

# Cirak's Daughter Short Guide

## Cirak's Daughter by Charlotte MacLeod

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## Overview

Cirak's Daughter deals with many basic human issues, including the search for identity, family relationships, the nature of inheritance, the conflict of revenge and forgiveness, truth and lying, and the problem of mental illness. These significant themes are exemplified in an appealing and convincing cast of characters and explored through the plot device of a murder to be solved. The result is a suspenseful mystery story which entertains readers but also gives them much to think about as well as solving the crime.

The situation in which the nineteen-year-old protagonist finds herself is essentially a realistic and universal one. Young Jenny Cirak ventures into the past life of her father in order better to understand herself. Investigating the mystery of his death brings her into contact with a different lifestyle, that of a small New England town, and with a variety of people representing differing facets of familial loyalties and conflicts. Although the themes are profound, the touch is light, for the author writes with considerable humor and a lively, colloquial style. The inherently melodramatic event of a murder is never treated melodramatically but is dealt with through believable characters in a realistic setting and with casual, relaxed dialogue.

## About the Author

Charlotte MacLeod was born on November 12, 1922, in Bath, New Brunswick, Canada. Her parents were Edward Philips and Mabel Maude MacLeod. After moving to the United States, she attended public schools in Weymouth, Massachusetts. She also attended what is now the Art Institute of Boston. A staff member of an advertising firm in Boston from 1952-1982, she has also published several mystery novels for adults as well as for young adults. In addition she has contributed short stories to many well-known magazines, including Good Housekeeping and Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. Her mysteries are notable for their humor and for their portrayal of strong female characters. A few of her novels are published under the pen names of Matilda Hughes and Alisa Craig.

# Setting

The story is set in Meldrum, a small town in the smallest state, Rhode Island. For Jenny, having been brought up in city surroundings, small-town life is a completely new experience.

She finds that her back yard is contiguous with that of the neighbors, and on her first night in her new house she is frightened to see someone standing under a near-by tree. She also learns to her surprise that everyone in the town knows everyone else, and indeed most people seem to be somehow related to each other. Whether actually related or not, they know all about each other's lives, and gossip is a well-cultivated art. There are some exquisite scenes of local life, as when Jenny attends a dinner party at the elegant household of the well-to-do Firbelle family. The New England food from clam chowder to pumpkin pie, the furniture and fireplace, the family portraits, all combine to create a tableau of local color. Jenny's decision to stay in the Meldrum house becomes an important part of her reaching maturity.



# Social Sensitivity

Several important social issues are treated with a good deal of sensitivity.

The characterization of the protagonist is handled particularly well. Jenny is depicted as a strong, independent young woman, not merely intelligent and imaginative, but also totally capable of pursuing her own goals completely on her own. She is a wellrounded character, with the usual human faults of self-doubt and fear, but she is able to overcome them. Jenny is a good role model for the teen-age reader.

The author also deals both sensitively and humorously with class distinctions. In the small town of Meldrum, the wealthy family of Firbelle is held in awe by most of the community, but a closer look at their life reveals significant problems. Jenny has been raised by a well-to-do aunt and uncle, for whom she has little respect and whom she is eager to escape. The lifestyle of the spoiled rich does not appeal to her.

Approaching the issue of social class from the other direction, the author depicts Jason Cirak as the "outsider," the immigrant of supposedly gypsy blood who tries to fit into the world of the prominent eastern family he marries into but who is never accepted.

Although Jason, too, is a well-rounded character with flaws as well as virtues, he generally comes through as a sympathetic figure worthy of Jenny's devotion to his memory.

MacLeod deals with the social issue of mental illness through two of the characters. In both cases the reader meets the character, along with Jenny, as a normal individual, but the mental problem is revealed only in a moment of crisis, when the person acts irrationally. In each case the point is made that the mental illness should be treated as illness and not as a family secret to be covered up and lied about. The social sensitivity toward such topics as mental illness, class distinction and rejection of outsiders in a closed society is carefully integrated into the main theme of Jenny's search for her own identity through solving the mystery of her father's death.



# Literary Qualities

Although *Cirak's Daughter* is by no means a simple novel to be read merely for the plot, it is a very exciting and suspenseful mystery story. As Jenny attempts to interpret the scant evidence she has concerning her father's death and the nature of the people who knew him in Meldrum, the reader is piqued, misled, aroused, and gratified along with her. The author maintains Jenny's point of view on the various characters and situations that arise during her adventure, even though the narrative is not told in the first person.

