The Bone Wars Short Guide

The Bone Wars by Kathryn Lasky

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Contents

Overview

The Bone Wars examines what happens to people caught up in surging tides of rapid change, as happened in the western United States in the 1870s.

It is an exciting story with many varied but realistic characters, each trying to realize a dream, even though that dream is sometimes nothing more than trying to hold on to what one has in the face of great odds. It features many characters from many different backgrounds, making each comprehensible to the reader with colorful descriptions and revealing vignettes of their lives—from English gentry to Native Americans. Some, like Chief Crazy Horse or Colonel George Custer, are actual figures from history. Others are fictional, but closely based on real people of the time: fossil-hunters Cunningham and Babcock are much like scientific rivals Cope and Marsh, competitors in the real-life "Bone Wars," as reported by the newspapers of their day. The two principal characters in the novel, Thad Longsworth and Julian DeMott, are totally fictional yet still quite believable young people experiencing a remarkable period of history when new frontiers of thought as well as new frontiers of land were being opened up.

The novel explores issues that began with the discovery of the New World and are still with us today, through the actions of its many characters. The opening of the American West was a boon for many, from prospectors for minerals to prospectors for science, even for those, like Calamity Jane, who sought simply to escape the confining customs of their own civilization. Yet the opening of the West also meant the end of the Native American's way of life. Lasky wants to convey the idea that progress has its costs, and that those costs should be weighed before certain intangible but nevertheless important aspects of a culture, like wisdom, diversity, and trust, are lost forever. The author demonstrates this principle for us in the actions of her two main characters, who risk everything in order to bring their discovery to the whole world rather than just a chosen few.

About the Author

K athryn Lasky was born on June 24, 1944 in Indianapolis, Indiana, the second daughter of Marven Lasky, a bottler, and his wife Hortense, a social worker. In Indianapolis, she attended a girl's school that encouraged writing but not necessarily imagination. Her earliest attempts at fiction she kept strictly to herself; it was not until reaching adulthood that Lasky accepted writing as a legitimate occupation for herself. She left home to attend college at the University of Michigan, earning her bachelor's degree in 1966.

Marriage to photographer and filmmaker Christopher Knight followed in 1971.

While pursuing a master's degree at Wheelock College, and with the encouragement of her parents and her husband, Lasky produced her first book, Agatha's Alphabet, a book for children which was published in 1975. Her next three books, also for children, were collaborations with her husband, who provided photographs for her texts: / Have Four Names for My Grandfather (1976), Tugboats Never Sleep (1977), and Tall Ships (1978). Lasky completed her master's degree in 1977, freeing up time for a family and more ambitious writing projects. She published her fifth book, My Island Grandma, in 1979, the year she had her first child, a son, Maxwell.

The 1980s saw Lasky's first honors and first novels. The Night Journey (1981), her first novel for children and a departure into more serious subjects, won the National Jewish Book Award for Children and made the American Library Association's list of Notable Books. Night Journey is the story of thirteen-year-old Rachel, a girl living a typically American girlhood until she is assigned the task of spending afternoons with her great-grandmother.

What could have been merely an adventure in tedium becomes an opportunity to hear an exciting and poignant story of the family's flight from persecution in the old country nearly a century ago, introducing the history of the Russian pogroms to a generation of youngsters who have never known such danger.

Dollmaker: The Eyelight and the Shadow, which appeared in 1981, was another joint venture between Lasky and her husband. It was followed by Jem's Island (1982) and Sugaring Time (1983), which was named a Newbery Honor Book and made the American Library Association's List of Notable Books. The story of the New England tradition of gathering sap from maple trees to make sweet syrup was also made into a filmstrip and a video.

The year 1983 was a banner year for Lasky for two additional reasons: the birth of a daughter, Meribah, and the publication of a new novel set in the Old West. Beyond the Divide is a gritty but absorbing adventure story; it received a New York Times Notable Book Citation and made the American Library Association Best Book List for Young Adults. A Baby For Max, written in 1984, made young son Maxwell as well as husband Christopher a collaborator in this book about baby Meribah's arrival.

