

Aunt Maria Short Guide

Aunt Maria by Diana Wynne Jones

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Overview

Aunt Maria (pronounced Ma-RYE-ah) sensitively treats difficult relationships and abuses of power. Characters Mig and her older brother Chris face first a parental breakup, then their mother's total subjection to a sweet and helpless—but very strange—great-aunt. The stresses of life with Aunt Maria are developed in a suspenseful story which includes a ghostly apparition and other paranormal phenomena. Although the happenings are often improbable, Mig and Chris are believable characters who must master family problems that most readers can recognize in their own lives.

Jones presents ideas about tyranny in families that also apply to the community, since Aunt Maria's actions have overwhelmed the men, women, and children in her entire town. Aunt Maria works on several levels to examine conventional rules, personal freedom, and the roles of men and women.

Mig and Chris resist Aunt Maria's magic, thus showing that resourcefulness, courage, honesty, and caring can defeat evil manipulations and restore proper balance among individual people in the real world.

About the Author

Diana Wynne Jones was born on August 16, 1934, in London, England. Her philosophy of writing for young people developed from the unpleasantness of her childhood. Besides being displaced several times after 1939 because of the onset of World War II, Jones was forced to endure parental neglect. By 1943, when her parents settled in rural Essex to manage a conference/cultural center, they chose to reside apart from their three daughters.

Fire and Hemlock, 1984 Howl's Moving Castle, 1986 A Tale of Time City, 1987 The Lives of Christopher Chant, 1988 Chair Person, 1989 Wild Robert, 1989 Aunt Maria (also published as Black Maria), 1991 Castle in the Air, 1991 Yes, Dear, 1992 The Crown of Dalemark, 1993 Stopping for a Spell, 1993 Hexwood, 1994 The girls were housed in an uncomfortable two-room hut and often had to go without reading because their father refused to supply enough books. Jones turned to writing her own stories.

After she was married to university professor John Burrow, Jones took up writing because she could not find enough good children's books for their three sons. As a graduate of St. Anne's College, Oxford, she retained strong impressions of the fantasy writers C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, who taught there. Deciding that realistic writing could be painful to read, she concluded that writing fantasy was the best way to provide the kind of books she herself was deprived of as a child. She wanted books to be highly imaginative and humorous, as well as to help young readers cope with their own problems, including difficult adults.

Jones has published adult novels (Changeover, 1970; A Sudden Wild Magic, 1992) but has concentrated primarily on the younger reader since her first children's book appeared in 1973. Besides children's plays, she has written short stories and many novels for young adults. Awards or honors have gone to Dogsbody, Power of Three, Charmed Life, Archer's Goon, Fire and Hemlock, and Howl's Moving Castle.

Jones's many stories are rich in witches, ghosts, enchanted animals, and mythical figures—even a moving castle. She treats serious themes through characters' encounters with magic, time travel, and transformations of humans into animals, such as occur in Aunt Maria. Always there is humor to make her novels not only exciting and suspenseful, but also fun.

Setting

The story begins in contemporary London, where Mig and Chris live with their mother Betty Laker. Their father has left with another woman, then disappeared in an automobile accident on the way to visit his Aunt Maria. Betty Laker, responding to Aunt Maria's plea to spend Easter vacation with her in distant Cranbury-on-Sea, takes Mig and Chris and goes to the shore. On arriving, Mig and Chris discover a magical, dreary community ruled mysteriously by Aunt Maria. The townswomen are her co-conspirators, the men behave like zombies, and the children appear to be clonelike orphans.

Social Sensitivity

Jones treats topics in *Aunt Maria* that some readers might find troublesome, but she does so with sensitivity. She proceeds on the realistic basis that many of today's young people face broken homes, difficult relationships, and news stories of struggles for human rights. Domestic quarrels launch the story, and the parents have engaged in extramarital relationships.

The approach is nonjudgmental, however, and the stress is on the qualities that enable Mig and Chris to cope.

