

# Beauty Short Guide

## Beauty by Robin McKinley

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## Overview

In *Beauty*, McKinley ingeniously recasts the familiar tale of "Beauty and the Beast" so that it easily stands on its own as an absorbing novel. Both central and peripheral characters are convincingly and sympathetically drawn. McKinley skillfully mixes joy and sadness, contrasting Beauty's ominous departure from her family with the festive, exultant scene of her wedding. Perhaps McKinley's greatest talent is an ability to impart suspense to a story whose outcome is known in advance to most readers.

Underlying the events of the story is the revelation that beauty lies within a person, and is not a matter of mere physical appearance.

## About the Author

Jennifer Carolyn Robin McKinley was born on November 16, 1952, in Warren, Ohio. Her mother was a teacher and her father a sailor in the U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine. McKinley caught the travel bug as a young child, adapting to life in a navy family that never settled in one place for more than two years.

McKinley attended Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from 1970 to 1972, and in 1975 received her bachelor's degree from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. After graduating, she taught secondary school, worked in a bookstore, and did editorial work for a publisher. In 1981 she moved to a horse farm in Massachusetts, where she indulged in a pleasurable combination of physical exertion in working with horses and imaginative endeavor in writing fiction. She currently lives in Maine, surrounded by her huge book collection.

McKinley's fiction for young adults reflects her interest in fairy tales and folklore. Her first novel, *Beauty*, retells the traditional fable of "Beauty and the Beast." It was highly praised by reviewers and selected for the "Best of the Year List" by *Horn Book* magazine in 1978, establishing McKinley as a promising young writer of fantasy. Her subsequent novels and short stories have all been fantasies, some original and others creative reworkings of old tales. *The Hero and the Crown* was named an American Library Association Notable Book in 1984 and received the 1985 Newbery Medal.

## Setting

A brief opening scene introduces Beauty's family—her father and three sisters—who live in wealthy circumstances. Their lives are changed abruptly, however, by the devastating loss of the father's merchant ships, which leaves them virtually penniless. They move to the countryside to live more simply, and McKinley's carefully chosen details render the family's new rural environment believable.

In contrast to the family's simple home is the dark, dangerous forest that lies behind the farm house. Although he has been warned against entering, the father takes a short cut through the forest on his return from a long journey. There he discovers a mysterious castle occupied by the Beast. The subsequent action of the novel unfolds in this remarkable castle in an atmosphere of enchantment. Doors open themselves, candles light themselves, and clothes put themselves on. When Beauty comes to reside there, she finds that, no matter where in the huge castle she happens to be, her room is always just around the corner.

# Social Sensitivity

Although the reader learns of the spell that is cast on the Beast, the evil magician never actually appears on the scene. In general, McKinley's vision of human nature is a positive one, with instances of loyalty and courage on all social levels. As an example of loyalty, the Beast's two female servants, who remain in his castle as breezes, cheerfully serve Beauty because of their devotion to the man who has become the Beast.

The story is also essentially without violence. Storms may destroy the ships that provide the family income, and forests may house imposing figures who exact bizarre penalties for trespassing, but overall, Beauty takes place in a world without war or politics, a world of a vaguely distant past when life was more simple.



## Literary Qualities

For a first novel, Beauty demonstrates considerable literary sophistication. The author has a sharp eye for descriptive details and a flair for the striking use of simile and metaphor. She describes the scent of the country air: "the breezes often stirred the piney, mossy smell of the forest with the sharp smell of herbs, mixed in the warm smell of fresh bread from the kitchen, and then flung the result over the meadow like a handful of new gold coins." To depict a moment of painful silence, she writes: "The world was as still as autumn after a winter's first snowfall, and as cold as three o'clock in the morning beside a deathbed."

McKinley's descriptions of the Beast's castle mingle mystery with awe and humor. The sense of silent and invisible presences is captivating, as doors open and teapots pour themselves in a disarming fashion. A humorous touch involves the library, with its stacks of books not yet written.

The author's use of incremental repetition in the Beast's proposals of marriage and Beauty's refusals is poignantly effective. With each refusal, the reader becomes more sympathetic with the Beast. The potential for love in this relationship is paralleled with Grace's strong and abiding love for her longmissing fiancé Robbie.

The reader's perception of Beauty is enhanced by McKinley's effective use of first-person narration. Most of the events involve Beauty directly; those that take place out of her presence, while she is in the castle, are revealed by the Beast's magic mirror, which projects images of distant happenings.

Aided by a cast of appealing characters, McKinley piques the reader's interest immediately with such twists on the tale as the revelation that Beauty is not physically beautiful at all, but only named that out of childish whimsy. The author's descriptions of settings and episodes—such as the enchanted nature of the castle, and the newly impoverished family's struggle for survival—contribute to the reader's renewed enjoyment of familiar material.

McKinley's use of symbolism further enhances the story. The forest behind the family dwelling is clearly a magical and dangerous place, and comes to symbolize the young heroine's journey toward self-knowledge. Beauty's love of books and roses endows those items with deeper meaning—the beauty of roses is external, whereas the beauty of books resides within. Beauty's love of roses leads to her meeting with the Beast; her love of books is shared with him in the castle's prophetic library.

# Themes and Characters

The pervasive theme of McKinley's novel is the inner nature of true beauty.

Integral to this theme is the contrast of appearance and reality. Interestingly, the principle of interior beauty applies equally to the maiden and the bestial figure she eventually marries. The heroine is named Honour at birth but later nicknamed Beauty. The nickname of Beauty is in fact ironic, since the heroine is plain and somewhat boyish looking, particularly when compared to her handsome sisters, Hope and Grace.

