Children of the Dust Short Guide

Children of the Dust by Louise de Kiriline Lawrence

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Most readers will be drawn to Children of the Dust because of its vivid and imaginative picture of a new world being built on the ashes of our own.

The new society and new people, homo superior, portrayed in the second and third parts of the book are a surprise.

First, horror and doom fall over the world when nuclear bombs explode, and it appears there is no hope for humanity. The book has been criticized for assuming that a nuclear war is survivable, but reading of the struggle to rebuild will help readers to form their own judgments on this question.

Children of the Dust was named one of the Best Books for Young Adults in 1985 by the American Library Association.

About the Author

E lizabeth Rhoda Holden was born in Leatherhead, England on June 5, 1943. Growing up as a bricklayer's daughter in "the English stock-broker belt," she was miserable at school. The place where she knew the most happiness was in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, where her grandfather lived and where her family moved when she was eleven. Wandering around the countryside and listening to her grandfather's vivid, spooky stories formed her warmest childhood memories. Today she still lives in the region.

She left school at seventeen and worked at a bank and several libraries before finding a career writing books for young people.

Louise Lawrence is the pen name she consistently uses. Lawrence says she never consciously sought to become a writer. Rather, an idea came to her while she was doing housework. She felt compelled to write it down, and it turned into a novel. As a young woman trying to cope with children in an isolated farmhouse, she found writing to be an escape from unhappy reality. When her first marriage broke up, writing also provided the means for financial survival. But, adds Lawrence, she came to see it as a way of searching, of exploring the "questions that have no answers" which she believes everybody has.

She remarried in 1987. Busily involved in other projects starting with remodeling an old house, she admits she sometimes wonders if she needs to go on writing. But then, a new idea may come to her, and she is eager to see what her next book will be about.

Setting

Children of the Dust is set in a nearfuture England, during and after a catastrophic nuclear war. Most of the story takes place in the vicinity of Bristol, its countryside, villages, and underground shelters. Cities play virtually no part in the book, because they were destroyed in the first wave of bombs.

Social Sensitivity

At first glance Children of the Dust contains little to trigger alarm. Who is in favor of nuclear war, after all? Although the book refers vaguely to "the dangerous international situation" which preceded the attack, the story includes no details. The bunker society is constricted and authoritarian, but it comes across as realistic under the circumstances. A closer look, however, reveals several ambiguous issues.

The failure of technology is one. It is never made clear whether high technology is implicated in the nuclear blowup, whether it would have led inevitably to a catastrophe of one kind or another, or if its postwar breakdown stems only from it being unsuited for the new world being born. This is not a question that a novel necessarily needs to answer. But teachers and readers should be aware that the book raises the question and then waffles about exploring it.

Science and scientists are also treated. Ophelia's mother Erica, a geneticist, is not a wholly unlikable person, but she never understands the needs of a growing girl, and she never questions authority. In general she fits the stereotype of a woman scientist who neglects personal and social responsibilities to bury herself in her work. There is nothing per se wrong with these traits appearing in any one character of a novel.

In an era when more girls are being urged to go into science, though, it may be regrettable that the only female scientist is shown this way. The attitude toward science in the abstract is even more negative. The bunker's labs for cell cloning and other synthesizing processes get no results. The intended message may be: "Science removed from the natural world cannot work", but it readily comes across as simply: "Science doesn't work." Moreover, some physical changes in the outsiders are doubtful according to current scientific knowledge. At age twenty-eight Catherine appears to have severe radiation sickness. Yet she survives to be an old, old woman. All the healthy children born "outside" after the nuclear winter have the same mutation: white eyes with pinprick pupils and soft white fur over their bodies. Genetic theory would suggest more trial-anderror, and at least several generations before a viable mutation stabilizes.

These mistakes may merely stem from the need for thematic unity in a relatively short novel. Yet, any writer of an adult science-fiction novel would have felt obliged to check such details before including them. The author's failure to do so hints at a somewhat disdainful view of science.