The parental breakup leads to contact with Aunt Maria. On one level, the novel concerns how far family members should go in caring for demanding elderly relatives. In another vein, some readers may question Chris's sarcastic talk and behavior toward adults. Yet again, the intent is not to preach but to enlighten. On another level—and this is the far more intriguing one—Aunt Maria rules an entire society gone awry. Here Jones reveals her stand against systems of dictatorship, a point of view with which few readers would disagree. "People should not manage people," Mig concludes—within the home or without.

A point of concern might be what Jones has to say about the male-female relationship, which in the novel is integral to the question of power. The novel is rich in complexities that arise from dialogue including references to "woman's work" and women's brains being "obtuse." Mig deplors the fact that in town "the women are winning," but the message is not antiwoman. Mig is a strong female character who rejects the notion that "having ideas is not women's work." Throughout the novel, the intent is to present ideas and develop understanding. Ultimately Antony Green brings spiritual freedom equally to every man and every woman.

He also admits that the "stuff" he disseminates, which thwarts traditional ways and conventions, is "not easy to describe." The comment is thoughtprovoking, as are many aspects of this novel. The point Jones makes is the need for granting individuality free play, and this is true of her inclusion of black clonelike orphans among the rest. There is no racism here, but rather the perception of color as a quality of individuality. The emphasis is on the necessity for social diversity, and the association between men and women that will end domination by either gender.

Readers concerned about violence should not find Aunt Maria objectionable. They should be aware, however, that the novel generates considerable suspense, and that main characters are placed in very real danger. The novel's humorous touches do not entirely lighten the serious tone or the rare grim and frightening episode. In the case of the wolf hunt, a killing does in fact occur and the wolf involved is a transformed human being. However, the killing is discussed and not depicted, involves a peripheral character, and enhances the novel's central theme.



Literary Qualities

Aunt Maria communicates adventure, suspense, and message through a variety of literary techniques. Mig, the narrator, is a likeable character with whom the reader can easily identify, and her down-to-earth reactions to mysterious happenings and magic spells lend them credibility. Jones also makes fantastic events seem more believable by beginning the action of the novel in a realistic setting, the way C. S. Lewis does in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or Lewis Carroll does in *Alice in Wonderland*. So effectively does Jones use the technique that the narrative moves smoothly from the Laker home to Aunt Maria's strange domain.

The attention Jones pays to the everyday details of domestic life, such as setting the table or pouring tea, serves the same purpose of enhancing believability. Careful description is an important feature of the novel. Jones uses words that help to convey an ominous, bleak mood in *Cranbury-on-Sea*, thus reinforcing the theme of dangerous, boring conformity. For example, Aunt Maria's house is dark, the town and seafront deserted and windswept.

Jones also employs numbers and colors suggestively, to heighten the sense of mystery and suspense. Aunt Maria's address is number 13, for example. Elaine, her lieutenant, wears black to signify the death of personality. By contrast Antony Green, whose name, apparel, and magical box are assigned the color of growing things, represents hope for the development of individuality and freedom.

The emotional atmosphere in *Cranbury-on-Sea* often is evoked through figures of speech, as when Mig refers to "feeling you are in a sort of bubble."

The image conveys a sense of entrapment in a closed and stifling community. Also, she sees Aunt Maria as a queen bee, who has everyone in the town hovering about her. Magic—like that represented by the green box—is another imaginative element used to good effect by Jones to convey profound concepts concerning individuals, relationships, and power. In one instance Antony Green's manipulation of the magical box greatly affects Aunt Maria's physical size, thus altering also her dictatorial powers.

Although the tone is serious and the ideas sufficiently complex to challenge the reader, the entertainment value of the novel remains high. Jones weaves a fine story, filled with surprises, humor, and deft touches of realism. For example, Mig is transformed not into a grown cat, like her mother, but a fluffy kitten which promptly proceeds to lick itself. Here the humor balances the characters' urgent need to take action in order to save persons gripped by Aunt Maria's magic.