Her decision to live with the Beast in order to save her father's life, however, reveals an inner spiritual and moral strength. Similarly, the Beast, who is furred and clawed, turns out to be a gentle, caring, considerate, intelligent, and cultured individual.

Personal integrity is also important in this novel. For example, when the father agrees to return with his daughter to the Beast's castle, no one attempts to cheat on the bargain. Integrity enters into the subplot of the sister Grace, who waits faithfully during the six-year absence at sea of her fiance Robbie. Integrity also characterizes the family relationships in the story. When financial hardship afflicts the family, the father and his three daughters stick together and work hard to survive. The author touchingly portrays a close-knit and generous family.

Both principal characters, Beauty and the Beast, are effectively drawn. Beauty is a likeable young woman, tomboyish and independent of spirit, yet considerate of family and friends. Modest about her appearance, she feels no jealousy of her sisters' attractiveness.

When she resides in the Beast's strange castle, she is polite and friendly toward him, accepting the gentle nature beneath his frightening exterior and in no way hinting that she is repelled by his more bestial characteristics. Her strong sense of independence, however, leads her to repeatedly reject his offers of marriage, until she suddenly realizes that her affection for him is actually love.

The unfortunate Beast, caught in a spell cast by an evil wizard, maintains his dignity and humanity under the most trying circumstances. He is gentlemanly, considerate of Beauty as a guest in his home, an interesting conversationalist, and in all a most appealing personality.

The other characters in the novel are sketched with a sure hand. The father is a kindly and honest man, determined to get a rose for his daughter from the Beast's garden, thereby setting the plot in motion. The sisters Hope and Grace are individualized far beyond the allegorical nature of their names. Ger the blacksmith, who eventually marries Hope, is an industrious man who willingly helps the impoverished family.

Beauty's horse Greatheart, a magnificent animal who follows her around like an overgrown dog, endears himself to readers with his joys and fears. Beauty's invisible



servants in the castle appear as "breezes," although the reader suspects all along that theirs is a human story.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is it possible to determine the time period during which the story takes place? What clues does McKinley offer?
2. How do Grace and Hope fulfill their allegorical names?
3. How is the father transformed after his trip through the forest?
4. Does Beauty actually grow, or does she only seem to grow during her stay at the castle?
5. How does Beauty's interest in ancient Greek mythology and literature relate to her adventures in the novel?
6. Why does it seem appropriate that the Beast cannot recall his name when he is transformed back into a man?
7. Why does Beauty immediately like the portrait of the young man that she sees? Does she recognize, consciously or unconsciously, the resemblance of the portrait to the Beast?
8. Why is the title of the novel simply Beauty? Why is it not Beauty and the Beast?
9. Where, how, and by whom is magic used in the story?
10. Who are the three couples referred to in the remark about a triple wedding at the end?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Contrasts between appearance and reality pervade this novel. Examine the significance of the clothing worn by the Beast, the clothing worn by Beauty, and Beauty's attitudes toward the clothing she is given to wear in the castle.
2. Dreams are significant in this story.

Which characters have dreams? What do the dreams mean?

3. There is an ironic parallel between Beauty's love of animals and her relationship with the Beast. Even the birds that are banished from the castle come to eat the seeds which she puts out for them. Does her appreciation of animals make it easier or harder for her to consider the Beast's proposal of marriage?

4. When Beauty's family objects to her determination to live at the Beast's castle, she consoles them by saying that she will be able to "tame" the Beast.

Does she "tame" him?

5. What characteristics do Beauty and the Beast have in common that lead first to their friendship and later to love?
6. How does the author make the Beast sympathetic, but not grotesque?

## For Further Reference

Guthrie, Frazer. "Robin McKinley, *The Hero and the Crown*." *Times Literary Supplement* (August 30, 1985): 958.

This lengthy review explores the major features of McKinley's most recent novel, discussing action, character, and dialogue in depth.

Heins, Paul. "Robin McKinley, *Beauty*."

*Horn Book* 55 (April 1979): 201. A sensitive review of the novel, with comments on its believable characters, inventive plot, and entertaining style.

McConnell, R. M. "Robin McKinley, *Beauty*." *School Library Journal* 25 (November 1978): 65. This reviewer notes the humor in McKinley's inventive narrative and recommends the novel as an appealing "fantasygothic."

May, Hal, ed. *Contemporary Authors*.

Vol. 107. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Entry on McKinley offers a brief overview of the author's life and works, with several quotations regarding her ideas about writing fantasy fiction for young adults.

Rosenberg, Merri. "Robin McKinley, *The Hero and the Crown*." *New York Times Book Review* (January 27, 1985): 29.

The reviewer's discussion of the author's use of Celtic and Norse myths and of Arthurian legend in *The Hero and the Crown* will also be of interest to readers of *Beauty*.

## Related Titles

After McKinley's first novel, *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast*, she wrote a collection of short stories called *The Door in the Hedge*. Two of the stories are original, and two are retellings of fairy tales. *The Blue Sword* is a fantasy novel set in an imaginary country called Damar. It was followed by another fantasy, *The Hero and the Crown*, which features a female protagonist. McKinley edited a collection of fantasy stories called *Imaginary Lands*, which includes one tale of her own called "The Stone Fey." All of these works reflect the influence of folk and fairy tales on the author's imagination. Sequels to *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown* are anticipated.



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