

Clan Ground Short Guide

Clan Ground by Clare Bell

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Overview

In *Clan Ground*, Clare Bell creates a suspenseful fantasy set in a believable alternate universe. She addresses issues of leadership, technology, and social development through a story about Ratha, the leader of an intelligent band of wildcats called the Named.

The story is a beast tale—a type of animal fantasy that depicts the ways of animals within the natural world while also using the animal characters to comment on human society. Even though the animals in *Clan Ground* behave in ways that are instinctive and animal-like, they also possess speech and intelligence. Their efforts to build and maintain their way of life dramatize the human struggle to create a lasting culture. Bell uses her story to highlight other real-world concerns, such as the value of freedom, the changes brought about by new technologies, the meaning of responsible leadership, and the role of religion in shaping both hopes and fears within a community.

About the Author

Born in England in 1952, Clare Bell worked in television production, welding, design, and computer testengineering before she wrote her first book, *Ratha's Creature*, the story of a prehistoric wildcat who learns to tame fire. Since that time, she has continued to write fantasy and science fiction for children and adults. Included among her works are the further adventures of Ratha in *Clan Ground* and *Ratha and Thistle-Chaser*. Her time-travel fantasy *Tomorrow's Sphinx*, which involves a pair of cheetahs, also showcases the author's fascination with wild cats. Her stories tend to have sociological themes as well, exploring the changes that are brought about in human culture through technology. Bell says that the central theme of her fiction is evolution, and she lists the fantasy and science fiction of C. S. Lewis, Arthur C. Clarke, and Olaf Stapledon among her influences. Bell holds degrees in biology and chemistry, and she continues to work as a scientist and engineer in addition to writing fiction. A naturalized citizen of the United States, she makes her home in San Jose, California.

Setting

The setting for Clan Ground is an alternate prehistoric time, where the most intelligent beings on Earth are the huge wildcats who call themselves the Clan or the Named. The members of the Clan have evolved beyond their animal origins. They have created a language and a distinct way of life.

They herd, rather than hunt, the animals they need for food, and through the efforts of their leader, Ratha, they have secured the use of fire to warm themselves and to ward off enemies.

As the story opens, the herders and Firekeepers of the Clan are celebrating their now famed victory over the raider cats called the Un-Named, who in the past stole from the Clan herds and attempted to destroy the Clan. The celebration recalls Ratha's taming of the fire-creature, the weapon that the Clan used to drive off their attackers. While the Named enact a dance-hunt to honor their leader, a stranger approaches and asks to join the Clan. The silver-gray cat is brought before Ratha, who sees the light of intelligence in his deep orange eyes. Eventually, Ratha accepts him and gives him a Clan name, Shongshar. But she does not realize that one day Shongshar will challenge her, not only for the control of the fire that she calls "her creature," but for the leadership of the Clan itself.

Social Sensitivity

Clan Ground is a study of how some societies change. Both religion and technology play important roles in that change, for good and for ill. While Shongshar uses religion to manipulate the other characters and to control the Clan, the author is also careful to point out that religion need not be oppressive. Ratha allows a less dogmatic form of fire-worship to take place under her rule because she sees that her people have a need to express themselves through religion.

Male and female characters have equally important roles in the story.

While Shongshar becomes a villain, he is not entirely unsympathetic. His bitterness over the loss of his cubs makes his resentment real and his wish for power understandable. Some readers may find Ratha's abandonment of Shongshar's witless cubs disturbing, even in the context of fantasy, because of its possible human parallels with infanticide or abortion. Parents and teachers may want to discuss the rationale for Ratha's choice and her feelings about it with their young readers.

References to sexuality in the book are placed within the context of animal mating instincts and the desire to reproduce. Sexuality is treated honestly as a fact of nature, but the author does not dwell on it and there are no explicit mating scenes.

Literary Qualities

Clan Ground is animal fantasy at its best. The characterizations of the animals are convincingly feline. The Named swat each other with their paws, growl and purr, engage in hunting and stalking, and forget their dignity during the mating season. Yet the culture Bell creates for her cats has much in common with human society.

The power struggles, the need for religion, the reliance on innovation and technology within the Clan are all reminders to the reader of the problems and complexities of human society.

