

# Children of Light Short Guide

## Children of Light by Robert Stone

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# Characters

An alcoholic screenwriter and sometime actor, Gordon Walker is a familiar figure in Stone's fictional terrain. Inherently intelligent and not without promise, Walker is presently spent on cocaine and depression.

Alone, adrift, and tormented by his existence, Walker is rushing headfirst into self-annihilation. Blinded by the glare of truth, Walker attempts to retreat into a dreamscape of drug-induced euphoria. However, the spell is short-lived and reality will undoubtedly reappear to claim its inheritance.

Akin to Walker, Lu Anne Bourgeois is another unsusceptible victim within the novel. Vulnerable to the unnatural forces that take possession of the mind and body, Lu Anne is schizophrenic, dependent on a daily dosage of medication to control her interior state of madness. Demoralized and desensitized, Lu Anne attempts to break free of her bondage by artistic and ultimately spiritual triumph. Walker is compelled to intercede in her behalf, more for his benefit than for hers, yet he is unable to overcome his own limitations. Similar to Rheinhardt, Converse, and Holliwell, Walker survives to face another day regardless of the bleak uncertainty of the future. Lu Anne, on the other hand, will join Gertrude, Marge, and Sister Justine in a brief moment of transcendence.

Increasingly aware of the possibilities and intrinsic value of his secondary characters, Stone dispenses an entire colony of film personnel to supplement the authenticity and rhythm of the novel. Among his realistic, insightful, and often comic creations are the film-directing Drogues, junior and senior, the viciously omnipotent journalist, the rising young starlet, and a colorful array of the various and sundry "extras" of the business. All are under the watchful and sarcastic eye of Stone, observing the scene from a safe distance and shaking his head in saddened disbelief.

## Social Concerns/Themes

Moving his settings from New Orleans, Vietnam, Los Angeles, and Central America, Stone relocates to the coast of Mexico to continue his exploration of contemporary society in *Children of Light*. Considered an artistic departure for Stone, the novel replaces the eccentric, menacing characters of his earlier work with the inhabitants of present-day Hollywood. The "children of light" are the self-illuminating, talented people so often consumed by the fantasy world of illusion.

The novel focuses on the protagonist Gordon Walker. Recently deserted by his second wife, Walker decides to visit the location shooting of a film based on his screenplay and starring his ex-lover Lee Verger, the stage name for Lu Anne Bourgeois. Once again, Stone produces fragile and nearly broken characters precariously dangling before an emotional abyss, desperately seeking reconciliation with the modern world and a renewed sense of purpose in life. Unfortunately, the destructive lives of his characters are beyond repair, and salvation if at all possible is momentary and fleeting.

At first glance, *Children of Light* does not reflect the harsh reality and violence so commonplace in Stone's fiction. Seemingly quieted by the serene locale, his characters appear less terrifying than previous prototypes; however, as the novel unfolds, an unnatural and unconscionable evil surfaces to take hold of the action and characters in the form of manipulation, degradation, and insanity.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

Considered Stone's most realistic achievement, *Children of Light* is polished narrative strikingly similar in development to Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Immensely dependent on dialogue, the novel exposes the innermost depth of human suffering as well as the day-to-day routine of the film industry. Stone creates diversified voices within the novel but exercises complete control over the diction and intonation of his characters.

Stone is particularly successful, as he was in *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), in producing intricate plot development while orchestrating the actions of his major characters to intersect at the climax of the novel. Likewise, Stone creates an interesting parallel, similar to the relationship between Holliwell and Pablo, with Lu Anne and the character she is playing in the film. As fantasy and reality become interchangeable for Lu Anne, she realizes her destiny is to follow the precedent set by her fictional counterpart.

Striving for a final display of epiphany, Lu Anne disappears into the beckoning and comforting sea. Stone leaves, as he has before, a surviving protagonist, no wiser for having made the novel's journey, and a heroine as victim on the altar of the modern world.

In his feature article on Stone in the *New York Times Magazine*, Bruce Weber refers to *Children of Light* as Stone's "Hollywood book," identifying the novel as a negative portrayal of the film industry. Descending from the tradition of the Hollywood expose novel, *Children of Light* is similar in tone and design to Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1950) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1953).

Accentuating the self-destructive and self-perpetuating nature of the movie business, *Children of Light* invites comparison with a number of other works: the Hollywood trilogy of Harold Robbins, consisting of *The Dream Merchants* (1949), *The Carpetbaggers* (1961), and *The Inheritors* (1969), Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), Terry Southern's *Blue Movie* (1970), and William Goldman's *Tinsel* (1979).



## Key Questions

The least political of his novels, *Children of Light* lacks the complexity and depth of Stone's narrative style.

However, the interaction between Walker and Lu Anne provides a level of intensity that remains consistent throughout the development of the novel. Discussing the origins of the novel, Stone replied to one interviewer that he intended the focus to be on the relationship between two people "who know that nothing good can happen to them from each other and who know that they have nothing but trouble and even potential destruction to give to each other but who willfully — and one of them more willfully than the other — out of nostalgia, out of weakness, out of perversity, out of a desire for generalized destruction, make this pilgrimage."

1. What distinguishes *Children of Light* from Stone's previous novels is that there are only two principal characters and relatively little subplot.

Does this diminish Stone's narrative control of the novel?

2. The novel essentially follows the progression of Walker and Lu Anne toward inevitable disaster. How does Stone maintain this focus throughout the course of the novel?

3. Despite warnings from several individuals, Walker insists on traveling to Mexico in order to seek out Lu Anne. What is the primary motivation for his decision?

4. Identified early in the novel as being schizophrenic, Lu Anne has stopped taking her medication to prevent interference with her performance.

Discuss the willingness of the film's director, Walter Drogue, to work with the unmedicated Lu Anne. Why does Drogue tolerate the presence of Walker during the shooting of the film?

5. Compare *Children of Light* with other Hollywood-based novels, notably F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*.

To what degree in the novel is Stone making a statement about the film community?

6. Filming on location in Mexico is an important aspect of the novel. How does Stone enhance character development by contrasting the displaced Americans with the local population?

7. Discuss the complexity of character that enables Walker to show concern and sympathy for Lu Anne while simultaneously providing her with cocaine. Is Walker aware of the consequences of his actions?

8. How do the hallucinatory Long Friends help to define Lu Anne's character?



9. Compare the relationship between Lu Anne's self-destructive behavior with her innate capacity for survival.

10. Lu Anne seems doomed from the beginning of the novel, and her drowning is essentially anticlimactic. Does the contrived structure of the novel diminish the narrative strength of Stone's creativity?



# Copyright Information

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