Castle in the Air Short Guide

Castle in the Air by Diana Wynne Jones

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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".

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Overview

Castle in the Air treats issues of difficult family relations and enslavement by evil powers in an entertaining fantasy that resembles The Arabian Nights.

It involves a humble young merchant named Abdullah, a magic carpet he buys from a stranger, and a beautiful princess who is whisked away by a djinn. As the tale unfolds, Abdullah must learn to maneuver the carpet, then confront the troublesome relatives of his deceased father's first wife.

He must, above all, seek the beautiful princess because she wants to marry him. Abdullah energetically wends his way through numerous, fast-paced, and sometimes rollicking adventures with magical characters who are hardly ever what they seem.

Abdullah is a believable character set in an intentionally improbable tale.

He resembles anyone in the real world who faces a humdru m job, bickering relatives, and evil forces that try to thwart good ends, but yet still daydreams of romance and adventure.

Through his experiences and his reactions to them, Jones suggests the qualities that can bring personal freedom and happiness to anyone. Abdullah faces evil powers and enslaving social customs with persistence, resilience, courage, loyalty, and a sense of justice. Jones also suggests, largely through Abdullah's relationship with his princess, that the real world needs women who will assert themselves as men's equal partners—and men who will respect them for doing so.

About the Author

Diana Wynne Jones was born on August 16, 1934, in London, England. She has described her childhood as unusual and disorganized, and her mature writing developed from this perspective. When she was five, her parents undertook the first of several dislocations because of the outbreak of World War II. Jones spent some months with her grandparents in Wales where she heard incomprehensible, rolling Welsh syllables and paragraphs she could never forget.

She has said that she listens to them when she is writing, like a flow of music in her mind.

Her parents, by 1943, settled the family in a rural Essex village to manage a young adult conference/cultural center and school there. They chose to live in the main residence apart from Jones and their two younger daughters, whom they housed neglectfully in an uncomfortable hut. The three sisters, as avid readers, could never get enough books. Her father kept children's novels by Arthur Ransome locked away, and he presented his daughters with just one each Christmas. This probably encouraged Jones to develop her storytelling skills because, by the time she was fourteen, she wrote her own narratives to read aloud to her sisters.

Jones went to St. Ann's College, Oxford in 1953, and she found the lectures by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien inspirational. After her marriage in 1956 to English scholar and professor John Burrow, Jones took up writing again. She felt that her three sons needed good books to read, and she wanted to write exciting and perceptive ones for them to learn from.

She rejected realistic treatments as too painful for young readers. Jones chose the medium of humorous fantasy as the way to help them cope with problems and the difficult adults in their lives.

Publishers at first rejected her stories because Jones broke with tradition. She portrayed adults as the imperfect, thoughtless, and frightening figures they can really be. She succeeded with several plays and an adult novel Changeover (1970) before her first children's book Wilkins' Tooth (later titled Witch's Business) was published in 1973. Since then Jones has published short stories and over thirty books, concentrating on novels for children and young adults. Honored or award-winning titles include Dogsbody, Power of Three, Charmed Life, Archer's Goon, Fire and Hemlock (1985; see separate entry, Vol. 6), and Howl's Moving Castle (1986; see separate entry, Vol. 7).

Jones typically enriches the realism in her stories with mythical or fairy tale characters like witches, ghosts, enchanted animals, and other highly imaginative creations. Through the reactions of her characters to magic, Jones explores such serious themes as the abuse of power, tensions between young people and adults, the need for courage or compassion, the battle of good against evil, and the nature of time. Her

novels all have the extra dimension of a supple humorous touch that makes them exciting, suspenseful, and fun to read.

Setting

The story begins in the Sultanates of Rashpuht, a land of desert and camels.

Cheating is here "a way of life." A child learns to "guard its rights, for it is certain no one else will guard them."

A man may have more than one wife, but a woman only one husband. Everyone speaks to a business associate, family member, and enemy or friend in a flowery speech that conveys exaggerated politeness. Everyone believes in the workings of Fate, and any prophecy is regarded as truth.

