

Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death Short Guide

Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death by Richard Peck

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Contents

Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death 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

Peck has spun an entertaining yarn in Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death.

Adding an element of suspense to his comedy of manners about small town, USA, the ghost story links socially outcast Blossom Culp with handsome and wealthy Alexander Armsworth. Together these two freshmen, blessed with psychic powers, must find the missing mummy of a 3,500-year-old Egyptian princess and return it to her tomb, or face an ancient curse.

Humor, sometimes slapstick, plays an important part in the story. Coupled with Peck's gift of creating strong diverse characters and adroit plotting, the story moves quickly and culminates in a satisfactory ending. Underlying the suspense and humor in this fourth of the Blossom Culp series is the story of growing up in a small town and learning to think for oneself instead of being one of a group.

About the Author

Richard Peck was born on April 5, 1934, in Decatur, Illinois. He attended schools in the United States and England, earning a bachelor's degree in English from DePauw University in 1956 and a master's degree in 1959 from Southern Illinois University. He received less formal training, although just as important, while traveling among foreign cultures and during his stint in Germany with the U.S. Army.

Before he turned to writing, Peck edited textbooks, poetry, and nonfiction anthologies for young adults, and taught school. He would have continued to teach had he not become discouraged with the educational system, the watered-down curriculum, and teaching itself that metamorphosed, as Peck says, into something resembling "psychiatric social work."

Instead, he decided to reach young adults through a different medium, the written word. His experiences in the classroom taught him to listen to young people and understand their concerns.

His first young adult novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* (1972) focused on a young girl who is unmarried, pregnant, and hates the thought of giving up her baby for adoption. His subsequent novels, averaging about one a year, also touch on personal problems of today's youth. Rape, divorce, suicide, teen-age pregnancy, and death are topics in Peck's various realistic novels. His timeless themes of friendship, loneliness, and relationships with peers and family appear in all of his novels.

Peck does not moralize or preach; he entertains. Yet in each of his young adult novels, someone has to grow up.

The paths taken to maturity differ, as does the subject matter, but steps are taken toward responsible adulthood.

Many of Peck's young adult novels, including those in the Blossom Culp series, have received awards and honors. Peck won the Friends of American Writers Award, 1976, for *The Ghost Belonged to Me*, the novel which introduces Blossom Culp. The second book in the series, *Ghosts I Have Been*, was selected one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year, 1977; it was named one of American Library Association's Best Books of the Year, 1977; it was named an Outstanding Book of the Year, 1977 by the New York Times; it was listed as one of New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age, 1981; and it was chosen as one of Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association's Best of the Best Books 1970-1983. The fourth book in the series, *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death*, was selected one of Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year, 1986, and named as one of School Library Journal's Best Books for Young Adults, 1987.

Peck was named Illinois Writer of the Year for 1977 by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English.

Setting

The story begins in Bluff City in November, 1914. This small midwestern town has an up-to-date high school, complete with an electric bell system and a freshman class that has as rigid a social structure as the town itself.

Out-houses, early automobiles, traveling shows, and styles of dress reflect the setting of this early twentieth-century town.

Peck feels that the young are curious about the past, so he uses not only an historical setting, but also an Egyptian history project to give insights into another era and culture. Due to Blossom's gift of time travel, a portion of the book takes place fifty years earlier in an ancient tomb near Luhan, Egypt.



Social Sensitivity

In pre-World War I Bluff City, domestic issues overshadowed political conditions in Europe. On the forefront was the women's suffrage movement.

Peck presents a humorous view of this important social issue in United States history.

Mrs. Shambaugh believes it is the duty of every woman to tell her husband how to vote before he goes to the polls. It would be unthinkable for a woman to vote herself. Because bars and saloons are closed on election day, the polls are the place where men hang out and use profanity. On the other hand, Miss Fairweather, the new history teacher, is a suffragette. Only through coercion and a little blackmail does she convince the women of Bluff City, minus Mrs. Shambaugh, to join her on the suffragette's homecoming float.

