

# **Bird Bones and Wood Ash Short Guide**

## **Bird Bones and Wood Ash by Charles de Lint**

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## Overview

De Lint offers an unusual take on comic book superheroes, noting the cost to their lives a fanatical pursuit of evildoers entails, and he presents a new slant on what sort of superpowers such a hero would need. In "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," a woman is given unusual superpowers when she enters a fairy circle, and she uses these powers to hunt down child molesters and abusers. Her obsession with putting an end to the evils of child abuse costs her her job, her home, and even food to eat, but she struggles on.

## About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, the Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmit, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmit-de Lint, was a schoolteacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1961. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15, 1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he managed one until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends.

A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His *Jack the Giant-Killer* won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "Homer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for *The Little Country*.

*The Little Country* also was included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age, in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected *Trader* as one of its Best Books for Young Adults in 1998.

De Lint has become the quintessential crossover author: His writings intended for grownups have found a large audience among young adults much as the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Peter S. Beagle have; he doubles his crossover appeal because his writings for young adults have found an appreciative audience among grownups.

## Setting

There are two major settings in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash": a rural hillside and the fictional city of Newford, where many of de Lint's stories take place. The hillside is where Jaime took her lover Annie when Annie was dying; there, she found a fairy ring. It introduced her to some strange beings: "At first, Jaime knows them only as women with the faces of animals: mare and deer, wild boar and bear, raven and toad.

And others. So many others. Following her.... " And "Where they have been they leave behind a curious residue of dried blood and rose petals, tiny bird bones and wood ashes." From these beings, Jaime gains the power to enter other people's minds and make changes in them, and she receives animal powers of acute hearing and being able to see in the dark. When her life falls apart because of her fanatical devotion to stalking the night in search of evil, Jaime returns to the hillside and there learns that she is doing only half the job, which is why she ended up traumatizing a little girl she meant to help.

In Newford, Jaime finds many evil grownups who abuse children. The city itself is a large, complicated place, with a mix of rich and poor, of residential areas and industrial ones. Jaime creeps and climbs through all the areas by night; after she loses her job and home, she inhabits the alleys, living the life of a homeless, hungry woman. She meets social worker Chris Dennison in a dank, dark alley, where they form a partnership. She encounters Grant Newman in an apartment, where she learns about the evil in herself.

## Social Sensitivity

The motivation for Jaime's action is child abuse. A victim herself, she is driven to protect others from what she endured. Part of her anger stems from the death of her lover Annie, who wasted away; Jaime seems to feel abandoned by her lover and by extension, by love itself. Believing she has nothing else to live for, she almost destroys herself in her dark pursuit of evil.

The kinds of abuse endured by children in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" are mostly hinted at: sometimes the abuse is beatings, sometimes sexual, sometimes a mix. The very inclusion of the topic of child abuse in a story is likely to be controversial; it is a very sensitive social issue. Even so, it is an issue of importance to young adults—not only the ones who have been abused but to all young adults who may be acquainted with victims or abusers. De Lint cannot be said to have handled the topic delicately in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash"; in this novelette he offers up a revenge fantasy in the form of a costumed superhero, and typical of comic book superheroes, Jaime's solutions to child abuse tend to be blunt and direct.

During an expository pause in the narrative of "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," Jaime asserts: I never read superhero comics when I was a kid—not because they seemed such a guy thing, but because I just couldn't believe in them. I had the same questions for Superman as I did for God: If he was so powerful, why didn't he deal with some real problems? Why didn't he stop wars, feed the starving in Ethiopia, cure cancer? At least God had the Church to do His PR work for Him—if you can buy their reasoning, they have any number of explanations ranging from how the troubles of this life build character to that inarguable catchall, "God's will." And the crap in this life sure makes heaven look good.

This may well raise the hackles of some readers, although Jaime plainly is not being held up as a role model for young people. She is too wrongheaded for most of the narrative for that. On the other hand, this passage is reflective of de Lint's own views to some degree: In interviews he says he has an animistic view of spiritual life.

# Literary Qualities

In "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," de Lint employs alternating narrative perspectives, one from the first-person point of view of Jaime, the "I" of the narrative. This perspective has Jaime commenting on herself, her feelings, and her observations of others.

