

Edgar Valter

POKURAAMAT



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“The Poku Book”

Text and illustrations by **Edgar Valter**

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Storybook, fiction

Age: 6+

Rights sold: Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Udmurt

At first glance, the creatures named the Pokus look like tufted sedges. They live their lives discreetly, are friendly and inquisitive, but are terrified of human beings. The artist and children’s author Edgar Valter was one of the few lucky people to have ever gained their trust. His Poku Book tells about the Poku people, and details the life and times of the good-natured old Uncle Puuko at his cabin deep in the woods. There’s no denying that Uncle Puuko bears an uncanny resemblance, both in appearance and mind-set, to the author himself!

Edgar Valter’s Poku books – The Poku Book, The Poku ABCs, and Poku Stories – explore how to live in harmony with nature.

Awards:

2002 The Eerik Kumari Nature Conservation Award

1996 National Art Prize

1996 IBBY Honour List, for illustrations

1996 Nukits Competition, 1st place for writing and illustrations

1995 Annual Children’s Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

1995 Children’s Book Design Competition, 1st prize



Reading sample

[pp 5–10]

Something was wrong. For the last fifty years, the Pokus had lived just as they always had: in a nice, marshy wooded area with a glade nearby for a sense of openness, a deep protective forest at their backs, and a body of water just a stone's throw away. The Pokus dearly needed the opportunity to wiggle their toes in ground that was just damp enough. But now, the Pokus had noticed that instead of moist, soothing, pleasantly doughy soil beneath the soles of their feet, the ground was cracked and dry. It tickled their feet awfully. So, all throughout the time they would usually spend resting every evening, the Poku people, who were normally so calm and composed, looked more like haystacks in a whirlwind. It just wasn't right. Although they were able to wet their feet in a damper spot somewhere in the daytime, they were forced to dance in place instead of taking a nice nap during their evening break.

No, this could not last long: that much was clear to everyone, even to the littlest of Pokus.

Late on one hot, cloudless day, they huddled close together to discuss the matter. The Pokus didn't have much of a choice: they had to find a new place to live.

And so, the little Poku population could be seen journeying onward. Pokus tend to stay quite settled in one place, otherwise, and aren't at all in the habit of wandering. Nevertheless, if need be, they can move soundlessly and at an incredible speed. It was dim in the woods, despite the white summer night, but they didn't mind, because Pokus can see very well in the dark.

All the forest creatures who have a nocturnal way of life spotted them as well. This didn't bother the Pokus: they had no enemies. So, they processed in their orderly little line, stately and solemnly. They didn't know where they were going or for how long, but of one thing, they were certain: when they arrived at the right place, they would experience a great FEELING OF RECOGNITION.

Dawn began to break. The Pokus had been soundlessly stepping along moose trails, had walked along well-trodden wild boar paths, and now turned onto a deer lane. But they still didn't have that right FEELING, even though they had come across a fair number of nice marshes, a few partly-overgrown trenches, and even some pretty wooded glades with little patches of open water glistening in the middle.

The Pokus stopped, stood, and waited... But that FEELING wasn't there. They merely exchanged glances, turned around with a soft swishing of their grass coats... and the soundless trek carried on.

But then, something unexpected happened. The forest came to an end so suddenly that they froze in shock, standing on the edge of a little, breathtakingly beautiful clearing fringed by tall trees.

They stood, and they stared. The strong, sweet scent of water wafted into their nostrils. There were many wonderful smells there. The Pokus looked at one another questioningly.

As if by silent agreement, they slowly crept forward in a big clump. It was nicer moving that way. They certainly didn't have THAT FEELING yet, but nor did they feel like they were in danger.

Suddenly, they spotted a building. Several buildings, actually. One, the slightly bigger one, had a chimney, and the other ones, which were smaller, had no chimneys at all.

The Pokus halted. They weren't afraid, of course. They didn't feel endangered. Perhaps they should have, but they didn't. They merely stopped to observe their surroundings.



The building, the one with a chimney, had a thatched roof with a pleasantly-shaded rug of moss draped over the straw. It had a few dusty little windows and a door with a couple of moss-coated stone steps leading up to it. A vine shinnied up onto the moss rug of the roof, holding on with its green tendrils. Just one rug apparently wasn't enough for the old cabin. It looked forlorn, but in a very friendly kind of way, and it radiated goodness.