In this land, at the Bazaar in the city of Zanzib, from a humble booth, Abdullah buys and sells carpets for a living. He bought the booth with a little money inherited from his deceased father. His father, who was disappointed in him, left the remaining money and a large carpet emporium at the Bazaar's center to relatives of a first wife who was not Abdullah's mother. Although he is rather content with his lot, Abdullah spins daydreams to forget his encounters with those relatives.

Abdullah fancies himself the son of a mighty prince from a distant eastern country. He imagines that a pistolwielding bandit carried him away at the age of two. He pictures himself a frightened boy running off into the desert, where he is found by the man whose money provided him the dismal booth. Abdullah dreams of a perfect princess, and he weaves elaborate details into his mental images of her palace and the one from which he imagines he was taken.

He is in the process of constructing magnificent imaginary gardens for his princess when an intruding stranger offers to sell him a magic carpet.

Abdullah's life changes suddenly that night, as the carpet begins to fly him in and out of his dreams. He finds himself sometimes in the booth, sometimes in places of danger or delight: splendid palaces and gardens, a Sultan's dungeon, a bandit's oasis, a cold northern land called Ingary, and a wizard's home at the royal city of Kingsbury. Eventually Abdullah ar rives at an elusive, cloud-shaped castle in the air, and here his destiny is sealed.

Social Sensitivity

Jones treats family and gender relations with intelligence and considerable sensitivity. The impact of painful family relationships is greatly softened when the situation involves fantasy and half-brother djinns. Abdullah, the major realistic character, is independent and does not directly conflict with a parent. The disappointment of father toward son, represented by the modest inheritance, is resolved by the parent's absence and their clear misunderstanding of Abdullah's real talents. Abdullah clashes with relatives who are only remotely his, those attached to his father by a previous marriage, and they are shown to be selfish and uncaring.

The rebellion of Flower-in-theNight against her father is direct, but his wishes for her clearly violate her rights of choice and happiness. Jones thoughtfully sets the disobedience in the context of fantasy, and uses the situation to inform her theme of women's rights. The Sultan's claim that women "do not count" must be seen as harsh. Part of the wisdom expressed in the novel comes from portrayals of balanced gender relations. The novel's romantic relationships make it clear that Jones does not exalt disobedience of parents, but rather seeks to properly weigh parental wishes against the competing imperatives of respect, equality, and freedom for children of both sexes.

Jones is also fully aware that free expression can be taken to unpleasant extremes. She makes the point humorously, through a ludicrous remark of Abdullah's next-door neighbor, the fried-food cook Jamal. When Abdullah suggests that his neighbor should be careful about whom he allows his hostile dog to bite, Jamal replies that he believes in free will. "If my dog chooses to hate the whole human race except myself, it must be free to do so."

Hilarity dances through the pages of this novel, and the few violent scenes are described in fairly passionless terms, with little serious involvement on the part of characters who matter.

One violent episode is a robbery and murder attempt, which is thwarted by means of physical struggle and a wielded knife. The episode is quickly over, and described with scant detail.

On another occasion two men are reported to have been hanged by villains, but they reappear in their true forms as angels. A pivotal scene depicts blood shed from the nose of a djinn, but the cause is a dog and the overall presentation is humorous.

Some readers, their parents, and guardians, may wish to be cautioned about the few scenes involving alcoholic beverages. Abdullah is present at a feast of bandits who drink the Sultan's wine, but the drink does not impress him. "Wine did nothing for thirst except make it worse." The ambiguous Strangian soldier introduces beer as "wonderful stuff," but the reader does not identify with this character. It is Abdullah who determines the scenes, and he drinks beer when nothing else is available. To him the beer tastes

like something "from the bladder of a camel," perhaps even a "camel that was rather unwell."

Another possibly bothersome aspect concerns the two brides chosen for Abdullah by Fatima, his father's hated relative. They are depicted as "extremely fat," tastelessly dressed, and quite silly. Abdullah is "revolted" by them in comparison to Flower-in-theNight, whose superior qualities include "being beautiful (and thin)."

