

Children of the Fox Short Guide

Children of the Fox by Jill Paton Walsh

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Overview

Children of the Fox is a collection of three novellas about children who live in ancient Greece. The central characters described in Children of the Fox are wholly fictitious, but the story of Themistokles, the Athenian general known as the Fox, is factual. Thus these tales offer historical insight into what it was like to live in ancient Greece or Asia Minor and to be caught up in the events of war and political intrigue. The three heroes are quite ordinary children of their time, unlikely candidates for great adventure, but their first-person narration of each tale brings an immediacy and excitement to the stories.

About the Author

Gillian (Jill) Bliss was born on April 29, 1937, in London. She graduated from St. Anne's College, Oxford, with honors in English literature and taught school in London from 1959 to 1962. On August 12, 1961, she married Alan Paton Walsh, a chartered secretary, with whom she had three children.

Jill Paton Walsh began writing books at the age of twenty-six after she left teaching and had her first child. Since she began publishing, she has developed an interest in the criticism of children's literature as well as the craft of writing. To date, she has published seventeen novels for young people, a novel for adults, and a work of nonfiction, and she has edited a structural reader of *Beowulf*, she frequently writes book reviews and literary criticism, and participates in workshops and symposiums on children's literature in Great Britain and the United States.

Although Paton Walsh is known primarily as a writer of historical fiction, she has produced outstanding contemporary fiction, including *Goldengrove* and its sequel *Unleaving*, which won the 1976 Boston Globe-Horn Book award and was included in the Children's Book Showcase selected by the Children's Book Council.

Setting

The novellas take place in ancient Greece during the Persian Wars (500 to 449 B.C.). Because most schools no longer require a course in ancient Greek history, the historical setting of *Children of the Fox* may be very unfamiliar. Fortunately the afterword to the tales includes an explanation of the different governing systems of the Greek citystates of Athens and Sparta and the intense rivalry between them. Athens is threatened by an invasion of the army of the Great King of Persia and must rely on help from Sparta and the other Greek cities to throw off the invasion. But because of their rivalries, the Greek generals cannot agree to fight as a united army or navy, and so Themistokles, the Athenian general, treacherously sends a message to the enemy Persians to trick them into attacking the Greek armies before quarrels split them apart. The stories revolve around Themistokles's political maneuvers in Athens, his flight to Asia Minor, and his involvement with the kings of Persia and Mollossia. The afterword also contains an excellent map so that readers can follow the action of the stories.

Social Sensitivity

War is a recurrent subject in Paton Walsh's writing, sometimes forming the backdrop for a story of emotional maturation, as in *Fireweed*, and sometimes constituting the central theme of the novel. War functions as both background and theme in *Children of the Fox*.

The stories depict the waste and terrible destruction that war wreaks as well as the heroism and loyalty that war inspires. Although violence and gruesome descriptions are less evident in *Children of the Fox* than in Paton Walsh's other works, inclusion of these realistic passages marks her attempt to bring to a young adult novel a mature, unsheltered awareness of the world. As with any historically accurate fiction, *Children of the Fox* affords an opportunity to reflect on attitudes that have changed with time, especially those regarding the place and role of women in society and the institution of slavery.



Literary Qualities

Of the three incidents depicted in *Children of the Fox*, the one described in the third tale, "Persian Gold," is the most probable historically but the least convincing emotionally, evoking less of a sense of involvement with real children than the other two stories do. The author compensates for this problem somewhat by framing Lala's experiences with Themistokles within the story of her later relating these events to the Athenian who documents her account; this device lends authenticity to the tale.

The enigmatic character of Themistokles comes alive, and readers are able to decide if he was truly a hero or an opportunist.

Paton Walsh is a powerful writer whose work is demanding to read, but very rewarding. She always chooses complex subjects and plots but relates her stories in graceful language.

Through action, description, and, most significantly, realistic dialogue, she evokes a tactile sense of the scenery and develops engaging characters. Although the use of natural manners of speech is often problematic in historical writing, Paton Walsh manages to convey the speech patterns of the past without resorting to artificial or archaic language. The first-person narrations make especially effective use of internal dialogue or soliloquy, where a character argues within himself, revealing his feelings and the process of coming to a decision.



Themes and Characters

A recurrent theme in literature for young people is that of a child developing mature, unselfish attitudes and a willingness to risk danger for the welfare of others. In each of the stories of *Children of the Fox*, the main character learns that leaving home and having a great adventure sometimes involves hardship and sacrifice. But these characters also discover an inner strength that helps them to endure the hardship and makes them heroic. Because they are ordinary young people who rise to meet extraordinary circumstances, these characters reveal the great potential within each human being.

Aster, the sheltered fourteen-year-old Athenian girl who narrates *Crossing to Salamis*, longs for freedom from the impoverished and secluded life she lives with her mother, brother, governess, and their slave-girl. Because her brother Nikias was still too young to inherit the family estate when her father was killed at the battle of Marathon, Aster's unscrupulous uncle now controls the family fortune. He refuses to give Aster's family any money, forcing them to earn a living by weaving. To preserve the family reputation from any seeming impropriety, Aster's mother, Myro, confines herself and her daughter to their home. In contrast to Myro's narrowmindedness, Phryne, the Spartan governess, believes that women should be allowed more freedom and do not need an adult male to escort them at all times. Out of devotion to the family, she remains with them after the death of Myro's husband even though there is no money to pay her wages. The slave-girl Lysia represents a third attitude toward women and their role. Forced to work without wages and with no choice of where she will live, her desires are ignored. But ironically, she has more freedom than her young mistress, because she is allowed to go to the market and can learn all the latest gossip.

