# BlackJack Short Guide

## BlackJack by Leon Garfield

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.



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.

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Overview

Full of mystery and romance, Black Jack is a suspenseful, action-filled story. Written in a descriptive style, the story includes authentic historical details that bring its eighteenth-century setting to life without ever becoming dull. Touches of ironic humor, aimed mostly at self-important people, enliven the story.

Garfield endows his many unusual, quirky characters with believable personalities, making them recognizable as real people. His depictions reveal a tolerance for human frailty and a belief in every person's potential for good. Nevertheless, his characters are complex, suggesting that there is often more to a person than appears on the surface.

Black Jack explores the often subtle differences between good and evil and shows how difficult it can be to tell them apart. The divisions between kindness and cruelty, love and hate, truth and hypocrisy, trust and jealousy, knowledge and ignorance can be murky as each of these qualities sometimes masquerades as its opposite.

# About the Author

Leon Garfield was born on July 14, 1921, in Brighton, England. After attending grammar school in Brighton, he briefly studied art and then served for five years in the Army Medical Corps. He worked for twenty years in a London hospital as a biochemical technician while establishing himself as a writer.

He now lives in London.

Garfield taught himself to write fiction by imitating authors such as Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Andersen, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and Robert The Captain's Watch, 1971 Child O'War: The True Story of a Sailor Boy in Nelson's Navy, 1972 Lucifer Wilkins, 1973 The Golden Shadow, 1973 (written with Edward Blishen) The Sound of Coaches, 1974 The Prisoners of September, 1975 The Apprentices, 1978 Footsteps, 1980 (also published as John Diamond) The Wedding Ghost, 1985 (written with Charles Keeping) The December Rose, 1986 Louis Stevenson. He is usually categorized as a juvenile writer, but prefers to call his books "family novels," accessible to the intelligent twelve-year-old and still enjoyable for the adult.

After writing various works for adults, Garfield achieved his first real success with Jack Holborn (1964), originally submitted as an adult novel but published in shortened form as a juvenile book.

Garfield found he had an affinity for the eighteenth century and has subsequently published nearly thirty novels, mostly adventure tales for young adults, set in London or southern England during the eighteenth century, and some retellings of classic tales and myths. In 1980 Garfield completed The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Charles Dickens's unfinished novel, successfully matching the Victorian writer's style and spirit.

Garfield's books have received several awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal for The God Beneath the Sea, a retelling of Greek myths on which he collaborated with Edward Blishen.

Several of his books have been runnersup for the Carnegie Medal, including Smith, Black Jack, and The Drummer Boy.

# Setting

Black Jack begins in London in 1749 on a Tyburn Monday, a day when convicted criminals are hanged. Young Bartholomew Dorking, known as Tolly, joins the crowd gathered to witness the day's entertainment. Tolly is asked to guard the gigantic corpse of Black Jack, hanged as a highwayman. But Black Jack, who inserted a metal tube in his throat before the hanging, unexpectedly revives and runs from the law, taking Tolly along to help him until he regains his strength.

As the two work their way south to the seacoast, Black Jack tries to continue his thieving, murderous career. They spend some time with a traveling fair that stops in towns to sell trinkets, cheap jewelry, and a supposedly magical elixir. Tolly and Black Jack's adventures also take them to the elegant mansion of a wealthy family, a frenzied insane asylum, and a ship captained by Tolly's uncle.

Garfield merges historical fact with his fiction and even includes a vivid portrayal of the 1750 earthquake in London. His skillful descriptions bring to life settings unfamiliar to most twentiethcentury readers.

# Social Sensitivity

There is a great deal of suggested violence in Black Jack. The book's first scene occurs at a gallows where murderers and thieves are being hanged.

The novel's suspense hinges largely on threats of physical danger to Tolly and Belle, but the violence is not graphically presented. Although Garfield describes Black Jack's bruised, badly injured neck following his hanging, the actual hanging is implied rather than shown.

Black Jack enjoys killing people early in the novel, but he later sees the error of his ways.