The other narrative voice is third-person omniscient, meaning a point of view that allows the narrator to describe anything in the story, even the thoughts of the characters. The result of this is very effective because it creates a powerful irony: The thirdperson narrator is merciless in its description of events, letting its audience in on Jaime's slow breakdown even as she gives breakdowns to others.

De Lint's borrowing motifs from comic books is likely to appeal to many young readers of "Bird Bones and Wood Ash."

Jaime cuts quite a figure in her costume: I used to laugh at the comic books Annie would read, all those impossibly proportioned characters running around in their long underwear, but I don't laugh anymore. The costumes make perfect sense now. My bodysuit has a slick black weave with enough give to let me move freely, but nothing that'll catch on a cornice or in someone's grip. The Thinsulate lining keeps me warm, even below zero. Black gloves, lined hood and runners complete the outfit. Makes one look like one of those B-movie ninjas, but I don't care. It gets the job done.

She is a dark avenger, something like Batman, only she does not need his gizmos to climb walls and discover evil. The evil she fights is very evil, indeed, without any mitigating factors, much like the straightforward evil of most comic book villains. In the hands of de Lint, she is not an absolutely good fighter of evil; she makes mistakes, and some of the evil she must fight is within herself, where she has internalized her hatred and made each of her attacks on a evildoer's mind almost a selfish act of revenge on those who abused and rejected her, rather than a pure effort to help a child.

Even so, dressed in her sleek costume, gifted with superpowers by the animas, and determined to protect children, she is a fine wish-fulfillment figure, a revenge figure for the weak who have been brutalized by the strong.



## Themes and Characters

Animism is a form of religious belief and is found in cultures as diverse as those of Native Americans and the Chinese; the gods and goddesses of Western religions before the advent of Christianity probably had their origins as animas similar to those Jaime encounters. An anima is a free-floating spirit. Usually, in an animistic religion, the universe is thought to be inhabited by a multitude of animas, most of which have little or no interest in human beings. In general, human beings are but an insignificant part of a vast spiritual world. Animas are often believed to inhabit animals of all kinds—hence the practice in animistic religions of apologizing to the spirits of animals that have been killed for food. Some animistic beliefs go so far as to say that everything has a spirit, including inanimate objects such as stones or mountains.

De Lint has adapted these concepts to his novelette of revenge and rebirth, emphasizing a matriarchal point of view in which the important animas are female. In this sense, Jaime is a sort of priestess without realizing it: She is visited by the anima and is given special powers to work their will on the world. In animistic beliefs, anima do not have to be benevolent—they can be evil; they do not even have to be interested in people one way or another.

For Jaime, "the women [animas] don't so much make her nervous as cause her to feel unbalanced"—and this turns out to be her major weakness. She enters the minds of men (she seems to find no evil women) and changes their innermost thoughts about themselves, changing them from abusers to meek, perhaps kindly men. Chris notes that chronic child abusers seem to change overnight into people who do no harm. Yet, Jaime's solution to the problem of individual abusers seems to have a significant flaw: She loses a bit of herself every time she works her powers on a mind. As the narrative progresses, it becomes a story of Jaime's "unbalanced" life. She neglects her personal life for her nighttime prowling, losing her job, spending all of her savings, losing her home, and not being able to buy enough food to stay healthy: "There are always more monsters," she explains. Her breakdown is gradual, but eventually she seems to become a lost woman, homeless and out of touch with reality. Near the end, she has fallen far enough that her violence against an abuser harms the child she is trying to protect; she is becoming that which she fights. Only when she realizes she must heal the victim even as she undoes the mind of the abuser does she restore balance in herself, learning that "self-empowerment has got nothing to do with what you can do to someone else."





## Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Jaime feel as though part of her has died each time she makes changes in an evil mind?
2. "Dried blood and rose petals./Bird bones and wood ash./It's all just metaphor for spirit—that's what Annie would say." What are these images metaphors for?
3. Why does Jaime kill Grant Newman? Why does Jaime think that killing him did more harm than good? Why would this be an important insight for her?
4. Jaime says the "war" of child abuse is "Fought not just physical, but in the soul as well." How well does "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" illustrate how the war is fought in the soul?
5. When Alice's daughter drives Jaime back to the city, Jaime says that her trip to the country was worthwhile because "I brought away some human contact." What does she mean? Why was the human contact of particular importance?
6. Annie says "that there's always a price. Nothing operates in a vacuum: not relationships, not the ecology, and especially not magic. That's what keeps everything in balance." How does this apply to "Bird Bones and Wood Ash"? Why is it important to Jaime? How does it apply to the novelette's themes?
7. What does Chris mean by "We're in the middle of a war and the freaks are winning"?
8. What aspects of "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" are borrowed from comic books?
9. Are Jaime's remarks about God appropriate to her characterization? What do they say about her personality?
10. When Jaime kills Grant Newman, has she committed murder?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jaime says, "I think it's something like two out of every three women have been sexually assaulted by the time they're in their twenties." What do scientific studies say the statistic is? Do they all define sexual assault the same way?
2. About child abuse, Jaime says, "It's not a war, it's a slaughter." What does she mean by this? How big of a social problem is the abuse she mentions?
3. What social services are available to help abused children? How effective are they? What could be done to improve the situation?
4. Jaime asserts that child abuse is about the "loss of dignity and self-respect." What do psychologists say about the effects of abuse on the dignity of a child? What are the long-term effects on a person's dignity? What can be done to enhance a victim's dignity and self-respect?
5. What is animism? How do anthropologists define it? How is it important to our culture? How does de Lint use the concept of animism in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash"? Is his presentation of animism faithful to real-life animistic beliefs?
6. It is through her work for the tabloid *The Newford Examiner* that Jaime encounters the fairy ring. She says that she and the tabloid's other writers would just make up stories. What are tabloids? What are their editorial policies? Who would be their audience?
7. Jaime says she was disowned by her family "when I came out." What does "came out" mean? What typically is a family's reaction to one of its members saying that she is a lesbian?
8. What are fairy rings? Do they have scientific explanation? What do folk traditions say about fairy rings? How has de Lint adapted the folk traditions to the fairy ring in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash"?
9. What do psychologists say motivates someone to abuse a child? Would what Jaime does to abusers stand a chance of working?

## For Further Reference

De Lint, Charles. <http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl>. An exceptionally fine author's website with information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and an FAQ (frequently asked questions) section in which he answers questions about himself and his views. In the FAQ page, he says, "My own beliefs probably run more closely to an idiosyncratic form of animism, which isn't to say that I actually believe that trees, stones, wells, whathave-you actually have souls, but at the same time everything certainly seems to have a spirit of some sort, something that goes beyond what we see when we simply look at it."

Green, Roland. Review of *The Ivory and the Horn*. *Booklist* (February 1, 1995): 993.

Green is unimpressed with *The Ivory and the Horn*, in which "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" appears.

Lipsig, Chuck. "Interview with Charles de Lint." De Lint says, "This interview first appeared in an on-line magazine called *Sphere*, albeit in a much altered form."

This version is found on de Lint's website.

In the interview, de Lint says, "I write in what I call a very 'organic' style of writing. In other words, I'm finding out every day what happens, the same way a reader would."

Review of *The Ivory and the Horn*. *Publishers Weekly* (March 27, 1995): 77. A brief, positive review of *The Ivory and the Horn*, in which "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" appears.

Schimmel, Lawrence. "An Interview with Charles de Lint." *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* 32 (Summer 1996).

This interview was conducted via written correspondence. Although the interview is extensive, it remains throughout well focused on de Lint's literary work.

In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world."

A copy is available on de Lint's Internet website.

Timonin, Mike. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint." *The Wordsworth* (January 1998). A longer version of this interview appears on de Lint's website. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."

## Related Titles

De Lint is a prolific writer of short fiction. Most of the events take place in urban settings, especially fictional Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life.

These stories often feature unusual people such as Jaime, whose magical abilities set her apart. Newford abounds with odd characters such as animals made human, fairylike people, and other figures based on folklore.

Most of de Lint's stories feature troubled heroines like Jaime, and they often incorporate elements of modern fantasy such as the comic book motifs in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash." Like "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," they tend to end with the main character having learned something important about herself. Lesbianism, touched on in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," is treated elsewhere in de Lint's fiction, notably in "Small Deaths" (1993), in which the main character's best friend is a lesbian.



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