Young readers should be cautioned against the casual interpretation that Jones intends to mock girls who are not perfectly slim. She makes it clear that intelligence is a quality the fat brides do not possess. Abdullah perceives that the fat brides "have hardly a brain cell between them," and he is repelled by their giggling and their attempt to bully him by crying.

Furthermore, Jones portrays the group of captive princesses, though of all shapes and sizes, very favorably— assertiveness and courage are the winning qualities they share. When the Strangian soldier is allowed to choose any princess from the group, he selects solidly built, middle-sized, and sensible Beatrice. He declares that he would not know what to do with a "flimsy, pretty little princess." Appearances after all, as this novel indicates clearly, can be very deceiving.

Literary Qualities

Castle in the Air is primarily a fantasy, but it contains elements from other novelistic traditions as well.

Features of the romance novel are evident in Abdullah's love for Flowerin-the-Night. Obstacles of family background and social status, like those Abdullah faces, are typically found in romantic plots. The unusual conflicts of personality, confrontations with danger, and exotic settings and customs that arise in Abdullah's pursuit of love also make his story one of suspenseful adventure.

Abdullah's story also contains hints of political intrigue. These can be seen in the troubles between Strangia and Ingary, and in the Strangian soldier's position as a cast-off war veteran wandering through enemy land. The novel also contains a science fiction concept of an alternate world, the one to which Hasruel exiles himself.

The fast-paced action and intricate plot twists that add excitement to these categories of novel are well represented in Abdullah's story. Castle in the Air, in its chief mode of fantasy, generates excitement and suspense through the devices of magical spells and enchanted characters. Such elements, drawn from myths and fairy tales, are typical of fantasy. Djinns are specifically found in Muslim mythology. The magic carpet, genie, Abdullah's name, and desert kingdom show the strong influence of The Arabian Nights.

A young character's quest toward maturity and identification of his true nature, such as Abdullah undertakes, is also typical of fantasy. Abdullah's struggles for good against evil and for freedom against unwanted control are typical fantasy themes, although the explorations of family tensions and equal rights for women are specialties of Jones. Symbolism is commonly employed in fantasy, especially dark and light images. Jones uses this technique to convey mood and separate daydream from harsh reality. Strong sunlight accompanies Abdullah's return to his booth, for example, shaking him from his gentle, moonlit experience in the garden of Flower-in-the-Night.

Colors typically have symbolic meaning. When Abdullah first finds himself in the garden, the moon casts light "as white as paint" and "round yellow lamps" dispel the "dense black shadows" cast by the moon's bright light. In another scene, Flower-in-theNight runs toward Abdullah among white flowers and the yellow lamps.

She looks "golden" when a seeming cloud overshadows the white. A symbolic image of good and evil is suggested as a djinn takes her up, and she becomes "a small white figure against the huge blackness." These symbolic colors recur in the novel. "Golden light," for example, catches "the wings of a white bird circling the spire" Abdullah sees from his dark dungeon.

Jones uses another device commonly found in fantasy, beginning the story in a realistic setting so that imaginative events that follow seem more believable. This is a technique used by C. S. Lewis in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950; see separate entry,

Vol. 5). The deft use by Jones of detailed description also lends an air of believability. The mirrors and rods of a wizard's room, as she portrays them, seem almost as reasonable as the ordinary sights and smells of Abdullah's booth. Jones also achieves realism by having her characters react as people do when faced with complicated and challenging situations.

Although the conventions of fantasy mark her work, Jones is a remarkably talented and original writer. Critics praise her ability to treat serious themes without preaching, and her balanced and balancing humor that leavens the most somber insights. She is highly inventive in her construction of interesting characters, humorous scenes, and witty dialogue. The flowery forms of address that are customary in Abdullah's land are often the source of humor, and show her typical rhythmic word flow. The stranger greets Abdullah: "O master of a stack of mats." Abdullah declares the stranger a "sheikh of shrewdness." He urges his flying carpet onward with the phrase: "O fabulous fabric, carbuncle and chrysolite among carpets."

