



# **"Be Home by the Bells": A Child's Narrative in Upstate New York**

*Holly O'Brien*

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The year is 1961. Katie lives in a small village in Upstate New York. She and her neighborhood collection of friends meet outside each day to make up their own adventures and manage their own time. There was a rule in the village that they all followed. It had always been used, for generations, probably! Moms had a way of telling kids when to be home no matter where they wandered during the day. At 4 pm the McDougall's donkey brayed, at 5 pm the town siren wailed and at 6 pm the church bells pealed over the whole little town. When your mom said, "Be home by the bells", that was a very special treat; be back just in time for dinner! Katie's lyric, heartfelt narrative of a year in her life, which she records in a journal, brings us there through compassion, fear, joy and tragedy; growing with her as she develops self-reliance. Join the neighborhood bunch through unending adventures such as building homes for crayfish, exploring Grandma's attic or discovering the "ghost kids", (quarantined kids who live upstairs and are always watching them). Feel the excitement of building a log city, exploring ruins in the woods, tracking animals in the snow, or saving newborn St. Bernard puppies. They must cope with chronic illness, accidents, a massive town fire and a destructive tornado while learning to appreciate wild foods, the beauty of nature, native crafts and each other. Katie is a history lover like her dad. Her wistful yearning to reach out to the shadows of the people of long ago who still seem to lurk all over her quaint town often dominate her thoughts. She asks big questions about the meaning of life's tiniest details as we grow in awareness and wisdom along with her. Over 100 original pen and ink drawings and photos enhance the charm and realism of the story. Detailed historic notes are included for each chapter and will be useful for those who wish to further learn about regional Upstate New York history. An appendix of suggested activities related to the book adds to the overall value of this unique narrative. Based on a real girlhood in the Mohawk Valley/Capital District of New York State, with fictionalized yet realistic characters, the overarching theme behind all of her adventures is one of learning and living wholesome Christian values as she grows up in a loving family within a small town setting. Katie's perennial question is, why did everything from long ago just seem better? How will she finally find safety, purpose and hope right here in her own ordinary life?

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