is accessible and understandable. She was deeply concerned about environmental issues and wrote about the

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importance of living in harmony with the earth, no matter how dystopian the future she depicted. *Isis*, with its theme of survival, the integration of cultures, and what it truly means to be human, is one of her most acclaimed works.

Other works developed important themes, as well. *Invitation to the Game* was written in response to the reality of severe unemployment in Britain. *The Crystal Drop* explored the reaction of two young children left alone and struggling to survive in a world that has suffered years of drought. In these and other works, the gentleness and kindness of the author shone through as she invited her readers to explore the future she depicted for them. Above all, it was important to her to write the truth for her young readers, no matter how difficult it might be to accept, but at the same time to include an element of hope.

We will miss her wonderful worlds and the marvelous characters she created to inhabit them. To explore her contribution to literature for young people, visit her website at <http://www.ecn.ab.ca/mhughes/> and find out more about her life and her literary output, as well as where she got her ideas. Various teachers' guides are also available at this site.

**Bonnie Kunzel** is the Youth Services Consultant for the New Jersey State Library. She is well known for her work with teens and is a former president of the national Young Adult Library Services Association. Among her published works are *Strictly Science Fiction: A Guide to Reading Interests* (with Diana Tixier Herald) and *First Contact: A Reader's Selection of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (with Suzanne Manczuk).