Humor is enhanced by the extravagance of polite address when such courtesy is unwarranted. "Most gentle fighting man," for example, is one of Abdullah's phrases for the soldier he distrusts. Theme is subtly conveyed also in this way. The fact of life's dualities is underscored when the characters conceal their true meanings or feelings under a facade designed to deceive. Jones comments cleverly, through these forms of address, on the insincerity that too often rules interpersonal relations.

Themes and Characters

A remarkable array of characters swirl around Abdullah in the course of his remarkable adventures; while a number are realistic, most are highly imaginative. There are at various times a lowly merchant friend with a snappish dog, princesses of all sorts, hateful relatives, an angry Sultan, villainous bandits, djinns, wizards, wives of wizards, angels, a strange soldier whose character is hard to pin down, an enchanted cat and kitten, and a sulky genie who emerges from his bottle to grant one wish a day that he tries his best to spoil. Even the threadbare magic carpet has a personality, responding to flattery and panting when weary.

Many of these characters shift form or identity according to the magical powers they possess, or which possess them. Abdullah, on a quest for happiness and the truth about himself, undergoes the kind of change that takes place inwardly. He is, at the outset, a shrewd and persuasive merchant of extravagant politeness. Despite his modest inheritance, he has built a successful carpet business by attracting wealthy customers on their way to better booths. Abdullah is resilient, very cautious, and capable of helping out a friend. He cannot realize his true potential at his booth, since a merchant has little chance to develop bravery.

The relatives of his father's first wife—Hakim, Assif, and Fatima—especially inspire Abdullah to retreat into daydreams, as they are archetypal family faultfinders with a lust for social climbing. They know and reveal the prophecy recorded by his father: Abdullah will be raised above all others in the land. The relatives want to use Abdullah to help themselves. He hates them for their avarice, and he hates Fatima's choice for him of two fat, giggly brides.

Abdullah gains the courage to stand up to these domineering relatives after he meets Flower-in-the-Night, the princess of his dreams. Flower-in-theNight, though hidden away by an evil djinn for much of the novel, is important to the progress of Abdullah. His pursuit of her draws out his inner strengths of loyalty, persistence, and resolve. The pair's relationship addresses themes of freedom and selfrealization, equality and social justice.

Ultimately, Abdullah stops lying about being a prince's son, and his princess chooses to marry him even knowing that he is a merchant.

Flower-in-the-Night is beautiful, intelligent, just, and kind. Although she is more an ideal type than a rounded creation, she represents the specific thematic concept of women's rights.

As Abdullah benefits from knowing Flower-in-the-Night, she is helped equally by learning from him the extent of her oppression. Her father, the Sultan, has kept her isolated from every man except himself. He raised and educated her to please the unseen prince he has chosen to be her husband.

Abdullah and the Sultan represent two different ways of thinking about women. The Sultan tells Abdullah: "Women do not count." Abdullah strongly disagrees; although he greatly admires Flower-in-the-Night for her beauty, he is dazzled as well by her "shrewd and logical mind." She displays it at once by asserting her rights over the stifling powers of family and social custom. She defies her father's right to choose her husband. She denounces as greedy and "extremely unfair" the right of a man in her land to take many wives, when a woman is allowed one husband.

Flower-in-the-Night plots to escape her captivity from the stolen moving castle of two djinn brothers. Her strongly assertive quality is typical of the nearly thirty other princesses held captive with her, including four-yearold Princess Valeria. The princesses are well able to hold their own against the abusive male power that is trying to bind them. Along with a wizard's wife named Sophie, another strongminded woman, the princesses prove to be worthy participants with Abdullah in the battle for freedom.

Their two djinn captors reflect the theme of the cruel plays for power that can occur within families. The djinn named Hasruel stole the moving castle and the princesses, but he did it because he had to obey his half-brother Dalzel, or die. Dalzel had discovered and stolen the hidden part of Hasruel that is life. The situation underscores the point that exerting control over someone takes away that individual's true self-expression.

These two characters also address the theme of good against evil. Hasruel is of the Host of Good Djinns. Dalzel is the son of Hasruel's good mother and a djinn from the Host of Evil. Dalzel is evil like his father but weak in character, "since Good and Evil do not breed well together." That Dalzel is also an angelic-looking man of unearthly beauty illustrates the ambiguity and duality that must be sorted out in life—people and things are often not what they seem.

