

Katherine M. Reeves

July 19, 1899 — October 1, 1963

The sudden death of Professor Katherine Reeves was a profound shock to her professional colleagues and many friends in the Ithaca community. As a perceptive teacher, skillful writer, and creative worker for the welfare of children, she had served Cornell and the community for over thirty-six years.

Born in Winchester, Kentucky, Professor Reeves was the daughter of the Reverend John Reeves and Mae McCormick Reeves. She received her early education in the public schools of Pendleton and Weston, Oregon, and her later elementary and secondary education at Science Hill School in Shelbyville, Kentucky. After two years at Ohio Wesleyan University she transferred to Kentucky Wesleyan College where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English in 1922. She taught for a year in her native Kentucky and then joined the staff of Hull House Settlement in Chicago. While there, she became interested in early childhood education in general and the relatively new nursery school movement in particular. To prepare for what she always referred to as an “exciting educational adventure,” she studied at the National College of Education at Evanston, Illinois, receiving the nursery-kindergarten-primary teaching certificate in 1927. She later attended Columbia University and completed her Master of Arts degree in 1948.

Professor Reeves joined the staff of the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University as a nursery school teacher in the fall of 1927 and was appointed Director of the Cornell Nursery School in 1937. She was named Associate Professor of Child Development and Family Relationships in 1943 and Professor in 1952.

As a teacher of young children, Professor Reeves was especially gifted. For her each child was a very special person, different from all others. She loved each one—the rebel, the conformist, the bright child, and the slow child—and each child responded with love, trust, and spontaneity. She was curious about how children see the world of nature, words, and people; insightful in sensing children’s needs; and skillful in providing a stable environmental situation conducive to individual and group development. Her knowledge of children’s needs for space, materials, and natural beauty was instrumental in determining the design of the present Cornell Nursery School, which for many years was regarded as a model for university nursery schools.

Professor Reeves’s concern for children and her activities in their behalf extended well beyond the sphere of her professional responsibility. Ever an active worker in the community, she took a leadership role in the establishment of wartime day care centers in Ithaca and throughout the state. She was one of the founders of the New York State

Nursery School Association. Throughout her life she was involved with a variety of community activities such as the Tompkins County Mental Health Association, the Social Planning Council, and the Youth Bureau. She was a member of the Advisory Committee on Nursery Education of the State University Agricultural and Technical Institute at Cobleskill, the International Association of Childhood Education, and the National Association of Nursery Education; she was named to the governing board of the latter in 1960.

Endowed with unusual ability to communicate ideas, orally and in writing, Professor Reeves's classes in "Kiddy Lit" (Children's Literature) will long be remembered by the many students she inspired. Students report being held spellbound by her "soft, pleasant, yet expressive voice" as she read from a children's classic or analyzed a child's behavior. They recall her patience and kindness, her willingness to arrange informal studies, and her encouragement when they had academic or personal problems. Her office and her home were always open. Students expressed their appreciation by choosing her Professor of Merit for the year 1961, a recognition that moved her deeply. But even more, she found satisfaction in the considerable numbers of students whom she helped to influence to enter teaching. She followed the careers of these students, taking quiet pride and deep satisfaction in their accomplishments.

Writing was Professor Reeves's major avocation. She loved to write and often said that she never wrote anything which she didn't enjoy writing. She conducted a monthly column, "The Children We Teach," for *Grade Teacher* for several years. She published many articles for teachers in professional magazines. For her book, *Children—Their Ways and Wants*, she received the citation of the Child Study Association of America in 1961. In one of her articles Professor Reeves wrote, "A book is a personal statement, a way of giving out again what you have learned and taken and come to consider important as you have lived." This was the essential characteristic of all her writings. From a seemingly inconsequential incident of everyday life she was able to elaborate a theme for an article or children's book. One of her books for children, *The Farmer's Catnap*, was the 1957 selection of the Kansas State Reading Circle, adopted for use in that state as a school text. In 1959 she was honored for her "outstanding contribution to children's literature" by the State Association of Elementary School Principals. Her last book, *The Cloud Eater*, was a selection of the Children's Literary Guild. She was at work on a fifth children's book at the time of her death.

In addition to writing for teachers and children, Professor Reeves wrote essays, fiction, and poetry. She received the Emily Clark Balch Award for adult fiction in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1961. Of her many poems, twenty were selected for the 1958 Durham Chapbook Award and published under the title *Time Is a Cadence*. She was a member of the Poetry Society of America and the Central New York Branch of the National League of American

Pen Women. At the time of her death, she was serving as a judge for nonfiction and miscellaneous articles for the National League of American Pen Women. She was also a member of and past president of the Writers Association of the Ithaca area.

Endlessly generous of her self—her time, her strength, her concern—Professor Reeves will be sorely missed by all who knew her. She had that rarest of human gifts, unerring awareness of the moment when sharing would increase another's joy, or diminish another's sorrow. She has left splendid legacies in her writing, in the outstanding collection of children's literature assembled under her direction for the University Library, and in the weekly story hour which she founded at the Cornell Public Library and which will continue as a happy, living memorial. But to her friends she has left riches "for the mind to keep"; they are unique and immeasurable, the gift of one whose quiet, unassuming selflessness was a testament of faith.

Mary Ford, Catherine J. Personius, Virginia True