

Balyet Short Guide

Balyet by Patricia Wrightson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Balyet Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

Balyet takes the reader onto the edge of wilderness in what starts as an ordinary few days' camp-out. There is a fourteen-year-old girl, a Granny to keep track of her and give her annoying tasks, and two interesting young males to distract her with fun and motorbike rides. There is also something else waiting for the girl, Jo, in the wilderness. Because another young woman once was with two brothers here, and met a terrible end, the campout does not proceed in an ordinary way. Instead of light-heartedly flirting and harmlessly exploring, Jo is drawn by mists and echoes toward a very different experience. Why the "sorrow in the hills" wants her, and why Jo is called to it even when she knows the danger, makes for an exciting and haunting story.

About the Author

Patricia Wrightson has said that readers will find her biography much duller than her stories, but the setting of her own life is fairly exotic to American readers. She was born in Lismore, New South Wales, in 1921, and grew up in the sparsely-settled North River country area of Australia.

Although she attended a district primary school, most of her secondary schooling was taken by correspondence, in a program for students living in isolated areas. She did much reading as a child, and she remembers gradually noticing that none of the books she read and loved were written by Australians, or about Australia. A few years later she began to remedy this lack through her own writing.

Meanwhile, World War II intervened. After graduating from high school she went to Sydney, where she took a job in a munitions factory. She also married, had two children, and then worked as a hospital administrator for a number of years. When her marriage broke up in 1953, she returned with her children to the river country. Then she started writing stories, at first for her own children, whose reactions helped her pinpoint what needed to be reworked in the stories.

Her first few published books were realistic novels for young people, set in the same New South Wales countryside where she had grown up. *The Crooked Snake*, the first of her books to be published, won the Book of the Year Award from the Australian Children's Book Council. While her first books surprised her by the attention they gained, not until *A Racecourse for Andy* came out in 1968 that she began to also be recognized outside Australia as a fine writer of children's books. This book, a warm story about a mildly retarded boy who thinks he has bought a racetrack, won several awards, including inclusion on the Hans Christian Andersen Honors List, an international honor.

About this time Wrightson began to want the challenge of writing a different kind of book, one in which magic and playful spirits played a part. She had read widely about the legends of the aboriginal Australians. At first she had great difficulty "feeling the magic" of the mythical beings in these stories, but finally the connection came to her as she imagined them inhabiting the same land as she.

Her later works, based on these various legends and beings, have brought her further fame. Starting with *An Older Kind of Magic* (1972), they have included a fantasy trilogy, the award-winning *The Nargun and the Stars*, and several other novels along with *Balyet*.

Setting

Like most of Wrightson's books, *Balyet* is set in Australia. The story's events all occur within a small patch of hill country, apparently just a few miles' drive out from the safe, familiar city. Yet Jo's ventures into the vine-shaded pool, the rocky slopes, and the tangled gullies take her far, far away from the markers of civilization.

The ancient, lonely stretches of the island continent seem to loom just beyond the clearing and its camp. *Balyet*, as a creature from a time long past, can roam this vast, wild region which means only danger for her present-day counterpart. This fact, and the layers of legend and mystery woven through the landscape, make it more than just the background for a novel. The land is almost a separate presence here, without which the story would not take place at all.

At the same time this setting is described so clearly and matter-of-factly that non-Australian readers will have no trouble visualizing it. Only a few plant and animal names are unique to the region. Likewise the social setting emphasizes ordinary, contemporary features rather than anything uniquely Australian. Cars, motorbikes, baby-sitting, and university attendance are all mentioned in the story. This makes the book easily accessible to young-adult readers of all levels of sophistication. It also heightens the ambiguity and symbolism in the story, as tragic long-past events are almost reenacted in an otherwise normal social setting. Wrightson has said that she only became able to draw on the aboriginal lore of her country by "going through the land" for a connection. Her success in weaving landscape and lore together are evident in the finely-drawn setting of *Balyet*.

Social Sensitivity

Balyet is based on a legend of Australia's aboriginal people, and contains two women (one real, the other a spirit) of this heritage as main characters. The author treats both the legend and the characters with respect. Even the seemingly cruel custom which exiles Balyet from human contact is explained as reasonable in another time and world view. There is no sense here that any group or culture is inferior to another; they are simply different.

This attitude is maintained so evenly throughout the book that teachers and parents may want to explore its validity in discussion. Might Balyet's exile have been a cruel and unusual punishment even for her own time? Does holding Balyet guilty in the blood brothers' fight say anything about the position of women in that society?

Likewise, does the "like calls to like" principle of magic that operates so strongly in this story have the same level of validity as the common-sense rules of cause and effect? These are questions without a single answer, but well worth thinking about.

Somewhat awkward is the handling of age. When Jo finally realizes the dangers in letting Balyet touch her, she desperately cries out: "You're not young and pretty, you're . . . old and cruel! . . . You're old inside." And Balyet, who has been whispering to Jo to join her because we're young, howls in pain and turns away, crying for death to find her. Because of the complexity of the story, it is difficult to tell whether this exchange, the climactic turning point in the novel, represents a real devaluation of older people, or whether it merely signals Balyet's belated recognition that time has passed her by, and the experiences she missed in her youth can never be recaptured.

