BOOKS

Natalie Babbitt, Author of 'Tuck Everlasting,' Dies at 84

By SAM ROBERTSNOV. 1, 2016

Photo

Natalie Babbitt with students of the New Lincoln School on the Upper East Side in 1981.CreditWilliam E. Sauro/The New York Times

Natalie Babbitt, a celebrated children's author and illustrator whose ruminative novel "Tuck Everlasting," about a family's immortality, found a fervent

readership and inspired two films and a Broadway musical, died on Monday at her home in Hamden, Conn. She was 84.

The cause was lung cancer, her husband, Samuel F. Babbitt, said.

Ms. Babbitt won the inaugural E. B. White Award for achievement in children's literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2013, a Newberry Honor in 1971 and other accolades during a prolific literary career that spanned more than four decades and produced some 20 books that she wrote and 10 more that she illustrated.

"Each new work offers more evidence of the originality, intelligence and high purpose that make her our most gifted writer for children," Selma G. Lanes, a fellow author, wrote in The New York Times Book Review in 1982.

While Ms. Babbitt's personal favorites were "Herbert Rowbarge" ("for women over 40," she advised) and "Goody Hall" ("for kids"), she said that if a reader had to choose one of her books, she would want it to be "Tuck Everlasting."

Ms. Babbitt had been inspired to write "Tuck," she said, when her 4-year-old daughter woke from a nap crying because she was scared of dying.

The critic Melanie Rehak, writing in The Times in 2002, said of the book, "From the moment it appeared, it has been fiercely loved by children and their parents for its honest, intelligent grappling with aging and death."

Anne Tyler, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, described "Tuck Everlasting" as "one of the best books ever written — for any age."

"Tuck" is a cautionary tale about a family of the same name that inadvertently discovers the proverbial Fountain of Youth and is forced to reconcile with the anomaly of eternity.

It has sold four million copies in the United States, was translated into 27 languages and was adapted twice for film — in 1981 and in a 2002 Disney production with Sissy Spacek, William Hurt and Alexis Bledel. The Broadway musical adaptation, at the Broadhurst Theater, was short-lived; it closed on May 29, about a month after opening.

Photo

Alexis Bledel and Jonathan Jackson in the 2002 film adaptation of "Tuck Everlasting." CreditRon Phillips/Disney

In the book, a lonely 10-year-old named Winnie Foster wanders into the woods where Angus Tuck and his family guard their secret of longevity. Winnie is terrified of death.

"She would try very hard not to think of it," Ms. Babbitt wrote, "but sometimes, as now, it would be forced upon her. She raged against it, helpless and insulted, and blurted at last, 'I don't want to die.'"

Angus, the family patriarch who considers immortality a curse, tries to reassure Winnie that the great natural wheel of life must turn.

"'No,' said Tuck calmly. 'Not now. Your time is not now. But dying's part of the wheel, right there next to being born. You can't pick out the pieces you like and leave the rest. Being part of the whole thing, that's the blessing. But it's passing us by, us Tucks.

"Living's heavy work, but off to one side, the way *we* are, it's useless, too. It don't make sense. If I knowed how to climb back on the wheel, I'd do it in a minute. You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we got. We just *are*, we just *be*, like rocks beside the road.'"

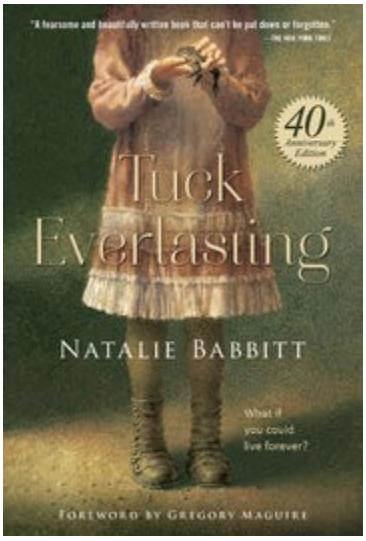
Natalie Zane Moore was born on July 28, 1932, in Dayton, Ohio, the daughter of Ralph Moore, a personnel administrator, and the former Genevieve Converse, an amateur artist.

She grew up wanting to be an illustrator and was raised with what she later described as “an Ohio life-view.”

“It is, first of all, uncomplicated,” she explained. “There is the feeling that certain things are right — and that’s that. Also, there is a sense of the land’s always being there.”

After graduating from Smith College, where she majored in fine art, she married Samuel Fisher Babbitt, with whom she collaborated on a children’s book, “The Forty-Ninth Magician,” in 1966. (She took one writing course in college because her husband hoped to become a novelist and she wanted to understand the challenges he faced. But, she said, “he didn’t enjoy the long, lonely hours that writing demanded.” He became a college administrator.)

Photo



An anniversary edition of “Tuck Everlasting.”CreditMacmillan Publishers

In addition to her husband, she is survived by their children, Dr. Christopher Converse Babbitt, Thomas Collier Babbitt and Lucy Collier Babbitt, and three grandchildren.

When her husband became president of Kirkland College in Clinton, N.Y., he and Michael di Capua, who would remain her editor for 50 years, encouraged her to write as well as illustrate. The first book she wrote, “The Search for Delicious,” about an orphan boy surveying the tastiest food in the kingdom, was published in 1969.

As her children grew, so did the reach of her imagination. “Knee-Knock Rise” (1970) was sparked by the memory of loss when her older sister debunked Santa Claus. “Tuck” followed, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 1975.

“Actually, I don’t think of ‘Tuck’ as being about death,” Ms. Babbitt said in 1982. “The tale is concerned with life — its finiteness, what this means and whether or not, ultimately, it is preferable to immortality.”

Then came “The Eyes of the Amaryllis,” a spectral tale of lost love, in 1977; “Nellie: A Cat on Her Own,” her first full-color book, in 1989; and many others, through “The Moon Over High Street,” in 2011.

She was a frequent contributor to The Times Book Review and continued to write into her 70s, belying an observation she had made decades earlier: “I have about three or four good ideas left, I think. Then I’ll stop writing and maybe decorate lampshades or run a marionette theater or something. I want to use up my ideas and then stop. It’s not fair to the trees.”

Shortly after she became an author, she struggled to define what distinguished a children’s book. She decided it was “The Happy Ending” — not the saccharine happily-ever-after finale, but the hopefulness of childhood as contrasted with the pity expressed by adults who say they wouldn’t want to be young and “have to go through all that again,” by which they mean the hard lessons in compromise and the abandonment of one dream after another “down to what we have at last settled on as possible.”

“Alas, we have not arrived and we are not unique at all,” she wrote in The Times Book Review in 1970. “We are not beautiful, nor clever, nor even very good; and, no matter how well we do what we do, there is always someone who can do it better.

“The white house on the hill is lost to us forever, and all of our sweet tomorrows are rapidly becoming yesterdays which were almost (if we were lucky) but not quite.”

As for immortality, Ms. Babbitt echoed Angus Tuck. “I think that living forever would be a terrible thing,” she once said. “It would be boring, sad and lonely.”