The novel clearly affirms the worth of the individual and the necessity of evaluating each person individually rather than as a member of some category. The midgets are unsympathetic characters not because of their diminutive size but because they are "hard and unforgiving." Garfield criticizes Mrs. Mitchell and Mrs. Gorgandy not because they are women but because they are selfish and uncaring toward others. Both poor and wealthy people may be either generous or mean-spirited.

Just as the worth of a person is not determined by his finances, appearance, or gender, a person's title or profession does not necessarily make him or her admirable or trustworthy.

Black Jack encourages healthy skepticism in regard to the advice people give and claims they make. Near the end of the novel, the account of Mr. Carter's death that Tolly and Belle have accepted without question because it was offered by "professional" people turns out to be untrue. This realization sets both Tolly and Belle free, literally and figuratively. The need to keep an open mind about people, to think for oneself, and to question what one is told, is symbolized by the name of the ship on which Tolly and Belle sail away at the novel's end—The Philosopher.

# Literary Qualities

Black Jack tells of a boy's quest for personal identity and for a moral beacon to guide him through life. In Garfield's novels, journeys often symbolize moral quests. Tolly leaves the security of his uncle's home for the freedom of London and ends up with almost more freedom than he can handle when he travels with the unpredictable Black Jack, the eccentric members of the traveling fair, and the erratic Belle Carter. By the time Tolly returns to the safety of his uncle's ship, he has found his own identity and worked through his moral dilemmas: he has become an adult. His reunion with his uncle gives the story a circular structure, wherein the protagonist undergoes a series of developmental experiences but ultimately returns to the story's starting point.

Although Tolly provides the structure and purpose of the novel, he is not a particularly well-rounded character. He sometimes seems impossibly good and rarely displays a sense of humor. He is humble, however, seeming to "muddle through" the conflicts he encounters.

Thus, he becomes an appealing, if flat, character.

But the strengths of Garfield's style in Black Jack certainly overshadow any weaknesses. A careful observer of human nature, Garfield draws many memorable characters, and the historical setting emphasizes the timelessness of human truths. Vivid images, beautiful descriptions, and fresh language complement the tightly-constructed plot.

The book maintains a high level of suspense as the reader wonders whom Black Jack will murder next, if Belle will regain her sanity, and whether Hatch will succeed in his evil designs. Colorful descriptions capture the range of human emotions, including Tolly's terror of Black Jack, his love for Belle, his loathing for Hatch, and his pity for the deranged Mr. Mitchell. Touches of irony add humor and insight to the narrative. For example, when Mrs.

Mitchell asserts, "You just never know," Garfield comments, "Here Mrs. Mitchell knew what she was talking about . . . In her competent, assured way, she was something of an expert in ignorance."

Garfield demonstrates a mastery of narrative technique and figurative language, carefully choosing details to evoke moods and make scenes come alive. For example, he says that the poor homes in a London slum look "very like forgotten hulks, creaking at dry anchor in their dock gardens—these tall, dark, makeshift backs of houses—with, here and there, lines of light drawn round shutters like the remnants of gilding on high old poops." Garfield describes the sorrow of Belle's family about her affliction as "shadows that lurked at the back of their eyes—as if somewhere in the deep of their minds a black moth was forever fluttering its wings."

Often compared to the novels of Charles Dickens, Garfield's work has also received attention from critics tracing its roots in the works of novelists Henry Fielding, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Jane Austen. The complexity of human emotion and the universal themes encountered in Garfield's work prepare readers for literary greats such as William Shakespeare and Fyodor Dostoevski.

# Themes and Characters

Black Jack is filled with a variety of eccentric characters, including a twelveyear-old blackmailer, several traveling hucksters, and a "professional widow" who claims corpses of hanged criminals to sell to surgeons as cadavers. Tolly, the novel's central character, is a poor boy whose generous nature allows Black Jack to involve him in a series of frightening adventures.

BlackJack has spent his life waylaying travelers and killing them for their money, but he is not a totally unsympathetic character. Although he resents Tolly's attempts to reform him and sneeringly refers to the boy as his "little saint," Black Jack comes to have a grudging respect for the boy's principles. Initially, Tolly is terrified of Black Jack, but he also feels responsible for the convict.

When the two become separated, Tolly alternates between feeling relieved and wondering what the giant is up to.