Peck also humorously contrasts the layers of society in small towns. Although the people interact, high society does not admit knowing so-called lower-class people. For example, Mrs. Shambaugh would not explain that she got the Egyptian artifacts from Blossom's mother. On the same level, when Blossom was invited to the sisterhood meeting, the S.T.&B.F.S. girls ran ahead to Letty's house so they would not have to walk with Blossom.

Literary Qualities

Although *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death* is a tale of the supernatural, that aspect of the book is merely the surface story and meant to be interesting and entertaining for young adults.

The secondary story, that of growing up in a turn-of-the-century small town, transcends time and depicts the same high school social stratification that teen-agers face today. By providing leading characters that readers can look up to and giving a sense that problems can be solved, Peck has shown that not all of life is cruelly conformist and young adults can think for themselves. This lesson is not preached. Rather, Peck employs a humorous tone and sometimes slapstick relief to lighten his message. The initiation rites of Alexander's secret fraternity are a prime example.

Peck's strength lies in his convincing characters. A few well-chosen words describe a character physically, but the emotional makeup of a character is developed through the use of dialogue.

This technique is important because Blossom tells the story in the first person, and goes so far as to address the reader as "you." Too detailed a description by her would bias the story.

Dialogue gives a more balanced picture and the reader can understand a character's personality without having the author spell it out in the narrative.

Peck's lively dialogue is not colored with vulgar words, nor does he repeat pet phrases that teen-agers, then and now, use in their speech. Instead, he employs informal but standard speech, which although unrealistic, sounds right.

Historical events, including the suffragette movement which was gaining steam in 1914, give the story more meaning. Women gained the right to vote in 1920, after a forty-year fight for that right. Peck shows the strength of that movement in his portrayal of the suffragette's homecoming float.

The author also details the burial traditions of the ancient Egyptians.

Their belief in the afterlife led them to bury mummified loved ones in tombs with items such as food, clothes, and jewels, that were necessary for the next life.

Peck's tongue-in-cheek style presents a colorful look at early twentieth-century small town life. His gift for a humorous turn of phrase, strong characters, and tight plotting create an entertaining reading experience.

Themes and Characters

features a wide variety of characters, including the town thief, the town's most prominent woman, a suffragette, the ghost of an Egyptian princess, and members of the freshman class of Bluff City High School. Two freshmen are the major characters, Blossom Culp and Alexander Armsworth, but other classmates contribute to the story line.

Fourteen-year-old Blossom Culp is a loner, quick-witted, spunky, part-gypsy, very poor, and blessed with a gift: She is sensitive to other worlds and has, on occasion, traveled through time. Like other major female characters Peck has created, Blossom is intelligent and resourceful.

Blossom has a crush on classmate Alexander Armsworth, who also has the ability to understand the spirit world, although he constantly denies it. He lives on the right side of the tracks that separate his parents' property from the run-down shanty where Blossom and her mother live. Quite concerned with social standards and his position in life, he joins a secret fraternity, a high honor for a freshman boy.

The ka, or spirit self, of Princess SatHathor can only be seen by Blossom and Alexander. This ghostly character is not a blurred specter, but a carefully crafted distinct individual. She demands that the two freshmen find and return her stolen mummy and the precious items that were entombed with Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death her. If they do not cooperate, she will put a curse on them.

Letty Shambaugh is president of the freshman class and also president of the Sunny Thoughts and Busy Fingers Sisterhood, a parallel to Alexander's secret fraternity. Letty's position in life contrasts sharply with that of Blossom.

That alone would make them antagonists, but in addition, they both like Alexander.

The adult characters are sharply drawn and are dissimilar, although all are strong women. Mrs. Shambaugh is a loud, gossipy, high society matron.

At the other end of the social spectrum is Blossom's mother, who steals for a living. Somewhere between these two diverse characters stands Miss Augusta Fairweather, a no-nonsense, all-business, scholarly and sarcastic history teacher.

As in most of Peck's books, the young adult characters learn to think for themselves and, therefore, disregard peer pressure. For Blossom this is not a difficult lesson. Although she can be as susceptible as other fourteen-year-olds to peer pressure, she is normally an outcast and has to think for herself to survive the traumas of adolescence. She realizes that the present time gives her more trouble than the past or the future, which she can travel to on occasion. She also admits that she sometimes has a better view of other worlds than the one in which she lives.