Similarly, someone may be humble but in possession of princely qualities.

This social point is made by Hasruel's scheme to free himself. Hasruel made sure to steal princesses who would leave behind at least one injured lover or disappointed prince. He assumed that these men of high birth and reputed valorous dispositions would then come in pursuit, challenge Dalzel, regain their princesses, and free Hasruel in the process. Instead, Abdullah alone has had the loyalty, persistence, and courage to seek his princess. "Low as my birth is," Abdullah tells Hasruel, "Fate seems to want it so."

A thematic moral question is posed by Hasruel's reaction to his fulfillment of Dalzel's wishes. Hasruel had taken Seven Vows that joined him to the Host of the Good, "but his brother had given him the perfect excuse to break all seven of them." While Hasruel was provoking all sorts of mischief to please his half-brother, he "was clearly enjoying himself hugely" and "did not regret it." Hasruel feels that he cannot therefore rejoin the Host of the Good Djinns, and he willingly exiles himself to another world.

Another character who addresses moral questions is Abdullah's traveling companion in the land of Ingary, a Strangian soldier. The soldier has a policy of robbing anyone who has robbed him, and he resorts to deception to make this happen. He complicates the moral issue with a political one. He fought fiercely in the recent war, but neither land of Strangia nor Ingary cared to repay him when peace was won. The soldier therefore robs "the folk of Ingary" because they fought unfairly. They are "the ones who brought wizards in and cheated their way to victory."

The Strangian soldier is one of the most puzzling, shifting characters Abdullah confronts. He seems to be "a barefaced sponger and a thundering bore," perhaps a robber and certainly a cuddler of cats. His age is uncertain, and his observant eyes change in expression from innocently honest to shrewdly cunning. The soldier advises Abdullah wisely about the nature of Fate and the need to pursue his best interests, rather than letting a contrary force like the sulky genie plague him.

The soldier and the genie are two of many identities set free by Abdullah's brave, determined stand against the controlling spell of evil. The happy ending is made possible by the strengths displayed by the women, who lend crucial support. The rightness of equal partnership between the genders, which Abdullah's relationships with women strongly address, is suggested further through the revealed character of the puzzling soldier. From among the women's group which includes beautiful Flower-inthe-Night, he chooses to marry the "downright," down-to-earth Princess Beatrice. Although not physically attractive like Flower-in-the-Night, she is strong-minded and sensible enough to share in a man's governmental work.

Topics for Discussion

1. How important is the romance element in the novel?

2. Is the novel fast-paced? What effect does the pacing have on readability of the story?

3. What is the prophecy obtained at Abdullah's birth by his father? How does it work out in the course of the novel?

4. Was Abdullah's father right to believe his son would be a disappointment?

5. Why do his father's first wife's relatives seek out Abdullah? What do they really think of him?

6. Why does Flower-in-the-Night think Abdullah is a woman? How does her misconception relate to theme?

7. What reasons does Abdullah have for thinking he cannot marry Flowerin-the-Night? What does she think about marrying him, and how does their relationship address the idea of social justice?

8. The Strangian soldier argues that it is right to rob from robbers. Does his argument make strict sense? What part does the morality of war play in his logic?

9. How is the genie like Fate, according to the Strangian soldier? How should Abdullah deal with both?

10. Why does Hasruel feel he has to exile himself? What does he mean when he says that Dalzel taught him to have fun? What has this reasoning to do with morality (Chapter 21)?

11. Who really is the Strangian soldier? How surprising is the revelation of his true identity?

12. Is the ending satisfying? What does it indicate about the relationship men and women should cultivate?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Abdullah's daydreams are described early in Chapter 1. How far afield does he fall from the fulfillment of his daydreams by the novel's conclusion? Is the outcome what he expected?

2. Castle in the Air is a sequel to Howl's Moving Castle. What characters are found in both novels? Are you better able to follow characters and events in Castle in the Air because you have read the earlier novel? Or do you think reading it is not really necessary?

