



A Chalet School Headmistress

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A Chalet School Headmistress is covers the same term as *A Mystery at the Chalet School*. It shows Bill's tenure as headmistress of the Chalet School while Hilda Annersley recovers after her accident mentioned in *Gay from China*.

A Chalet School Headmistress Details

Date : Published by Girls Gone By

ISBN : 9781904417477

Author : Helen Barber

Format : Paperback

Genre : Childrens, School Stories, Academic, School

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Shawne says

As I march through on my re-read, slotting in all the fill-in books as I go, I'm beginning to get a better sense of the different authors and voices who are colouring in the history of Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's Chalet School. Following this re-read of *A Chalet School Headmistress*, I'm quite confident in saying that Helen Barber is easily my favourite of the lot. She writes almost uncannily like EBD herself, the lapses (whether in language, grasp of character or idea) far fewer and less noticeable than I've experienced in the work of other fill-in authors. My favourite fill-in book by Barber remains *The Bettanys Of Taverton High*, but *A Chalet School Headmistress* is also a very good effort, and one I'm quite happy to read alongside the main series.

Barber's book is, effectively, a companion piece to EBD's *The Mystery Of The Chalet School*, a slight novella that runs throughout the term following the disastrous car accident that incapacitated four of the Chalet School's senior mistresses. In *Headmistress*, Helena Wilson - erstwhile senior mistress and doyenne of the School's scientific education - rises to the occasion, accepting the titular position while her great friend Miss Annersley continues to recover from her injuries.

For the most part, *Headmistress* does a very good job of following Miss Wilson through her first official term as Headmistress. She lends 'Bill' a touch of trepidation, weighted with her trademark confidence, sarcasm and competence. Beyond her irrefutable powers of quelling naughty students, Miss Wilson has her tender, sharp and funny side, which Barber also draws out: whether in the form of the comfort she tries to give a heartbroken Marjorie Redmond, or in her efforts to cheer up a despondent Sybil Russell.

Barber even includes quite a few episodes that I am more than happy to count as canon, with two in particular tickling the funny bone in much the same dry, amiable way EBD did at her very best. The first is a midnight adventure featuring two former Head Girls of the School, who are now mistresses themselves - following a dinner at Plas Gwyn, Hilary Burn and Gillian Linton return to school only to get embroiled in a minor escapade that soon draws Miss Wilson's attention. The second incident is the Staff Evening, which is described delightfully as a proto-Guy Fawkes' Night - the games dreamt up by Barber, including a torch-lit group hunt and an obstacle course, are a joy to read.

The book does lose a little steam in its final third, possibly in conjunction with Barber's decision to shift the focus from Miss Wilson. In the preceding chapters, she had served either as a major player or a supporting presence in the various episodes of the narrative. By the end, she seems to have been relegated to a passive role that causes the book to lose a little of its focus. Also, while Barber has a good grasp on her characters, delving with some welcome insight into Grizel Cochrane's (mis)adventure with a pack of students and a cow - Grizel also being a former Head Girl turned Chalet School mistress - the incident itself feels more than a little belaboured.

Nonetheless, *Headmistress* is a really decent, strong effort at telling a story in EBD's deep, complicated and error-ridden universe. I find myself thrilling to character descriptions and paragraphs of prose the way I do with stories actually written by EBD, which is not something I can say about most of the other fill-in novels I've read. (Not that they're bad, mind you - more often than not, in fact, they are very competently written and researched and are perfectly readable. But they seldom, or never, make me forget I'm reading a book written by someone who's definitely not EBD. Barber just about manages it on quite a regular basis, which is - you'll have to admit - pretty darn impressive.

Heather says

An Excellent Book. Definitely one of the best fill-in's. I admire all the fill-in Authoresses and appreciate their hard work, but Helen Barber's work is outstanding, and she truly writes a brilliant and enjoyable story.

This tells Miss Wilson's story, her full term as Headmistress, while Miss Annersley continues to recover from her accident. It's a lively, interesting book, but without too much drama that would stand out as odd if not mentioned in original series. You could easily read this in order, and not realise it wasn't written by EBD, as I feel it fits seamlessly into the series. As always with a GGB edition, you can read the grammatical and history/dating of series details at the end if you wish.

There are stories about the Middles, the Juniors - expecially a new awkward one, who features in later books, and the private difficulties of a mistress, Mrs Redmond, formerly Miss Durrant. The Firework Party is very original, and I like the concert description at the end, as it's a little different, but not too much that it doesn't fit.

Deborah says

One of the best fill-ins. Various Chalet references are properly explained and rounded out (the Eilunedd and Gwensi affair being particularly well done), and how appropriate to have Jennifer Penrose causing trouble with a book, given what happens in *Wrong!*

This is, however, another CSB where you will need to have a box of tissues handy, for Mrs Redmond's story, which is utterly heartbreaking.

What is best about this book, though, is the detail we get about EBD's characters. They are all absolutely the characters as EBD created them, and the extra 'voice-time' they get here is excellent. Grizel's adventure is probably my favourite (and very EBDish).

I thoroughly enjoyed all the various episodes, and it's lovely to see all the girls (from the juniors through the prefects to Miss Wilson herself) doing proper Chaletish activities and talking in authentic Chaletish voices. One not to miss.

Jen Pritchard says

I quite like having the teachers perspectives as rather central to the story.