Lastly, the new telepathy mutation which emerges in the "outsiders" may bother several different groups of adults: scientists, conservative Christians, and those whose beliefs and practices include psychic phenomena.

From a literary standpoint, it is common for "borderline fantasy" elements such as telepathy to appear in a science fiction novel. The way it is handled in Children of the Dust, however, makes it problematic. When telepathy pops up in the novel's conclusion

as the distinguishing trait of a new race labeled homo superior, the scientifically-inclined may want to grit their teeth. Even those who grant the possibility of extrasensory perception will wonder at the way it emerges in this novel. An ESP mutation could carry survival benefits in a low-tech world; Laura uses hers as a radio and Geiger counter. But how are such gifts linked with the other mutant traits? And how did they become universal in the population in two generations? The book offers no explanation for these unlikely developments.

Certain conservative Christian parents object to any telepathy in novels for their children. Teachers are in the best position to know if this applies to some of their students. Aside from the assumption that ESP marks a superior, evolving race, it is hard to see where the present novel would be more objectionable on this basis than many others written for young adults. No spiritual or metaphysical or even interpersonal meanings are placed on ESP gifts in Children of the Dust. People use them only as technology.

This very lack of depth may bother parents who believe in the reality of psychic events. Extrasensory powers are used here in a very matter-of-fact way, without the sense of responsibility and interconnection which most such belief systems include. Although these parents are less likely to be vocal about their beliefs than scientific or traditional religious groups, they form a growing portion of many communities.

In short, the telepathy in this novel is handled curiously and without much thought. One can almost imagine the author nearing the end of the book and seizing upon telepathy as a "gee whiz" factor to make the new world different from the old in a special way. In spite of these caveats, most readers will probably accept it the same way, as an interesting story element.

Literary Qualities

Children of the Dust uses a fairly standard third-person narrative style.

There are three sections of approximately sixty pages each. Each section takes us, in chronological order, through important events in its title character's life. The structure is that of a shortened family saga, with two family members, Bill Harnden and his daughter Catherine, tying the family together across time. Catherine is physically present at events in all three sections; Bill is present only in spirit in the first and third.

The tone of the first section is almost unrelievedly grim. Although scenes like the younger children's squabbling give an illusion of ordinary life for a few lines, the reader is never very far away from the realization that everything will end soon, and horribly, for most of these people. This tone is perhaps inevitable and even desirable, given the subject. Yet it makes Children of the Dust a book that may disappoint some readers, not always for the same reasons.

A string of harrowing events at the start of a book may signal a tale of gore and horror to the reader. Or a wrecking opening may be used as "shock immersion," to turn the reader's attention to important issues, which is the purpose of the novel. The later two sections have a more ordinary feel, even though they are still serious.

Some readers hooked on the book by the images of mass destruction and gross radiation injuries may not enjoy the deeper questions it later raises.

Likewise, some readers who would appreciate the latter may be put off by the initial horror.

But these are the kinds of mismatches any work of literature risks.

They are notable here because the novel's emotional path starts so negatively and runs upward, unlike the more frequent pattern which starts with ordinary events but leads steadily to higher levels of jeopardy and violence.

One notable stylistic device is the author's tendency to cross-cut scenes of natural beauty with those of extreme revulsion or desolation, often within the same paragraph, as in: "Fat flies fed upon the festers of her eyes . . . [they drove] past an abandoned coal mine and . . . down through the cracked streets of a deserted town.

Surrounding hills were tinged with a pinkness of willow herb." This carries the theme of new life rising out of dire destruction. On the whole it is an effective method, but sometimes the mix of images is jarring.

The author makes several references to literature and legend. These are only used in an understated way, like Ophelia's name. It takes a considerable mental stretch (although it may be accurate) to connect her name to her father's passivity as well as to

his love of English literature. The meaning of other borrowed features is even more obscure, as with the standing stones.