Belle Carter is a young woman with a nervous disorder caused by a childhood illness. Her ashamed parents hide her away at home and then ship her off to an insane asylum where she will be out of sight and mind. She escapes, however, when Black Jack attempts to rob the coach bearing her toward the asylum. With the help of Tolly and some members of a traveling fair, she recovers her sanity, and she and Tolly fall in love.

Twelve-year-old Hatch makes his living with the traveling fair, demonstrating the unscrupulous Dr. Carmody's Elixir of Youth. Hatch drinks the elixir and deftly switches places with Dr. Carmody's baby daughter, thus convincing prospective customers that he has suddenly grown younger. Hatch later develops a lucrative blackmail scheme of his own, targeted at both Belle's father and the owners of the insane asylum.

Finally, he gets a job in the asylum, where he can enjoy teasing the residents while making money by whatever devious means come to hand.

Some of Black Jack's themes recur in many Garfield novels. A favorite Garfield motif, the "search" theme, involves a young person's quest for knowledge, a sense of identity, or a system of values.

Through most of the book, Tolly simply adopts his uncle's values, and Belle even teases him about repeating his uncle's adages, such as "Shun great happiness; then you may avoid great grief." In time, Tolly comes to realize that he must determine his own values.

Another frequent Garfield theme is the ambiguity of good and evil, or of appearance and reality. For example, Mrs. Mitchell seems a kindly soul until it becomes obvious that she is actually torturing the mentally ill patients she pretends to help. The deception practiced by Carmody and Hatch proves relatively harmless when compared to some of the more subtle duplicities in the novel. As in many other Garfield works, an adolescent

boy is confused by the changing values he finds in the adult Black Jack world and must find his own answers to moral questions.

Good does overcome evil in Garfleld's novels, however. Tolly's goodness eventually infects the murderous Black Jack, and at the novel's end the convict is a changed man. The evil Hatch dies for having schemed once too often, and Belle gains her sanity and freedom.

Tolly and Belle demonstrate the power of love by conquering her madness.

When Belle voluntarily enters the asylum, mistakenly believing that she is not cured, Tolly's persevering love ultimately reunites them.

Garfield's novels frequently satirize "respectable" institutions and their official representatives. Black Jack takes aim at medical personnel, apothecaries, and the clergy. When Black Jack and Tolly seek an apothecary to treat the giant's badly wounded neck, Garfield ridicules the apothecary: "Like his betters, the physicians, the apothecary had the trick down pat of never addressing a patient save through a third party—as if sickness made them too ignorant to be spoken with direct." The owners of an unspeakably awful insane asylum, Dr.

Jones and Parson Hall are even more reprehensible than Dr. Carmody with his "magical" elixir or than the opportunists who hawk "earthquake pills" that supposedly ward off injury by the earth's tremors. Jones and Hall not only allow mistreatment of their wards, but also continue charging fees for the care of patients who have long since died.

Clearly, professional status is no guarantee of high character.

# Topics for Discussion

1. How does Black Jack survive the hanging? Does his method seem believable? Why or why not?

2. Throughout the story, Garfield frequently describes Dr. Carmody, especially his head. What do his physical characteristics reveal about him?

3. What is Hatch's job with Dr. Carmody? Why is Tolly not very good at it?

4. Mrs. Arbuthnot constantly foretells some form of impending doom for Dr.

Carmody. Why? Do her prophecies ever come true?

5. Before Belle ever appears, her insanity is described. It soon becomes obvious that she cannot keep her thoughts straight. Why does she get better? Is her transformation believable?

6. Though the story takes place almost entirely on land, the novel is full of seafaring metaphors. Find some of them and explain how they add to the story.

7. When Belle remembers who she is, "a plague of cheerfulness" overtakes those around her. Is this an apt metaphor? Why or why not?

8. How has Black Jack changed when he returns to the fair? Is Tolly right in not trusting him at this point?

9. When Black Jack tells Belle that her father has committed suicide, she says to him (about Tolly), "We both love him, don't we, Black Jack?" Does Black Jack love Tolly? Can you find evidence that he does?

10. What happens to Hatch at the end of the story? Is his ending appropriate?

Why or why not?