Prank, published in 1984, became another critical success: it garnered a spot on the ALA list of Best Books for Young Adults with its portrait of an impoverished Irish-American family living in East Boston that must come to terms with its failures when one of its sons is arrested for vandalizing a synagogue. The year 1985 saw the publication of the novel Home Free, about a relocated midwestern teen-ager in rural Massachusetts and his autistic friend, as well as the critically acclaimed nonfiction work Puppeteer. Lasky also began in 1985 to publish adult books under her married name, Kathryn Lasky Knight. Pageant, the story of a Jewish teen-ager trying to find a place for herself in a gentile school, appeared in 1986 and made the ALA list of Best Books for Young Adults; Lasky received the 1986 Washington Post Children's Book Guild Non-Fiction Award for her body of work.

The Bone Wars came out in 1988; it is a provocative and entertaining blend of two of young readers' favorite eras: the Wild West and the Age of the Dinosaurs. It received the Pratt Library's "Youth to Youth Books" Award. Sea Swan also appeared in 1988, followed by the nonfiction book Dinosaur Dig in 1990. Her most recent publications are children's and adult books. Lasky currently resides with her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Setting

The Bone Wars is set in the northern Great Plains of the United States in the 1870s, when most of the region was untamed territory still freely roamed by Cheyenne and Sioux Indian tribes.

The states of North and South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana, where most of the action takes place, were not yet formed. The region is on the threshold of great change, as the familiar elements of the Old West—miners, railroaders, boatmen, farmers, townsmen, gamblers, cattlemen, and the U.S. Cavalry—were poised to enter the land in great numbers and claim it as their own. Into this stew pot of American expansion come the practitioners of the new sciences: geologists, botanists, and the "bone men"—paleontologists, who seek the fossils of ancient life forms to describe a long-ago real world stranger than most fiction.

The main characters in the novel come to the territories as part of three scientific expeditions, one English and two American, to comb the newly-discovered bone beds for the fossils of dinosaurs. Each expedition hopes to uncover previously unknown species, and before long the spirit of competition turns to the spirit of enmity when the leaders of the parties allow their professional animosities to become personal ones. Thad Longsworth, formerly a scout with a cattle drive out of Texas, finds employment with one of the American expeditions headed by Dr. Babcock, who has a long-simmering feud with Professor Cunningham, who heads another.

Julian DeMott accompanies his father, Dr. Algernon DeMott, from London.

Thad's and Julian's paths remain separate until the middle of the book, when they begin work on a secret joint project—the excavation of a spectacular fossil skull to be given to a new kind of museum: one devoted to the enlightenment of the average person rather than to creating collections seen only by a few specialists. In the meantime, one of American history's most famous battles 2854 The Bone Wars is in the making, as the Black Hills of South Dakota, sacred to the Sioux Indians and protected by treaty, are nevertheless about to be invaded by the U.S.

Seventh Cavalry headed by Colonel George Armstrong Custer. The two stories come together at the Little Big Horn, as Thad and Julian become the only non-Indian witnesses to the fate of Custer and his men.

Social Sensitivity

Lasky carefully treats sensitive issues in The Bone Wars. The first of these is violence. There is no way to honestly portray the American frontier, particularly that of the 1870s, without admitting that the vast plains of the West could hide the lawless as well as the law-abiding, and that there were people who took advantage of the fact. The opening chapter does include a murder of a defenseless woman, but it is told from the standpoint of a five-year-old hidden safely in an old quilt under the bed. The only facts of the crime scene that haunt little Thad are a couple of remarks overheard as he is taken from under the bed and cradled in Mr. Jim's arms, eyes averted from his mother's dead form. Those remarks come back to him in nightmares for years and years after. This chapter is less graphic and more genuinely sorrowful than most of the staged violence that youngsters today see in films and television, as well as the real thing seen in "sound bites" on the evening news every day.