The style is lively, both in dialogue and exposition. The dialogue is skillfully associated with the speaker. Jenny, for example, talks with youthful energy and verve, while Marguerite Firbelle speaks slowly and carefully, with an effort at dignity. The poor cousin Beth speaks in a self-effacing and whining tone. The exposition is also vivid, enlivened by clever similes and analogies. The elderly woman's Scottish accent is described thus: the old lady's "r's rolled out like the snare drums of the Queen's Own Highlanders." The ebullient lady herself is characterized as "a Caledonian version of Mrs. Santa Claus."

The opening passage in the novel is strikingly unconventional. The first item one reads is an obituary notice about Jason Cirak. Then, as the first chapter begins, Jenny is reading palms and telling fortunes at a party. This dramatic beginning is effectively designed to draw the reader into the story.

The characterization is subtly convincing. A few of the less important figures are sketched with what may seem just a few brush strokes, but they come through as individuals. The author has a knack for selecting the right details of dress, of conversational style or gesture, to capture the sense of personality. The character of Jason develops for the reader along with Jenny's increasing knowledge about him. As an absent father he takes on a mythic dimension. As we piece together the details about him, it becomes clear that he was not the villain that Jenny's family had painted him to be. On the other hand, he was a kind of trickster figure, capable of making money not by actual cheating but by taking advantage of his knowledge of human nature to play an occasional wily trick. Jenny clearly resembles her father when she assumes the identity of the fortune teller, and when she pretends to be a gypsy. She assumes a disguise and lies about her age with ease. Jenny and Harriet both develop as characters during the course of the action, while the others do not develop but rather emerge as Jenny learns more about them and sees them in more informal settings.

When the murderer is finally revealed, the truth, surprising as it should be, is consistent with characterization and with details of the plot. The author resists the temptation to give the tale a pat romantic ending.



# Themes and Characters

As in most good novels, themes and characters are virtually inseparable.

The central character, Jenny, is a strong-willed, independent, and highly imaginative nineteen-year-old. Unhappy with her weak mother and her dominating relatives who take care of her after her father's desertion, she is baffled but elated when she learns that her recently deceased father, Jason Cirak, has left her both a house and a fortune. She takes the opportunity to leave the uncomfortable nest and go claim her inheritance, living alone in the Meldrum house. When the reader first encounters her, in the opening chapter, she is telling fortunes at a social gathering in her new home town.

She is wearing a wig and an unbecoming cocktail dress intended to make her look older than she is. Her powers of observation are keen, and her perceptions of human nature sharp so that her guess-work fortunes ring true. Her introduction to the local community thus makes a vivid impression. Since her aim is to learn more about the father whom she has never known, particularly to find out how he died, she seeks out as much information as she can from the people she meets who also knew him when he lived in Meldrum.

Her search is aided by another visitor, a mysterious middle-aged woman named Harriet, who unexpectedly shows up on her doorstep with an unlikely story about having received a package mailed to her from Jenny's address and containing a blood-stained jacket. Jenny instinctively trusts this woman, who agrees to pose as a visiting aunt in order to help unravel the circumstances surrounding the mysterious death of Jason Cirak. Harriet plays a maternal role for Jenny, and the two women become close friends. Her competence, her experience in the business world, and her somewhat puzzling interest in the fate of Jason Cirak make her an invaluable helper. One of the themes her role introduces is that of the foster mother, as she is clearly a better mother than Jenny's own, who is depicted as both weak and spoiled. The friendship of the two generations is also stressed, as the author comments at one point in their relationship. "Two women, one older and one younger than either had realized until now, sat side by side."

The theme of family relationships is also represented in the complex Firbelle family, with its wealthy matriarch, Marguerite, and its apparently poor cousin, Beth. Marguerite dominates through her control of the finances. When Jenny reads her palm, however, she finds a sign of potential danger which obviously distresses the dowager. At the opposite extreme from the elegant elderly lady is the frumpy young cousin, Beth. What first impresses Jenny is the fact that Beth has to make her own clothes, which she does badly. Although she seems to be badly treated by her rich relatives, she also seems to be very active in helping with such matters as church socials. It is Beth who found the body of Jason Cirak at his house.