Aster's secluded life comes to an abrupt end when Athens must be evacuated and all citizens are taken across the channel to the island of Salamis. There Aster has freedom to run, play, gather food, and learn survival techniques from Phryne. In spite of her sheltered upbringing, she discovers within herself the courage to undertake a dangerous mission to warn Themistokles of treachery.

Demeas, the son of an olive tree farmer, narrates *The Walls of Athens*. He returns with his family to their burned farm and ruined olive grove after the defeat of the Persians. When all of the other strong young men are called to Athens to rebuild the city walls, Demeas resents being left behind to help his wounded father restore the farm. One day he comes across a runner who has fallen and broken his leg while carrying a secret message to Themistokles, and Demeas agrees to carry the message all the way to Sparta for him. As he passes through the beautiful Greek countryside left unravaged by the war, Demeas discovers how much he loves his farm and Athens. He pushes himself to the edge of his physical endurance to carry a message that may save Athens from future destruction.

Lala, the young barbarian princess in *Persian Gold*, tells the tale of Themistokles's escape from Greece and his flight to the court of the Great King of Persia. Feisty and



courageous, she has been allowed to run and play with her brother Perdiccas instead of staying in the palace with the women. A perceptive narrator, Lala explains well the motivations for other characters' actions; her dialogue with Themistokles reveals why the Athenian council banished their general-hero and why he chose to defect to the enemy. Lala's extended discussion with the Athenian who came to write down her story provides insight into Themistokles, a man of confusing loyalties.

The theme connecting all of the stories is the question of motivation. What causes an Athenian general, a sheltered but proud freeborn girl, a young farm boy, and a clever princess to join forces, at great risk to themselves? These tales suggest that the impulse to act with courage and self-sacrifice crosses the boundaries of gender and social status.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Aster's mother live in self-imposed seclusion? Why does Phryne stay with the family? What does Lysia think of her status in the family?

What is Aster's attitude toward Lysia?

2. Why does Aster chase away her pets? What does this show about her attitude toward the evacuation? What is her mother's attitude? What is Phryne's?

3. At the end of *Crossing to Salamis*, Themistokles says to Aster, "Why then, you need, I should think, a man with a Spartan mother, and liberal views, and an estate in the country somewhere healthy and secluded," and immediately Androkles steps forward to offer a proposal of marriage. Why is this improbable resolution appropriate for this story?

4. Describe the Greek system of citystates. How was this system affected by the geography of the country?

5. What is the custom of Amyntas's court regarding fugitives who ask for protection from the king? Why is Themistokles so amazed that the queen offers him her child?

6. Why doesn't the Athenian captain of the merchant ship turn Themistokles over to the Athenian navy?

7. Who is the Athenian to whom Lala tells her story in *Persian Gold*? Check the afterword to see what sources Paton Walsh used in her research about Themistokles.

8. What motivates Aster, Demeas, and Lala to embark on their respective adventures? How are these motivations and stories connected?

9. What kind of a man is Themistokles: a brave and noble hero or a scoundrel and traitor who cheated to gain fame and fortune? Support your answer with examples of his conduct.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe the attitudes toward women and their roles in society portrayed by Myro, Phryne, Lysia, Aster, and Lala.
2. Describe the attitudes toward war portrayed by Nikias, Aster, Demeas, Perdiccas, and Themistokles.
3. As Demeas runs on the road to Sparta with his message for Themistokles, he thinks about Pheidippides, who also ran this way. Find out who Pheidippides was and the circumstances of his run.
4. Find out what happened to Themistokles after the end of Lala's story. How do you think he would have answered Lala's question: "How can it be that men love Athens? What kind of a city can it be? Themistokles, I am sure, must hate it now."
5. Read Paton Walsh's Farewell Great King and look for the places in the story where the events depicted in Children of the Fox occur. Where does the author add her young heroes? Are the roles they play probable? Does the device of telling the events through the words of a young hero make the motivations of Themistokles and the other real historical figures more understandable?
6. Read Paton Walsh's article "History Is Fiction" in Horn Book (February 1972). Describe how Children of the Fox fits her description of a historical novel.

What does she mean by a "costume novel"? What books have you read that have a setting in the past but are not historical novels as Paton Walsh defines them?

For Further Reference

Paton Walsh, Jill. "History Is Fiction."

Horn Book 48 (February 1972): 17-23.

Discusses the nature of historical fiction.

"The Rainbow Surface." Times Literary Supplement (December 3, 1971). Reprinted in *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*, edited by Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlow, and Griselda Barton. New York: Atheneum, 1978. Paton Walsh's reflection on the difference between writing for children and writing for adults.

Townsend, John Rowe. "Jill Paton Walsh." In *A Sounding of Storytellers: New and Revised Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*. New York: Lippincott, 1979. An analytical essay about Paton Walsh intended for critics and teachers. Includes autobiographical note.

Related Titles

Paton Walsh wrote an adult novel about Themistokles entitled *Farewell Great King* (1972). Written as a letter from Themistokles to his lord Artaxerxes on the night before he takes his own life, this work is much longer and more difficult than *Children of the Fox*, but it reveals more of Themistokles's character and motivation. It is interesting to compare the historical insight gained from this complex work and the one gained from reading stories the author consciously crafted for a younger audience.

Another of Paton Walsh's challenging pieces of historical fiction is *The Emperor's Winding Sheet*, which recreates the fall of Constantinople. Winner of the prestigious Whitbread Award, this novel, intended for a young adult audience, is also more complex than *Children of the Fox*.

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