Themes and Characters

Aunt Maria features a rich cast of characters. Mig (a nickname for Naomi Margaret) is a central figure along with brother Chris, mother Betty Laker, and of course, Aunt Maria. Mig, through whose words the story is told, is the most intriguing character, partly for the way she changes as the story unfolds. She is bright, ambitious, resourceful, chatty, and unswervingly loyal to her brother. Inner strength and a matured outlook emerge as she is drawn into a power struggle that engulfs her immediate family members and leaves her alone to thwart Aunt Maria.

While Mig confronts Aunt Maria warily, brave Chris—alienated from the imperfect adults in his life—is inclined toward sarcastic remarks and defiance.

As a result of Aunt Maria's magical retaliation, Chris spends a good part of the novel courageously but helplessly staging his protest as a wolf. "Mum" Betty Laker is cheerful and kind, but susceptible to guilt feelings and "too civilized," Mig says, not to fall under Aunt Maria's sway. Betty's mild self-assertiveness emerges only through Mig's efforts.

Aunt Maria herself is characterized as the "Great Dictator," the "Queen of Cranbury," and the "Female Pope."

The elderly woman gives the appearance of being lonely, helpless, and kind, but she rules with an iron hand through provocation of guilt, disapproving suggestion, and—as a last resort—magic. Anyone who does not obey her every whim may be transformed into an animal or even a buried ghost. The best that can be said about Aunt Maria is that she is unable to see the error of her ways.

Other characters fascinate largely as extensions of Aunt Maria's power, which is the point of the novel. There are "the Mrs. Urs," respectable, teadrinking townswomen whose individual names are unimportant because they echo Aunt Maria's every wish.

There is black-clothed, next-door neighbor, Elaine, who functions as Aunt Maria's lieutenant. There are clonelike children and zombielike townsmen who include Elaine's husband, the boring "voiceless Larry," as well as Mig's sarcastic, indifferent father Greg Laker. There is the gray cat which oddly resembles Aunt Maria's missing live-in helper, Lavinia.

Cranbury-on-Sea's stand-out residents are the Phelps across the street and Antony Green, characters who object to Aunt Maria's power. Nathaniel Phelps believes in men's powers and scoffs at women. His sister Amaryllis Phelps, afflicted with falling spells, rejects the idea that anyone at all should rule. Antony Green at first is a ghostly apparition, but he comes seeking a magical box that holds the town's secrets. Forced to deal with the box and Antony, Mig must join a wolf-hunt that endangers Chris, then be transformed into a cat and undergo time travel.

The results are momentous, however, since Antony Green becomes a character who can undo Aunt Maria's powers.

In the course of the story Mig finds her own potential and comes to understand her parents, but more is involved. Antony Green's box bears directly on the thematic concepts of the nature of the male-female relationship, power in society, and individual freedom. Mig sees that power belongs to men and women equally, that "unreasonableness" can lurk beneath respectable conventions, and that abuses can be undone. What finally happens to Aunt Maria introduces the theme of just punishment, which ends the story with hope.



Topics for Discussion

1. What kind of person is Aunt Maria? What methods does she use to get her way?
2. Chris is rude and sarcastic to adults. What explains this? What does he think of the members of his family?
3. Mig and Chris nickname Aunt Maria's friends "the Mrs. Urs." Why are their real names unimportant?

What has happened to the minds of the residents in Cranbury-on-Sea?