Castle in the Air 4503 3. What techniques does Jones use to develop humor? How effective are they?

4. Jones typically employs mythology and fairy tale elements in her fantasies. Castle in the Air is particularly drawn from tales assembled as The Arabian Nights. Read some of these tales and compare them to Abdullah's story.

5. At the outset of the novel Abdullah is a successful merchant, but at the same time a passive daydreamer. How does he change in the course of his adventures? Why is he acclaimed as brave at the story's end?

6. Symbolism is typically found in fantasy fiction. Discuss the ways Jones uses this technique in the novel.

7. Who is punished in the novel?

Why? Whose magic backfires?

8. In this novel the characters are usually not whom they seem to be.

Select several of these characters to discuss. Do they have similar characteristics when spellbound and when revealed in their true identities? What are the similarities or differences?

For Further Reference

Alderdice, Kit. "Diana Wynne Jones [Interview]." Publishers Weekly 238 (February 22, 1991): 201-202. Jones comments on influences in her writing, her technique, and her approach to children's literature. Jones believes in being serious but not didactic: "There's nothing like being able to laugh at a thing to free you to use your mind."

"Diana Wynne Jones." In Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Vol. 12.

Edited by Laurie Collier. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 101-108. A valuable biography is provided in the context of critical commentary about selected titles, along with lists of publications by Jones, her awards, and a bibliography of review sources.

"Diana Wynne Jones." In Something about the Author. Vol. 70. Edited by Donna Olendorf and Diane Telgen.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, pp.

115-118. Quotations from an interview with Jones appear in a biographical sketch that includes a critical overview and lists of her publications, awards, and honors.

"Diana Wynne Jones." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series, Vol.

56. Edited by Jeff Chapman and John D. Jorgenson. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997, pp. 228-231. Provides updated lists of publications by Jones and sources about her, with brief critical commentary that includes her own remarks.

"Diana Wynne Jones: Writing for Children [Interview]." Locus 22 (April 1989): 5, 62. Jones discusses her preference for writing fantasies designed for the younger reader, her childhood "book starvation," and the development of some of her stories.

Jones, Diana Wynne. In Fifth Book of junior Authors and Illustrators. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983, pp. 166-167.

Jones candidly tells how her childhood and having her own children influenced her to write.

——. In Speaking for Ourselves, Too.

Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993, pp. 106-108. Jones tells how she was inspired to write, and how her first attempts to publish were rejected because she did not include the ages of young characters or portray adult characters as perfect.

Related Titles

Castle in the Air is a sequel to Howl's Moving Castle (1986), also a romantic fantasy. Characters who reappear in Castle in the Air include Howl, Sophie, and fire demon Calcifer. Part of the novel's fun is finally learning what enchanted parts they played. The moving castle stolen by the djinns Dalzel and Hasruel belongs to Howl.

The land of Ingary appears in both novels, as do magic spells and wizards.

In Howl's Moving Castle, the relationship between Howl and Sophie is explored. Sophie is a charming young hatter until a wicked witch turns her into a bossy old woman. She seeks shelter as a housekeeper to Howl, a young wizard who dwells in a moving castle. Each tries to undo magic while becoming involved in a blossoming romance.

Unlike Flower-in-the-Night, who is assertive but remote from Abdullah for much of his tale, Sophie has an important love-hate relationship with Howl in the earlier novel. She is the same blunt, strong-minded woman Abdullah comes to know. Howl is "sly and selfish and vain as a peacock and cowardly, and you can't pin him down to anything," according to Sophie's description in Castle in the Air. Much of the hilarity in Howl's Moving Castle comes from the bickering between Howl and Sophie.

Aunt Maria (1991; see separate entry, Vol. 6) is another of many significant fantasies by Jones. The humor is darker in this novel, which features the subduing of a family and an entire town by the magical powers of an elderly, seemingly helpless woman.

With the same deft crafting that typifies her work, Jones provides a commentary on society as well as treatments of maturation, family tension, and totalitarian rule. The themes emerge as young Mig and her brother Chris seek to overturn the magic spells of their father's Aunt Maria.

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