Unfortunately, young readers who can well identify with Jo's reluctance to join an "old, old" entity as sister and friend may unthinkingly reflect the former attitude. Here again, some reflection and discussion may be helpful.

The fact that it is Mrs. Willet whose efforts ultimately rescue both Jo and Balyet may counteract the disgust revealed in the preceding passage.

Literary Qualities

The author has effectively built the story around a myth of the aboriginal Australians, first recorded in the 1880s.

The tale itself is native to Australia; its air of loneliness in a vast arena of time and space seems to belong uniquely to this long-isolated continent. But the thematic concerns discussed in the previous section can be found in many other stories as well. Quarrels between brothers, impulsive youths defying social custom, an undead spirit whose touch kills even when it seeks to love, a natural realm where hidden powers infuse the stones and trees—each appears over and over again in literature and myth from all corners of the world. These draw on universal emotions and fantasies. Patricia Wrightson has used the motifs to tell a story which works on a philosophical level as well as the familiar plot line of a teen-ager being drawn into strange adventure.

The prose style is simple and crystal clear. The focus shifts back and forth between Jo and Mrs. Willet so that the reader can understand the actions of both. Balyet's thoughts and words come as echoes, repeated plaintively as they bounce across the hills and gullies. This is a singularly effective device for conveying the loneliness and confusion the little spirit feels. Her cries of Sister! and What will I do? blend into Hide in the hills! and finally a seeking, puzzled plaint as she calls out Where is death?



Themes and Characters

Balyet is told with a small cast of characters. The two main human actors are fourteen-year-old Jo and Mrs. Willet, a "Clever Woman" of aboriginal heritage, who was Jo's beloved sitter when the girl was younger. Stowing away in "Granny" Willet's car as the old woman sets out to tend the sites of ancestral magic, Jo churns with a mixture of emotions. Her simple act of hiding springs from several motives. Jo would never admit to uneasiness at being left on her own while her mother goes on a business trip. She is at that awkward age where one both longs for and resents adult protection. But she hates to be cooped up in the house while Mrs. Willet goes out in the country to do adventurous deeds. And Jo knows that her friend Terry is planning an outing to the same area. What fun it would be to surprise him!

Mrs. Willet also has mixed emotions when she discovers Jo in the back seat of her car. Secretly a little flattered when Jo tells her how special she has been in the girl's life, she still would rather do her ritual tasks without being responsible for a high-spirited, bored teenager.

The love, willfulness, and resentment between these two, revealed in this first scene, permeate events throughout the story. Jo is spurred into more daring deeds by her annoyance at Mrs. Willet's overprotectiveness. The old woman, knowing no way to make the uncanny dangers in the hills understandable to the girl, uses flimsy excuses and tricks to keep her from wandering. Jo can easily see through them, and decides that Granny is just simpleminded and stubborn.

Their mutual lack of understanding forms a strong motif of youth and age which informs the book. It is a complex exploration, more subtle than the mere youth versus age conflict between Jo and Granny. In her care for the ancient boolith stones and sacred sites, Mrs. Willet shows the elders' responsibility for maintaining tradition. In her plea for Balyet's release—"This is another time . . ."—she recognizes the need for changing as the world changes.

For her part, Jo fights mightily against Granny's hard words and her acceptance of an even harder law. Yet when the old woman's warning proves right, and Balyet's call brings up the dark, it is Granny Willet to whom Jo calls. And Granny Willet answers, for her hard words masked not only her helplessness but her love for the young woman. And—as Granny herself may not have realized before—they masked compassion for the spirit-woman Balyet also.

Balyet is an important character. In an author's note, Wrightson says that the book is Balyet's story, not Jo's or Mrs. Willet's. Some readers may disagree. Young readers are most likely to identify with Jo. In a standard analysis of the story as fantasy, Jo would surely be the protagonist, responding with wariness and fascination to a paranormal being. But on a thematic level Balyet is primary. Balyet makes the youth versus age theme even more complex.



She drifts and beckons in the story as a girlish spirit, exiled from normal life in punishment for the innocent passions of youth. Yet she has endured a thousand years in her spirit form, wasting away to a mere streak of mist. All her people have disappeared in the intervening years. She longs for a death she cannot attain. Perhaps the implication here is that, being cut off from the experiences of normal life, the opportunity to grow into moral responsibility is lost to her too. Her playful impulses are deadly, and she has gained no wisdom from her years on earth.

Balyet's predicament presents another theme as well. According to the ancient legend Mrs. Willet recounts, Balyet was condemned to her shadowy existence for violating a taboo. She fell in love with two young men, blood brothers. The blood-brother relationship was especially sacred because it helped insure peace between different tribes. Balyet was not supposed to flirt with either of the brothers; another husband had already been chosen for her. Balyet's flirtation led to the two youths' quarreling. They killed each other, overturning a whole set of relationships.