4. How does Mig describe the landscape in Cranbury-on-Sea? Does this description suit the mood in town?
5. Mig's mother tells her that Aunt Maria "uses people's guilt about their savage feelings" (Chapter 3). Mig thinks her mother is at a disadvantage because she is "too civilized" (Chapter 5). What do these remarks mean?
6. What influence does Nathaniel Phelps have on Chris? What trouble does this cause for Mig?
7. Mig's father tells her that "none of the traditional facts seemed to mean anything" to her mother. Her mother says her father never learned that "people aren't just a set of rules" (Chapter 9). From this, what does Mig learn about her parents' relationship?
8. How do the opinions of Nathaniel and Amaryllis Phelps differ? Why does Aunt Maria insist that Mig and Chris stay away from the Phelpses?
9. Why are boys separated from girls at the orphanage? Why does Aunt Maria want to build an extension to it?
10. "It's between women and men in Cranbury, and the women are winning," Mig observes (Chapter 6). What does she think about women's role in life? And men's?
11. Do you think what happens to Aunt Maria at the end is appropriate?
Is Antony Green's explanation a good one?
12. Mig wants to be a writer and likes happy endings. Do you think she got her happy ending in this novel?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The magical green box is an important device. What does it mean to the different people who come into contact with it? What do its characteristics convey about the themes confronted throughout the novel? Be sure to consider the question of power in society and the way it relates to men and women, devoting special attention to comments by Mig's parents and Antony Green (Chapters 9, 14, 15).

2. Describe how time travel is used in the novel, and make a judgment about its effectiveness as a plot device.

Is it more or less effective, for example, than such devices as the transformation of people into animals?

3. Near the beginning of the novel Mig describes Aunt Maria's character as "enormous—right up to the ceiling" (Chapter 2). Much later Mig concludes that "the main spell" Aunt Maria casts is "boredom," and the guilt she inflicts is a breakable "plastic bag" (Chapter 14). What do these realizations mean in terms of Mig's response to Aunt Maria's power? If Mig's thinking has changed, what has happened to bring this change about?

4. Diana Wynne Jones has been praised for her use of humor. Is Aunt Maria more a serious novel or a funny one? If humor is present, is it effective?

What is its purpose?

5. One way of handling magical occurrences in a novel can be to make a "big deal" of them, and use them primarily to surprise and entertain the reader. Another way can involve presenting them matter-of-factly, with about the same stress as on the realistic happenings. Has Diana Wynne Jones chosen this latter technique? If so, why would she have done so? Is the result a better story? Why?

6. A fantasy novel typically ends with hope for the future rather than with a permanent solution to the problems raised. Is Aunt Maria, with its many fantastic elements (magical spells, resurrection, and time travel), typical or not? If the ending hints that troubles may recur, how bothersome is that to the reader?

For Further Reference

Cart, Michael. Review. *The New York Times Book Review* (April 19, 1992): 16. The reviewer perceptively covers important aspects of the novel's themes.

Jones, Diana Wynne. In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Vol. 12. Edited by Laurie Collier. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994: 101-108. The entry is valuable for a detailed biography of Jones in the context of critical commentary on selected titles including *Aunt Maria*, with listings of publications, awards, and honors, and a bibliography of review sources.

———. In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 166-167. In a statement for young readers, Jones candidly relates her childhood struggles to her later writing.

———. In *Something About the Author*.

Vol. 70. Edited by Donna Olendorf and Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993: 115-118. The entry is useful as an abbreviated biographical and critical overview, with listings of Jones's publications and awards and honors.

———. *Speaking for Ourselves, Too*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993: 106-108. In a statement for young adults, Jones depicts her unhappy childhood in relation to her efforts to publish good books for young adults.



Related Titles

Aunt Maria's overlapping themes of the use of power, family tension, selfrealization, the male-female relationship—typical of Jones—can be found in several outstanding novels. The awardwinning *Charmed Life* and its sequel *Witch Week* concern the right use of power. In both, Chrestomanci is a government employee who keeps magic from being used for evil purposes.

Charmed Life specifically treats family tension and maturation through conflict between Chrestomanci's ward, shy Cat Chant, and Cat's jealous, mischief-making sister Gwendolen. The award-winning *Archer's Goon* concerns a power struggle between the Sykes family and their town's interfering, ruling wizards. The male-female relationship is explored in the honored fantasy romance, *Howl's Moving Castle*.

In it, young Sophie, magically transformed into a bossy old housekeeper, battles the wizard Howl against a backdrop of humor.

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