Conversely, Alexander tries extremely hard to be as ordinary as everyone else and let the group think for him. Only when he is alone with Blossom and is forced to deal with the princess, does he present a more mature side to his nature.

This theme of thinking for oneself is carried throughout the book, from the beginning when Blossom decides that people belong to a club if they cannot make plans of their own, to the end when the mothers follow Mrs. Shambaugh, in typical mob fashion, to convince the principal that the history teacher should be fired.

The relationship between mothers and daughters is another frequent theme in Peck's books. In this instance Letty's and Blossom's mothers figure into the story as secondary characters, who are different, yet alike in many ways. They communicate with their daughters in dissimilar manners; they command disparate degrees of respect; and they certainly have opposite views on hygiene and nutrition. Yet both profess maternal feelings.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the prologue the reader is presented with a picture of a deserted tent show, hidden behind a grove of trees, and whipped by November's cold winds. Is the prologue necessary? What mood does it convey?
2. How does Blossom feel about her mother? Support your answer with examples from the book.
3. How does Letty feel about her mother? Again give examples from the novel.
4. Why is Letty president for life of the S.T.&B.F.S.? What type of girls are members? Why did they exclude Blossom from the sisterhood?
5. What is the sleep of death? How does the spirit of Princess Sat-Hathor explain it? Describe the ancient Egyptian burial traditions.
6. Blossom is sometimes mischievous. Why did she plant the worm in the sandwich? Why did she start the fire at the outhouse?
7. What was Blossom's topic for the history project, and why did she choose it?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The supernatural plays an important part in the novel. What supernatural devices are used? How did Blossom travel through time?
2. Miss Fairweather was not a substitute, that was immediately evident to the freshmen. Using examples from the book give reasons why the students knew she was a real teacher.
3. Compare and contrast the characters of Blossom's mother and Mrs. Shambaugh. How do they feel toward their daughters? How do they view their stations in life?
4. Alexander's initiation rites for his fraternity are a comedy of errors. What part did Blossom play in these events?
5. The women's suffrage movement had supporters and those who were vehemently against women getting the vote. Classify the major characters into those for and against the issue and their reasons for their stands.
6. Blossom Culp was an outsider.
Cite her philosophy on belonging to a group and back it with examples from the book.
7. What sort of relationship do Blossom and Alexander have? What relationship does Blossom wish for?
8. Whenever Alexander is around the princess, he whines. Yet, when he finds the mummy, his reaction is quite different. What caused this change in him?



For Further Reference

Cart, Michael. Review. *School Library Journal* (May 1986): 108. The reviewer believes the book is well crafted and humorous.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 55. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 126-138. The sense of the writer's mission is expounded in this comprehensive interview.

Crew, Hilary. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. Edited by Tracy Chevalier. Chicago: St. James, 1989: 768769. Crew describes Peck's writing as sensitive and understanding.

Levine, Susan. Review. *Voice of Youth Advocates* (June 1986): 82. This reviewer believes this book is special because of the interaction of Blossom with Letty and Alexander.

Maxwell, Margaret F. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. Edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick. New York: St. Martin's, 1983: 610-611. Maxwell believes Peck's honesty in dealing with teenage problems makes him "one of the best writers of the genre."

Metzger, Linda, ed. *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*. Vol. 19.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1987: 366-370.

The article contains a short biography and an interview.

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (April 1986): 155-156.

Calls this book "as fresh and funny as any in the series."

Wilms, Denise M. Review. *Booklist* (April 15, 1986): 1226-1227. Praises the book as "comedy and suspense with a bite."

Related Titles

Blossom Culp and Alexander Armsworth were first introduced to readers in 1975 with the publication of *The Ghost Belonged to Me*. In that novel the focus was on family life, although the ghost story element added appeal and developed Blossom's and Alexander's psychic abilities.

In the subsequent novels in the series, Blossom takes the narrator's role.

Ghosts I Have Been (1977) and *The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* (1983) focus on her life in the community, although Alexander always figures prominently. *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death* is the last, to date, in the supernatural series, which has been very popular with young adults.



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