The Pokus grinned and nodded to one another. And then, the sun rose. The whole world was suddenly flooded with glistening light, and birdsong cascaded over the forest clearing as if a dam had burst. Buzzing, humming, and rustling rose from the tall grass. The insects were greeting the day. The Pokus all started talking and moving at once, as if released from a magic spell. And like children left unsupervised, they scattered in every direction.

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[pp 22–27]

Then, as if by silent command, the Pokus started gathering in the garden. Nearly all of them had managed to go nearly everywhere and to see nearly everything. Now, they stood in a tight talking circle and stared expectantly at the older Pokus. It was a decisive moment. It was a decision-making moment.

“My dear Pokus!” the oldest Poku of all began. “I believe you all saw the lake. The tiny, but bona fide spring-fed lake. You saw the reflection of the pines on the opposite shore, the birds on the surface of the water... and the water-lilies...”

The old Poku was visibly moved.

“And the shoreline! What a shoreline it is! What beautiful muddy inlets... And that teensy strip of sand on the side where the sun sets!”

The old Poku sighed.

“I stood there on the sand, and before me lay the spectacular lake, looking like an eye with reeds and cattails as eyelashes surrounding it... And the stun-

ning, strong, tremendous trees behind me... And the peace and tranquillity... and the sand stroked my feet... And I had the FEELING that... that...”

“HOME, HOME, IT FELT LIKE HOME!” all the Pokus cried out.

An enormous wave of relief washed over them. They swayed, laughed, and nudged one another. They had finally arrived!

Eku and Sooru listened intently to the old Poku's speech. The two were also moved by the Pokus' long-awaited decision and their bubbling joy.

Suddenly, a loud and raspy cough shattered the sublime scene. The Pokus froze in place, their gazes nailed upwards at a window – it was open just a crack, and a long, lazy ribbon of smoke floated out.

“A fire!” the Pokus whispered. “Are the flames coughing?”

Eku and Sooru exchanged looks and explained to the Pokus: “Don't be alarmed! The man who lives here has woken up, and just is puffing at his pipe.”

“The MAN?! There's a HUMAN here?!”

“As human as human can be. Most definitely. No mistaking it.”

The Pokus looked at each other uneasily. This fact could very well dampen their FEELING. The way the sedges shrunk was as plain as day.

“A HUMAN!”

“You're not all afraid, are you?” Sooru cautiously started asking. However, he hadn't finished his thought before the cabin door let out an awful creak and a little old man with a bushy, overgrown beard appeared on the doorstep.

The Pokus were oh-so petrified! It was too late to run and hide, so the best they could do was to simply stand there and be a little bit petrified.

The old man blinked rapidly in the bright sunlight, then cocked his hat down to shade his eyes, and

grunted: "Mornin', my little friends!"

Broad grins stretched across Eku's and Sooru's faces, and no doubt their expressions would have stayed that way longer if not for a high-pitched but pure-sounding little peep that came from one of the tiny sedges, saying: "Good morning!"

The old man looked down, and slowly removed the pipe from his mouth. A colossal number of sedges had sprung up right before his doorstep, overnight! And that tiny one right there...

The old man took a couple of steps back, sat down on the lowest step, and stared at the little sedge, confounded. Were his senses deceiving him?

He poked the sedge gently with the stem of his pipe, and asked: "Did you just say good morning?"

"Uh-huh," the sedge replied. "But you did first."

"You've got me, there. That is true. But not a single sedge has ever answered back. At least not as far as I can remember."

"But I'm not a sedge!"

"Is that so—you're not?"

"No. I'm a Poku. We're all Pokus."

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[pp 50–58]

The Moon had sailed its course, and soft darkness was settling over the land.

The Pokus had gathered by the house. Not even they knew why. But there they stood, staring at the closed door. Something seemed to draw them to it; or, to be more precise, to the strange, bristly human who seemed so very Poku-like. How could they explain it? Perhaps like this: it was nice being near that big Poku. It made them feel safe. And it felt as if the beautiful day should end together with a big Poku – with Puuko.

Sooru was no doubt inside already. He had his own cat door. Although he had shown it to the Pokus, not one of them dared to use it. They would need to have a separate agreement with Puuko to do so. The Pokus had been brought up well. Or had grown up well.