Lasky emphasizes the shock and lasting grief felt by family and friends left behind after such a death, something that not every reader may be aware of but is doubtless important to understand.

The second sensitive issue is the sense of historical revision in the novel. Some of the historical figures are not portrayed as the heroic characters or villains that they were once regarded to be. In the years immediately after Custer's death, for example, he was revered as a great hero to people throughout the West. The Sioux people particularly suffered from the vengeance of Custer's admirers at Wounded Knee in the 1880s, where many were killed. It is important to note that the reassessment of this famous figure of the past is not the author's alone. There are numerous historians who now, with the perspective of a century's time, have decided to demote Custer along with a few other "Indian-fighters" from hero status. This may well be to the good. American history is replete with many genuinely admirable figures who may be all the more appreciated by the young reader when he can see that they accomplished what they did, not surrounded by perfect beings, but by both human successes and human failures, just as remarkable people continue to do today.

The third sensitive issue is the potential conflict between matters of science and matters of faith. The MenWho-Pick-Up-Bones are operating on different assumptions about geological time than those who rely on religious texts. Lasky does not try to sidestep this conflict by simply neglecting the spiritual dimensions of humanity, an easy but not really satisfying solution to the problem. In as trying a place as the frontier, matters of the spirit cannot be entirely ignored by those who hope to survive there; religious expression was widespread in the Old West, as churches were established early in most communities. Rather than choosing a conventional religious organization to represent this aspect of frontier life, however, Lasky has the Native American embody matters of the spirit.

In this novel the land itself is such a strong presence that it almost becomes a character on equal basis with any of the human characters; it is appropriate that the "church"

where the Indians commune with the spirit world is outdoors in the sacred country of the Black Hills. Again they come off well in comparison to other people in the novel, as they are willing to share their sacred lands, not for settlement or commerce, but for "making medicine," which is the closest equivalent in their culture to what the scientists of the dinosaur expedition are doing.

Literary Qualities

The Bone Wars is an exciting story of physical adventure set in the Old West, a time and frontier that fascinates not only Americans but people around the world. Beyond this, the story engages the mind with a hunt, not for gold, but for another kind of treasure—knowledge of the past, of strange and exotic worlds as real as our own, but almost unimaginably remote in time.

It engages the heart with finelydrawn characters that challenge stereotypes instead of relying on them. The cowboys are not automatically the good guys and the Indians on the warpath are not inevitably the bad guys.

Further, the novel portrays a spiritual confrontation between the sacred and the profane. The Black Hills are holy lands to the Native American, and the quest of the bone men for knowledge for its own sake is also pure. To use these things for one's own self-aggrandizement, as does Algernon DeMott in the field of science or Colonel Custer to forward his personal ambitions in politics, is to commit spiritual crime.

Crimes of a more tangible nature, such as the killing and attempted killing of innocents, soon follow.

The author uses lyrical passages of description and rich imagery to describe the people and land of the American West. Thad is first glimpsed by Julian from a train and described thus: His skin was burnished a deep coppery bronze. His eyes were gray-green, the color of the prairie grass, and they did not have the vacant stare of the station-platform Indians, nor the frenzied ecstasy of the gentlemen-travelers.

They were clear eyes, and Julian felt relief. To Julian, the eyes seemed to reveal a spirit with a depth that matched the scale and dimension of the land.

The young scout is a character that the reader will likely want to know better.

Likewise, Black Elk is an interesting personality; his eyes are those of a seer, "like dark pools shot through with light." The coveted Black Hills are "clad in lush forests of pine and spruce but at their base was a velvety green meadow splashed with the colors of a hundred different wildflowers." Lasky makes the reader feel why these lands inspire those who visit as well as those for whom they are native country.