Children of the Dust falls into a category which is now almost fifty years old, the postnuclear holocaust novel.

For further understanding it might be helpful to compare it with some other books of this subgenre. There are many young-adult novels written in this subgenre, as well as a wealth of such stories in adult science fiction. Now that the danger of worldwide nuclear war seems to have lessened, this subgenre may lose some of its urgency, but it is likely that stories about rebuilding the world after a disaster will continue to interest readers, whatever the means by which civilization is destroyed.

Themes and Characters

The obvious theme, the horror of nuclear war, assaults the reader in the opening two paragraphs of the book. In fact, the first sixty pages, about the days and weeks immediately after a nuclear exchange, form a relentless catalog of tragedy. Only one member of the schoolgirl Sarah's family survives radiation poisoning. The entire surrounding region—and the world—is similarly devastated.

This theme appears in virtually all the many postnuclear holocaust novels published in the last half-century.

There are, however, large differences among these books in tone and message. Some, like Nevil Shute's On the Beach, show nuclear war as bringing the end of the world, or at least the extinction of the human race. Others, while also describing, the immediate postwar world as a terrible place, do have some people survive. The endurance of the human spirit against terrible odds may be a secondary theme in such books. Or they may merely raise the question: Will the living envy the dead in such a world? There is also a group of books that treats nuclear war primarily as a device which destroys civilization, in order to allow the author to explore what sort of new society might arise out of the ashes.

To a certain extent Children of the Dust takes all of these approaches. Not everyone dies, but almost everyone introduced in the first section does.

And by showing events through the eyes of a doomed girl, the reader is given an impression that very few people will live on.

This gloomy outlook is countered slightly in the latter two thirds of the book. These sections first follow people who take shelter in underground bunkers, and then on a group who, living through a nuclear winter in the outside world, have also survived.

The author seems to intend to make "survival of the spirit" a secondary theme, here; she ends each section with a statement that reflects it: "some things could never be destroyed: a child with her dreams . . . a man with his visions." Yet at various times several characters reflect that the future they face can hardly be borne.

In the third section the author focuses on the nature of the society which is rebuilding a drastically changed world. Unfortunately many customs and material objects are merely mentioned without weaving them together into a coherent whole. For example, the "outsiders" place new standing stones across the landscape, aligning them with those left by a prehistoric race. Yet "no one . . . knew why . . . they had erected the cromlechs." Perhaps the stones have something to do with the psychic talents the "mutants" display; but the connection is never made.

One connection which is made, though, gives the book an additional theme: appropriate technology. The people who survive outside use natural materials and revert to an

economy based on handwork and simple machines. With the breakdown of transportation and power networks they have no other choice. Those in the large underground shelters have maintained a complex habitat with modern technology. The bunker societies survive for two or three generations. In the first postwar generation they stay healthier and more comfortable than those living under primitive conditions outside. Yet the machines that sustain them ultimately break down, and they are forced to turn for help to the mutants whom they despise. Not only is their lifestyle based on a technology which no longer exists, their technocratic mindset makes it impossible for them to imagine other ways of doing things, and to innovate on their own.

The three sections of the book each deal with the experiences of a different member of one family. On the day of the attack, this family was divided by chance into those who stayed outside and those who lived in the fallout shelter. Sarah, the daughter of Professor Bill Harnden's first marriage, is caught in her home with a stepmother she only tolerates, and her younger brother and sister. During the terrible days that follow, she comes to see Veronica, the stepmother, as a vulnerable human being, doing the best she can to keep them all alive. As Veronica weakens, Sarah becomes responsible for the other children. She ultimately has to decide that only her sister Catherine has a future. She takes Catherine to Johnson's isolated "back-to-the-earth" farm as the best chance for the little girl's survival. Sarah is a likeable girl who matures suddenly under extreme necessity. Having her life cut off so soon comes as a shock.

Ophelia is another daughter of Bill Harnden, born in the underground shelter some time after the attack.