Several male characters appear, mostly in brief but vividly sketched vignettes. Like all of the characters in the novel, they are seen strictly from the perspective of Jenny.





Lawrence MacRae, photographer for the local newspaper, is the grandson of a Scottish matron, Mrs. Gillespie, who has been feuding for years with Mrs. Firbelle. She speaks with the Scottish trilled "r" which MacRae also adopts on occasion. Jenny's initial reaction to him is negative because he refuses to have his palm read. She also feels alienated from two other young men. Jack, a member of the Firbelle family, is noted for his laziness. A lawyer who passed his bar exam, he never practiced law.

Greg, who married into the family, is a flirt.

Sue and Bill Giles are not family members, but Sue's love of gossip provides Jenny with much information about them and others in the town. Bill is interestingly portrayed, as a seemingly normal young man who is revealed as having a mental problem. At a party he suddenly viciously attacks a boy who inadvertently bumped into him. The theme of mental illness is introduced through Bill and repeated in another major character, but his revelation is not made until very near the end of the novel.

The character about whom we learn most, apart from Jenny and Harriet, is the one who never appears. The deceased Jason Cirak is a presence throughout the novel as Jenny learns more and more about him from several people who knew him. Jenny also feels that she resembles him, both in appearance, as his photograph reveals, and in personality, which she gradually reconstructs in her Meldrum adventure.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the author begin the novel with the scene of Jenny's palm reading at a party?
2. What about Harriet's personality makes Jenny trust her so quickly when she is usually cautious about strangers?
3. The ending of the novel is indecisive because Jenny is indecisive about her future. Apart from wanting to stay in the house that she inherited from her father, she has no plans. What do you think she should do? Should she become the writer she has always pretended to be? Should she marry Larry MacRae? Should she live with her stepmother since they have become such good friends?
4. Do you find the explanation of the motive for the murder convincing?
5. How does the feud between the wealthy dowager, Marguerite Firbelle, and the Scottish grandmother, Ellspeth Gillesie, contribute to the narrative?
6. How does the character of Jason Cirak add up by the outcome of the novel? What are his good and bad points? Is Jenny justified in her defense of him?
7. The relative rights of biological and adoptive mothers is an issue which has received much publicity recently.  
  
How do you feel about Jenny's natural mother versus her adoptive mother?  
  
What concepts of motherhood does each of these women embody?
8. Are any of the characters in the novel "evil"? Is there a conflict between good and evil?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Because the story is told from Jenny's point of view, the expository language is frequently colloquial. Discuss this stylistic feature, citing specific examples of colloquial language used for exposition, not dialogue.
2. Trace the evolution of Jason Cirak's character, which emerges bit by bit through Jenny's experiences in Meldrum. Why is she ultimately very proud of him although she was brought up to dislike him?
3. How does Jenny develop during the course of the novel? In what ways does she mature? Cite specific instances to demonstrate her growth toward maturity.
4. Jenny occasionally misinterprets situations. Cite some examples and suggest why she misinterprets them. Is she a good judge of human behavior?
5. How does the element of humor contribute to the effectiveness of the novel? Cite examples.
6. Discuss what clues the author gives the reader as to the identity of the murderer. Is the revelation a surprise or is the careful reader prepared to expect it?



## For Further Reference

Beatty, Cynthia. "Cirak's Daughter" *Voice of Youth Advocates* 5 (February, 1983): 38. Brief synopsis of the plot and relates Jenny's amateur detective work to her developing knowledge of herself and her father.

Burns, Mary M. "Cirak's Daughter."

*Horn Book* 58 (October 1982): 520.

Praises both the suspenseful plot and the clarity of description. She compares Harriett with Agatha Christie's detective, Miss Marple.

Stevenson, Drew. "Cirak's Daughter."

*School Library Journal* 29 (December 1982): 81. This reviewer focuses on the carefully constructed plot and on the sharp characterization.

## Related Titles

In other novels for young adults, MacLeod also focuses on the theme of family and features teenage heroines who solve mysteries. In *We Dare Not Go A-Hunting*, the young protagonist, Molly, hired as baby-sitter in a summer resort, turns detective to solve a kidnapping. In *Maid of Honor*, the title character solves the mystery of a missing wedding gift. Both suspenseful novels are strong on characterization.



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