Lasky also uses imagery and description to reveal the essence of her characters. For example, Abigail Custer "stood like a beautiful doll in her soft peach-colored gown." Her husband George is first seen by Thad as "a yellow blaze .. . a fringe of gold epaulets, stars and braid, then a thick cascade of curls . . . the figure of the man seemed to dissolve in the shadows, leaving the curls and gold fringe to hang in a kind of mysterious suspension." There is an aura of unreality to the Custers, from Abigail who seems incapable of interpreting the action around her for herself, relying exclusively on what her husband tells her, to the Colonel himself, who has much flash and

determination but not much horse sense, especially when it comes to his new opponents, the Plains Indians. The Custers exist together "within a bubble of golden light, apart and distant from everything else." It is a bubble that will soon burst. The gold associated with Custer, like the gold nuggets in whiskey that he gives to his Indian scouts to bribe them into staying in the Black Hill country when they know it is far too dangerous, are merely false signals to dazzle the eye while numbing the brain. The disaster to which he leads his company is thus foreshadowed early in the book.

An absorbing novel, The Bone Wars is carefully crafted to entertain while it makes its points. The author uses a well-known and beloved period of history as a stage for an exciting story and a cautionary tale about the hazards of prejudice. Those like Julian and Thad who see the world around them with clear and unbiased eyes survive and flourish; those who do not, like Julian's haughty father Algernon and the ruthless George Custer, perish spectacularly. Lasky creates exceptional depth by incorporating important characters whose mission it is to uncover the vast ancient history of the land into her story. Her characters grow just like living people do, especially Thad and Julian as they grow into young manhood, gradually separating from their elders and developing their own mission in life. All these things are woven together in a well-paced tale, rich in action and character that leads to a spectacular double climax and epilogue.

Themes and Characters

The Bone Wars depicts a multitude of diverse characters, many of them familiar types known to Saturday-afternoon devotees of the Western film: Indian warriors, cavalrymen, dance-hall girls, cattlemen, gold-miners, railroad men, river boat gamblers, and scouts. Into this familiar mixture come less familiar but equally realistic characters: the scientists of the dinosaur expeditions.

The two main characters are Julian DeMott and Thad Longsworth, both teen-agers. Black Elk, a thirteen-yearold Sioux medicine man and warrior who befriends Thad, is also an important, although not principal, character.

Julian is a young English aristocrat under the thumb of his domineering father, but who is surprisingly open to a less-stratified society when he encounters the freedom of the open plains of the West. Thad is a young scout and hunter, an orphan whose father is unknown and whose mother is a deceased prostitute. As backgrounds go, the two could not be less alike, but both are fired with enthusiasm in the hunt for dinosaurs, as well as the idealistic desire to share what they discover about these fantastic ancient beasts with the common man.

Algernon DeMott, who appears early in the book, is a brilliant scientist but arrogant in the extreme. We first meet him when he callously fires his son's tutor, the harmless Mr. Fry, because the poor man unwittingly mentions the name of a sculptor who interprets dinosaurs a bit differently from Dr.

DeMott. In civilized society he is bad enough, but unimpeded by any watchful eye on the plains of western America, Dr. DeMott displays a ruthlessness that becomes criminal in its depth when he plots murder in order to steal someone else's discovery. Whatever good qualities he has are too few to outweigh the bad. His evil seems all the worse because he has lived a very privileged life, unlike some men who become hard and ruthless because the only life they have ever experienced has been harsh and unforgiving.

A number of the adult characters in the novel, several in positions of authority, embody negative traits. General Philip Sheridan and Colonel George Custer served their country well during the Civil War of the 1860s, but out on the western plains they display an ill-founded arrogance and treachery toward people they do not consider quite as human as themselves—the Indians. Scientific rivals Babcock and Cunningham do not come off quite as badly, but their personal rivalry does make life all the harder for the other scientists and excavators who work for them. The river boat gambler Rap Brown, who helps Thad and Julian out of some tight spots, comes off better than many of those in more "respectable" professions.