Growing up in this self-contained society, she sees no reason to question the "scientism" and authority of her world.

Then the bunker's authority figure, General MacAllister, determines to go after and seize a herd of cattle they have located by aerial surveys. Ophelia's young friend Dwight, a maverick within bunker society, openly opposes this "banditry," and her father Bill also quietly questions it. When the troops leave on this mission, these three follow, and end up at Johnson's spread, now a functioning community. Ophelia meets Catherine, whom she has never known, and is horrified at the toll radiation and frequent childbearing have taken on her twenty-eight-year-old sister. Dwight blows up most of the trucks, deflecting the cattle-theft, and escapes into the surrounding wilderness. Ophelia and her father return to the bunker, to try to carry on a society that is already breaking down.

Dwight's actions show the desperation of an idealistic young man in the face of arbitrary authority which cannot change, even when its decisions are sure to lead to disaster. Bill's and Ophelia's retreat to the bunker may be understood in two different ways. Having spent their whole lives in a hightechnology environment, they cannot cope with a more primitive life. Also, the knowledge they gained of 'outside' conditions is passed down so that the next expedition 'out' is better prepared to cooperate when they need the village dwellers' help.

Ophelia is a transitional figure.

When naming her, Bill Harnden quotes from Shakespeare: "And let her not walk i' the sun." Yet the world she is born into has little use for the humanistic knowledge her father shares with her. Further, her one trip outside shows a community that is even more alien to her.

The last section, "Simon," follows Ophelia's son Simon as he goes with another expedition into the outside world. Wounded and suspicious, he finds that Johnson's enclave has become a thriving center of a new, very different civilization. The girl Laura — his first cousin—treats his wound with herbs, while he resists the help because of her "mutant" appearance and her primitive way of life. His aunt, blind Kate, gives him the willies even as she brings strawberries and cream and clothing to him. He discovers that his "defector" uncle, Dwight, has even "dreamed" a cathedral which the people built with plaster and slate and bricks. Gradually, after care and explanation and struggle, Simon accepts that the mutant "outsiders" are the race of the future, and he decides to throw in his lot with them.

There is a fourth person who hovers in the background and unifies the story. Although he actually appears only in the middle section "Ophelia," Bill Harnden is perhaps the most important character in the book, and certainly its most complex and interesting.

His children and grandchildren make up the other major characters, and one feels that some power beyond mere chance brings the two branches of his family back together.

A gentle and scholarly man, he finds himself newly powerless in the world of the fallout shelter. It is run by the military and its people believe in high technology as the solution to everything, even after nuclear weapons have almost destroyed the world.

So Bill Harnden speaks of literature and values to a younger generation who cannot visualize the nature-images he uses. And he teaches and nurtures his third daughter Ophelia, even though he married her mother and fathered the child mostly out of social duty. He cannot change the wrongheaded decisions General MacAllister makes. Even in his one act of courage, when he follows the soldiers into the outside and teams up with Johnson to negotiate a compromise on the priceless cattle, Dwight Allison literally shoots the ground out from under him.

Married three times to strong-minded women, he owes his place in the bunker to an accidental meeting with Erica, a colleague whom he later marries. He is the very picture of a passive man at the mercy of events.

Or is he? It certainly seems so at the time. Only afterwards, thinking back over the tale, can a reader perhaps see that he has been the most influential figure in creating the new world. If he had not previously introduced Sarah to Johnson (a man whom he admired for opting out of the rat race when he himself did not dare), she would not have known to take Catherine there, starting the community of outside survivors. In protecting the cattle and the outsiders' livelihood Dwight was acting on the values he had learned from Bill. And no one else in the bunker could have given Dwight the sense of beauty and spiritual values that he put into visible form when he designed the cathedral.

Bill Harnden gives the reader much to think about. Is it possible that the powerful men who use force and command are not the real "movers" and heroes of the world?