11. What do Tolly and Black Jack discover the true cause of Mr. Carter's death to have been? Are there enough clues given to know who killed him? If so, why are we not told directly?

12. Why is Tolly's uncle's ship called The Philosopher?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. One reason for the vividness of Garfield's writing is his use of figurative language; for example, seafaring metaphors are found throughout the novel.

Find as many examples of figurative language as you can and describe their function and effectiveness within the story.

2. The narrator describes Dr.

Carmody's traveling band as a "painted Argosy." In the myth Jason and the Golden Fleece, the Argo was the ship on which Jason sailed in his quest for the Golden Fleece. Later, the term "argosy" was used for any large merchant ship.

Find out more about Jason, and discuss how Jason's adventures relate to those of Tolly.

3. Garfield often gives his characters names that tell something about them.

For example, Hatch is always hatching up a new plan to advance himself. How do some of the other names in Black Jack symbolize or help explain something about the characters?

4. We are given a very clear description of Dr. Jones's insane asylum. Is this depiction fairly accurate for the eighteenth century? Have conditions changed much?

5. Black Jack calls Tolly a "little saint."

Is Tolly too good to be believable? What are his flaws?

6. Garfield often uses the way a character speaks to indicate something about that person. Examine the gram mar and diction of two or three characters and write a paper explaining what the characters' speech patterns reveal.

7. BlackJack gives a vivid portrayal of the 1750 earthquake in London. Find a historical account of the same event, and compare and contrast the two.

8. Write a paper in which you show how the novel develops one of its major themes, such as the ambiguity of good and evil, or the quest theme.

# For Further Reference

Garfield, Leon. "An Evening with Leon Garfield." In One Ocean Touching: Papers from the First Pacific Rim Conference on Children's Literature, edited by Sheila A. Egoff. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1979. Garfield explains how he develops a story, and he lists some writers he imitated in order to learn to write.

Holland, Philip. "Shades of the Prison House: The Fiction of Leon Garfield."

Children's Literature in Education 9 (Winter 1978): 159-172. This article examines individual works by Garfield, especially in terms of his major themes, style, and development as a writer.

Jones, Rhodri. "Leon Garfield" and "Postscript." In Good Writers for Young Readers, edited by Dennis Butts. St.

Albans, England: Hart-Davis, 1977.

These articles discuss Garfield's style, the influences on his writings and the importance of moral choice in his novels. Several specific books are discussed in detail, including BlackJack.

Natov, Roni. " 'Not the blackest of villains . . . not the brightest of saints': Humanism in Leon Garfield's Adventure Novels." The Lion and the Unicorn Black Jack (Fall 1978): 44-71. Natov compares Garfield's novels to those of earlier British novelists, including Charles Dickens, Henry Fielding, and William Thackeray. Among Garfield's novels discussed in detail is Black Jack.

Townsend, John Rowe. "Leon Garfield."

In A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1971. Discusses Garfield's mastery of the English language, the "lawless" quality of the world he creates, and the "vastly larger . . . than life" character of his stories.

# Related Titles/Adaptations

Recurrent themes in Leon Garfield's novels include the "search" and the ambiguity of appearance and reality, good and evil. Often, these major themes are interwoven: an adolescent hero must seek the truth about a person or situation. In Jack Holborn, the title character confronts two brothers, and the identity and genuineness of each is open to question. In Devil-in-the-Fog, a young hero is again faced with confusion between two brothers.

Smith involves a young pickpocket's attempts to understand a document he has stolen. Both Black Jack and Footsteps involve a search for individual identity and for true, unchanging values in a changing world. The Apprentices, a series of short novels, explores the master-apprentice relationship, depicting young people finding a variety of guides in their quests to achieve adulthood.

In The Sound of Coaches, a young man searches for his father while contemplating the kind of future that is right for himself. In The December Rose, a young chimney sweep is caught up in a world of ambiguity and confusion involving warring politicians and a nation's security. The boy's quest leads him through a series of suspenseful plot twists before he can determine which of many plausible characters is truthful.

Black Jack has been made into a movie of the same name that won the International Jury Award at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival. The film stars Stephen Hirst and Louise Cooper.

# 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 Baziotes 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



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