The Indians in this book come off the better men. Outnumbered and outgunned by whites most of the time, they fight bravely to protect lands supposedly protected by treaty. Black Elk, undersized for his age and physically frailer than the youthful warriors

who surround him, nevertheless emanates a supernatural wisdom as a future medicine man. He befriends Thad early in the book, beginning a friendship that endures even through the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Crazy Horse, Little Big Man, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud—all famous names—appear as beleaguered men who are determined to resist the bullying of a larger power, even if that fight gains them little.

The major theme of this book is the importance of unselfishness and the willingness to share. These positive traits are embodied more in the younger generation—people like Thad and Julian, but also in people like Louis Woodfin, a youthful railroad magnate and one-time student of paleontology who wants to start the New World Museum, open to all, and Black Elk, willing to look beyond his own people to find a friend in Thad. The older generation, or much of it, seems obsessed with fame, power, and wealth, and it is they who inflict the most suffering and who suffer the most. Lasky does depict violence in this book, but except for the opening chapter, does not dwell on it.

It is not entirely clear why the book begins as it does, with a murder, but it does emphasize that life on the frontier was not as free and glamorous as many stories of the "Wild West" would have us believe. In addition, it re-enforces Lasky's contention that evil need not be returned for evil. Thad puts aside an understandable desire to avenge his mother's senseless death to become instead a man devoted to bringing good things, like an awareness of the vastness of time and the wonders to be found in the least obvious of places, to a young civilization in need of a sense of proportion, a sense of its true place in the wide world.

Topics for Discussion

1. Thad Longsworth gets a hard start in life: he is orphaned in a frontier town, spending his childhood working in a saloon with no opportunity for an education. Yet he goes on to become 2858 The Bone Wars not only a good and worthwhile person, but someone who contributes important discoveries in science to the whole world. What happens to him in the book that makes this possible?

2. The frontier experience brings out parts of a person's character of which he was scarcely aware before he arrived. What does it do to Julian DeMott? To his father, Algernon?

3. What has brought Jonathan Cabot and Oliver Perkins, young men from wealthy eastern families, into the study of fossils? The badlands of the Dakotas are a far cry from the comforts of upper-class Boston; why do they endure the heat, dust, and danger of the Western frontier just to look for old bones?

4. George Babcock, Nathaniel Cunningham, and Algernon DeMott, the leaders of the three fossil-hunting expeditions into the West, are all proud and ambitious men, and fierce, sometimes even ruthless, rivals. Many of us have been educated to believe that scientists are cool-headed, thoughtful, rational individuals; does the behavior of this trio of characters change your outlook on how science and scientists work? How?

5. How has Black Elk come to hold such a high place among the young people of his tribe? What special gifts does he have? How would he have been regarded if he had been born in, say, upper-crust Boston instead of an Indian tribe in the far West?

6. The Sioux held the Black Hills of North Dakota to be sacred lands. While they objected to miners hunting for gold there, they did not harm scientists hunting for the bones of ancient animals. Why do you think this was?

7. According to the novel, what kind of man is Colonel Custer? Is he a good military commander? If someone else had been in command of the ill-fated Seventh Cavalry, might their fate have been much different?

8. From the female characters that you meet in The Bone Wars—women like Delia Longsworth, as well as actual historical figures like Calamity Jane, Abigail Custer, Louisa Cody, and White Cow Sees—what do you make of the women of the Old West? Do any of them seem much alike? Who did you like best? Who the least? Why?

9. Why does the Triceratops skull take on such importance for Thad and Julian? Do you think it was worth all the trouble they went through in order to get it to New York City? Why?

10. Algernon DeMott is a highly educated man from England, and his assistant, Bobber Henshaw, is an uneducated frontiersman from America, yet they become quick and

unholy allies in The Bone Wars. What do they have in common with each other that makes this possible?

11. Rap Stevens is a professional gambler—an unusual and often unrespectable profession in the Old West.

Why do Thad and Julian become involved with him? Is he a good man, a bad man, or a little of both?