Topics for Discussion

1. In the book the different characters give different reasons for the nuclear catastrophe. Bill Harnden says "It was science and technology that invented the bomb and devastated the earth." Catherine says: "God looked on the earth and saw it was wicked."

Dwight blames power-mad leaders and thinks that ordinary citizens should have "gotten off their backsides and questioned what was going on." How much do any of these comments resemble our own world? Do you agree with any of them? Why or why not?

2. If you had to live in the novel's world after the nuclear war, would you rather be born into the bunker society or that of the outsiders? Do you think the book gives an accurate picture of what life would be like in each place?

3. In the first section Sarah's stepmother Veronica seals one room of the house and puts the dog out. Then after three days she unseals the room, goes outside, and brings the dog in. Are these reasonable actions, or is she floundering around in panic?

4. Ophelia's parents, Bill and Erica, disagree about teaching the bunker's children the literature and art of a bygone world. Can you understand why both feel the way they do? What are some of the dangers each way? Can people live without literature and art?

5. The name Lilith comes from an ancient Hebrew tale. The Lilith in that story is a demon who steals and kills human children. Ophelia discovers that her niece Lilith has put defective babies out to die. Simon, too, sees Lilith as an uncanny, mute creature whom he fears. Do you think their revulsion at Lilith is justified?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read another book about the aftermath of a nuclear war. Write a report comparing the methods the survivors use to cope in it with those of the people in Children of the Dust.

2. Nuclear war is not the only way civilization could be destroyed. List at least five other dangers you think could possibly lead to such a breakdown. For each one, indicate steps people could take to prevent it from happening.

3. The author of Children of the Dust uses contrast to show hope rising out of horror. Pick some event or subject you have strong, mixed feelings about.

Write a poem or a few paragraphs about it. Try to use the same sort of contrasts in part of what you write— for example, mixing beautiful and ugly things or scary images with scenes of safety.

4. Draw a map or picture of the underground bunker and mark living areas and other spaces they would need to keep a self-contained community of five hundred people working. Or draw a map or picture of the outsiders' town as Simon found it, with the great building and the fields and mill and other nearby places.

5. Laura uses her new senses to detect metal, to control animals, and to communicate over distances with other people. What are some other ways "extrasensory perceptions" would be very useful in a world that has lost its technology? Do you think all these abilities are part of the same "sense?" Or is it likely that a person might have one of them without the others? Give your answers and reasons in a report. You can use your own ideas or those from another novel or nonfiction book. List the books you used if you do the latter.

For Further Reference

"Children of the Dust." Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 39 (September 1985). Short favorable review which praises the pace and story line of the novel.

Fireside, Bryna J. "Young Adult Books: A Response to 'Members of the Last Generation.'" Horn Book 62,1 (January/February 1986): 89-92. An article examining various young adult books about the nuclear threat. Fireside concludes that good, thoughtful books for teen-agers are being written, but few of them are novels. The brief discussion of Children of the Dust criticizes it for "accepting the inevitability of nuclear war"—probably an unfair criticism that is not necessarily proven by the novel's content—and for "playing on the worst fears of [the] young."

"Holden, Elizabeth Rhoda (Louise Lawrence)." In Contemporary Authors.

New Revision Series. Vol. 16. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Reference work listing the author's published books and personal data, including quotations on her motivations for writing.

"Louise Lawrence." In Sixth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989. The most complete easily available source of information on the author's life and the sources of her ideas, told largely in her own words.

Zeiger, Hanna B. "Children of the Dust." Horn Book 62,1 (January/February 1986): 63. After summarizing the story line, this review takes strong exception to the book's premise. Finding its premise of a "fantasy world" rising out of nuclear holocaust extremely disturbing, the reviewer suggests it might even make nuclear war a bit more thinkable. The statement here that the mutant community built a cathedral by mind control is not supported by the novel's text.

Related Titles

The author's novel Andra is also set in a post-nuclear war society, but there is no other connection.

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