Exile was the natural consequence of Balyet's actions. By endangering the social order Balyet put herself outside it. Her loneliness afterwards only emphasizes what she lost by making up her own rules. Balyet's punishment seems cruel and unreasonable in our time, but it makes a good deal of sense in a different social world, where survival might depend on the understandings shared by small bands of humans living on a resource-poor land. The theme of social order and the cost of defying it is universal. The particular rules and the price extracted for breaking them vary widely, depending on the society.

Jo's friend Terry and his older brother Lance pop in and out of events.

They are normal, well-meaning young men, but their very presence tempts Jo away from more "serious" responsibilities, like the baby-sitting she volunteers for. The connection between these two real brothers and the blood brothers of Balyet's story is implied on the first page: "time itself turned in a great slow circle and brought across the plain two brothers." But the metaphor is not carried out fully; these brothers do not quarrel. On the other hand, their distracting effect on Jo forms a closer parallel to the legend. But there is a crucial difference: Jo's attraction to them is not taboo in her society, and her flirtation does no permanent damage.

A third, very subtle theme in the story of Balyet is the possibility of a dual nature of reality. The visible landscape in the book is infused with hidden spirits and meanings. This is the stuff of much contemporary fantasy as well as tribal lore. Whether it functions as a mere fictional device to allow "special effects" and a touch of the weird, or as a serious statement about the universe, depends as much on the mind of the reader as on the intentions of the author.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think Balyet's people were justified in going away and leaving her to be alone forever? Why or why not?
2. Several times in the story, Mrs. Willet tries to keep Jo from doing something by telling her there is not enough food to go around. Do you think Mrs. Willet is really worried about running out of food? If not, why does she use such a flimsy excuse?
3. Why does Jo keep seeking out Balyet in the face of Granny Willet's warnings, and after she has seen how little Kevin almost died after being called to her?
4. Could a boy or girl in our world innocently do something that upsets the people around her as much as Balyet's flirtation did her family? If so, what would it be, and what punishment would it provoke?
5. The worst thing Jo can think of to say to Balyet when she is fighting for her life is to call her old. Is this fair?

Would any other words have worked as well?

6. Terry and Lance's presence apparently helped bring Balyet near the camps. When she was a real, living girl, Balyet liked to flirt with young men. Why then does she ignore them and concentrate on luring a toddler and a girl to her?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many cultures have legends of playful and dangerous spirits who lurk in lonely places. Find and read a story about one from Native American lore, from Greek mythology, or from some other similar source. Write a short paper telling how that spirit and its story resembles Balyet, and how it is different.
2. Balyet contains several characters and situations which are not followed very far. How do you suppose Kevin's parents felt when he disappeared, and then Jo brought him back so cold and white? How much do you think Terry and Lance knew about Balyet and the way she was calling to Jo? How is Jo's mother going to react to the whole adventure when she comes back—or will she even hear about it?
3. The story mentions Mrs. Willet's booliah stones and her mission to tend the hidden sacred places. Read some more about Australian aboriginal legends and beliefs. Write a report on how the Aborigines perceived their land and how Mrs. Willet's tasks relate to these beliefs.
4. Draw a picture showing how you think Balyet must have appeared to Jo and Mrs. Willet. Or draw a map of the places mentioned in the story, showing the limits of where Balyet was able to go.
5. There are many famous stories in myth and literature where a forbidden flirtation or love affair leads to tragedy, as Balyet's did. Sometimes it is mainly the participants who suffer, and sometimes their families or the whole society does also. List at least five of such stories that you know about. For each one, tell why the match was against the rules, and what happened as a result.

For Further Reference

De Montreville, Doris, and Elizabeth D. Crawford. "Patricia Wrightson." In *Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978: 355-356. Although somewhat dated, this article is valuable for the autobiographical sketch in which the author explains how she came to love literature and to write.

Fader, Ellen. "Balyet." In *School Library Journal* 35 (April 1989): 120. Short, mostly favorable review pointing out how the author has added to the original legend, and her creative combination of ancient folklore with modern characters.

Heins, Ethel L. "Balyet." In *Horn Book* 65 (July/August 1989): 143. Appreciative review which summarizes the plot and pays tribute to Wrightson's clear and brilliant style.

"Wrightson, (Alice) Patricia." In *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 36. Detroit: Gale, 1992: 462466. This long article includes biographical data, a list of the many awards won by the author, discussion of some of her works (although not Balyet), and a lengthy guide to further resources.

Related Titles

Many of Wrightson's books draw on the same body of Australian aboriginal mythology as Balyet does. The trilogy of *The Ice is Coming*, *The Dark Bright Water*, and *Journey Behind the Wind* features other legendary creatures, such as the ninya or ice people. *Moon-Dark*, like *Balyet*, builds a haunting and mystical spirit world in a remote landscape. *Balyet* tells a unique story, however; there is no carryover of characters or time-lines from the other books.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996