12. Compare General Philip Sheridan and Chief Red Cloud. Do the same for Chief Crazy Horse and Colonel George A. Custer. Which of them comes off the better men in the novel? Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. An important part of writing a good historical novel is making sure that one's characters behave in a way appropriate to their own era, rather than the author's. How well do you think Lasky does in this regard? Give examples to support your answer.

2. In a meeting with Bill Cody late in the book, Thad hears him claim that it is the white man's destiny to spread everywhere in the West, treaties or no treaties. What results come of attitudes like this in the novel? In your opinion, are these results good or bad in the short run? In the long run?

3. There are funny moments in the novel, such as when Thad visits the Cody family, is hit in the jaw with a dead chicken intended for Mr. Cody, and must spend part of the afternoon dressed in a petticoat. Considering the many serious and even hair-raising events in The Bone Wars, what effect do such humorous interludes have on the reader? Why do you think Lasky included them in her novel?

4. The vistas and people of the Old West inspired artists and writers from many parts of the world. Lasky is particularly known for her ability to describe, to give her readers a comprehensive picture of her characters and their world in words. Find and analyze a few descriptive passages from The Bone Wars. How does the author get her vision across to the reader? Consider focus, colors, textures, and scents.

5. Who were some of the figures involved in the real-life bone wars of the late nineteenth century? Are there any parallels between them and the fictional figures in The Bone Wars?

6. What have been some of the discoveries made by paleontologists in the Black Hills?

7. What was the real-life fate of Black Elk's people?

For Further Reference

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In Something About the Author. Vol.

13. Detroit: Gale Research, 1980: 124125; and Reicha, Susan M. "Kathryn Lasky." In Something About the Author. Vol. 69. Detroit: Gale Research: 129-132. These two articles together provide basic biographical information about Lasky, her awards and honors, a list of publications and reviews of those publications, two photographs of her, two photographs of book covers and one of an interior illustration, and two "sidelights" sections. The early sidelight section is brief and consists of quotations from the author; the later article is a much longer and meatier review of the author and her works.

"Kathryn Lasky." In Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators. Edited by Sally Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989: 160-161. This short article consists of a biographical sketch and a photograph of the author.

"Kathryn Lasky: The Bone Wars." In Book Review Digest 1989. Edited by Martha T. Mooney. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1990: 958-959.

This entry contains several excerpts from critical reviews of the book.

"Kathryn Lasky." In Children's Literature Review. Vol. 11. Edited by Gerald K. Senick. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986: 112-122. A lengthy article, this piece contains a good commentary by the author herself on her books and how they were written, and a gold mine of book reviews about her work from 1976 to 1986.

Related Titles

Those who found The Bone Wars to be rewarding reading may find Beyond the Divide, an earlier title of Lasky's also set in the Old West, an interesting tale.

This novel vividly describes the adventures of a teen-age Amish girl of the 1840s who migrates west in a wagon train. Meribah Simon leaves Pennsylvania and the family farm to accompany her outcast father on a grueling twothousand mile journey from St. Joseph, Missouri, across the great continental divide of the Rocky Mountains, to the west coast and California. On this journey, as recorded in her drawing book, the young woman encounters sublime natural vistas, meets her first Indians, struggles across difficult terrain, and witnesses both the best and the worst in human nature. By the end of the book, Meribah has established herself as a physically tough and mentally independent personality—a genuine survivor.

The stark realism of Meribah's story is not for everyone. While The Bone Wars and Beyond the Divide gain much of their fascination for the reader from the author's well-researched gritty detail of life in the Old West, the earlier book has more dark incidents and little humor. Younger or very sensitive readers may find the darker aspects of the novel overwhelmingly sad, particularly the afterword which tells of the destruction of an unobtrusive Indian tribe, and it may actually decrease their interest in the era rather than sparking it. The older reader may find it an intriguing saga which attempts to expand our understanding of the hardships endured by many before our modern era.

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