Even Eku had deserted his little house and was sitting amid the Pokus, watching the door with them. The sound of the birds dwindled away. And then, it became exceptionally quiet. Only the crickets still sawed away at their violins tirelessly.

And then, Eku said: "Woof!" It wasn't a "hello" or a "goodbye"—it was simply a "woof". And that "woof" opened the door, and the old man looked out. He looked out, and he said: "Hello, all of you!"



The Pokus grinned and rustled their grass coats in satisfaction.

“Well, come on—come in, all of you!” Puuko said.

There was no need to be shy. All the sedge-people sprung into motion at once.

Eku was swept along with them, as if he was swimming in long grass.

“Everyone go ahead and see wherever and however you can squeeze in,” Puuko told them.

And so, they did. The space soon bore a strong resemblance to a pile of straw having been brought in to dry. Puuko chuckled, his eyes roaming across the room that had suddenly turned into a cozy haystack. He turned the wick of the oil lamp up just a tiny bit. Now, it was quite clear that this was no haystack: there were several dozen twinkling-eyed Pokus squatting wherever room was to be found.

It was snug and quiet inside. The old man’s gaze had roamed over everyone, noting where each had snuggled in, and then, his body slowly started to twitch. Only a few moments later did a familiar “he-he-he” sound out. And oh, how infectious it was! Before long, each and every Poku was rocking back and forth in laughter, and a loud “hoo-hoo-hoo”-ing echoed throughout the house. The sound blended in well with the “he-he-he”-ing.

Pyka, the old moose who just happened to be plodding past the cabin in the woods, froze in shock. He’d never heard the whole cabin making such strange noises before. Pyka quickened his pace just in case, shaking his head.

“Well, well, my fair Pokus,” Puuko finally said when the “he-he-hes” and “hoo-hoo-hoos” had died down, “tell me now: where did you come from? Did you all agree on it so unanimously?”

The Pokus spoke. They spoke about how peacefully they’d lived in their marshy fen, needing very little, until the Great Dry came and forced them to search for a new home.

The bristly little old man listened to their story

without uttering a word. When the Pokus’ tale had finished, he said: “I suppose a human could have caused it. Someone might have drained the land, dug deep ditches, redirected the waterways, or destroyed them entirely. I suppose man really is the one and only creature who alters nature just the way his beak wants it. He’s badly in the habit of doing that.”

The Pokus were silent. What could they have added, anyway?

“Will it all be drained away?” they asked, worried.

Puuko hurried to reassure them: “No, there’s no danger of that here. That sort of trouble won’t be reaching us just yet.”

He slapped his fists on his knees and asked: “But now, tell me: what did you do to fill your time when you were standing around so meekly there in the fen?”

Yes, indeed: what had they done? The Pokus exchanged glances. Then, one older Poku coughed and said: “Well, you see, we stood, and we stood...”

“We made poetry!” a littler Poku’s cheerful voice called out.

Puuko lit his pipe over the oil lamp, puffed it a few times, and then asked curiously: “Huh... And how did that work?”

“It went like this,” the tiny Poku gladly explained. “One Poku said one sentence, then someone else had to say another that rhymed with the first. And then a third had to say one, and a fourth, and that’s how it worked...”

“Oh, how clever!” the old man grinned. “I suppose that might have been quite exciting, indeed.”

“Oh, it was an absolute gas!” a tiny voice cheered from atop the cupboard.

“When a bear went through the pass!” a slightly huskier voice rhymed.

“The bear then burrowed in the hay,” the poetry-making continued.



“He said: that’s enough wind for today.”

“Nor in eyebrow-plucking.”

“He-he-he!”

So it carried on and on, and the evening turned to night.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo!”

“Wonderful,” Puuko finally said. “Now, we should get some shut-eye. Another day awaits tomorrow. But are the soles of your feet getting itchy? Perhaps you should moisten them up a bit?”

Even Eku grinned his wordless grin from ear to ear: they were true comics, the lot of them!”

“Purr-rrr!” That came from Sooru.

So, a moment later, all the Pokus marched to the lake and stood solemnly in the shallow water along the shoreline.

Puuko chuckled: “Sounds like you had a fun time.”

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“He, who laughs, gets health on a dime,” one of the Pokus immediately chimed in.

“There’s no point in clucking.”

Translated by Adam Cullen