

ALDOUS HUXLEY: THE CROWS OF PEARBLOSSOM

In his lifetime, Aldous Huxley was considered one of the great thinkers, a man who preached pacifism, the mystical possibility of sensual experience beyond that of the five senses, and the value of hallucinogenics to enter ecstatic states. Best known for his novel *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley wrote eleven novels, plus short stories, poetry, essays (one collection, *The Doors of Perception*, famously lent its name to the rock band The Doors), dramas, screenplays, and one piece for children *The Crows of Pearblossom* (written in 1944, published posthumously in 1967).

The English-born Huxley moved to the American southwest in 1937 at the age of forty-three, alternating his time between Los Angeles, California and, starting in 1941, Llano in Antelope Valley, Mojave Desert, where he had moved for his wife Maria's health. His sister-in-law's family lived in the nearby town of Pearblossom, and the Huxleys were often visited by their young niece and nephew, Olivia and Siggie. For Christmas in 1944, Huxley presented Olivia with the short story *The Crows of Pearblossom*, which mentioned her brother and herself, as well as their neighbors.

AFTER RECEIVING *The Crows of Pearblossom* as a gift, the five-year-old Olivia returned the manuscript to her uncle requesting that he illustrate it. The manuscript remained in Huxley's house until it burned down several years later. Fortunately, Olivia's neighbors the Yosts, mentioned in the story, had a copy that they preserved. In 1967, four years after Huxley's death, Random House published the story as a picture book with art by the legendary Barbara Cooney, who had already won the first of her two Caldecott Awards.

Nicholas Murray, in his 2002 biography *Aldous Huxley*, claims the tale as a pacifist fable since the snake is "defeated by intelligent strategy

rather than by being killed." But in the end the snake is still dead, so that seems a bit of a stretch. He also mentions "There is possibly a touch of self-mockery in the character of Mr Crow: 'This is serious,' he said. 'This is the sort of thing that somebody will have to do something about,'" apparently something Huxley would have said. In truth, considering the cause of its composition, the story is nothing more than an excellent children's story, one that is well polished and worth reading.

And fortunately, it has just come back into print in an edition illustrated by the great Sophie Blackall, illustrator of the *Ivy and Bean* series and *The Big Red Lollipop*. Olivia, for whom the tale was written, provides an afterword signed Olivia de Haulleville. (In the 1967 edition, the note says that she is now Mrs. Yorgo Cassapidis.) "I still live in the desert, near Joshua Tree National Park, and have my own two children...My brother Siggy's daughter now lives in the Yosts' old house, and this story is read to her three children."