Bell's love for both the animal and the human world is apparent.

The writer's descriptions of both place and character are beautifully detailed and help to create a fictional universe that remains believable even at its most bizarre. The cats Ratha, Fessran, Bira, and Shongshar are drawn in depth and complexity. Especially worthy of note is the subtle characterization of Thakur, the herding teacher, and his growing bond of affection with the treeling Aree.



Themes and Characters

The most important characters in the book are Ratha and Shongshar, as well as Fessran, leader of the Clan's Firekeepers, and Thakur, the Clan's kindhearted, solitary herding teacher. These characters are central to the powerstruggle that Bell portrays developing within the Clan.

At first, Shongshar makes every effort to please Ratha and the other members of the Clan. But trouble begins when the newcomer mates with a Named female and sires two cubs that display none of the intelligence required within the Clan. Ratha has seen such "witless" litters before, and knows that she cannot permit Shongshar's cubs to stay, because eventually they will become dangerous. Shongshar knows this too, but cannot bring himself to abandon his own cubs. In the end, Ratha and Thakur are forced carry the cubs away from clan ground and leave them to the elements. Shongshar, convinced that his cubs are dead, becomes bitter and begins to seek power over the rest of the Clan.

The control and influence that religion can have over a group of people is one of the book's important themes.

Shongshar observes the behavior of the Named and realizes that fire is not merely a tool to them. They treat it as a living being, some with an almost superstitious regard. Shongshar begins to use the Clan's reverence for the fire in order to manipulate them and turn them against each other. He convinces the Firekeeper leader, Fessran, to keep a master fire inside a great cave to protect it from the elements. Initially this seems a sensible idea, but Ratha soon notices that the Firekeepers have become arrogant and bossy, and are forbidding the herding cats from entering the cave—unless they can buy their way inside with meat.

The cave becomes a kind of temple—a place of elaborate ritual and dance controlled by the Firekeepers.

Many of the herders are prevented from entering, while the Firekeepers begin to regularly accept "offerings" of meat from those who are allowed inside. The fire becomes the Clan's god, and Shongshar its most powerful priest. Division and hatred begin to rule the Clan. Even though Ratha sees what is going on, she can do nothing to stem the irrational worship of the thing she once called her "creature." Instead, she watches and waits for an opportunity to challenge Shongshar.

The meaning of leadership is another important theme. Ratha's easygoing leadership style is contrasted with Shongshar's rule through fear and intimidation. Ratha, always willing to try new ideas, sees great benefit for the Clan in Thakur's pet treeling, Aree. The herding teacher has adopted this small monkey-like creature and trained it to handle fire far more skillfully than any member of the Clan. Ratha views Aree and her offspring as a valuable resource, able to accomplish tasks with far greater ease than the Named. But Fessran and Shongshar see the treelings as a threat and an insult to their



sacred fire-creature. Shongshar attempts to kill the treelings, but Thakur and another Firekeeper, Bira, manage to save them, and afterwards flee clan ground. Ratha herself is driven out by Shongshar shortly thereafter.

Only when her authority is taken from her does Ratha realize her own responsibility for what has happened to her people. She must relearn her leadership skills while in exile with Thakur and Bira. She also relearns her hunting skills to provide meat for the others. She teaches Bira to hunt. Gradually she comes to realize that "her position as Clan leader [has] distanced her from her people." She must become one of them again in order to win them back.

Ratha and her friends are able to regain control of the Clan through another innovation. They dig an earth trench to divert the flow of a nearby river to some cracks leading into the fire-cave's roof. The resultant flood quenches the master-fire in the cave and drowns many of its worshippers.

A duel follows in which Ratha kills Shongshar with assistance from Thakur, Bira, and Fessran, who has finally seen her error in helping Shongshar.

The Clan, tired of the gray cat's harsh rule, agrees to follow Ratha again. Instead of outlawing the worship of the fire, Ratha decides to let it continue—as long as it takes place in the open and everyone is free to join in.

The book ends on a joyful note with the Clan reunited, dancing together around the fire.



Topics for Discussion

1. Ratha gives Shongshar the choice of leaving clan ground with his cubs, or abandoning them away from clan ground. Is this a fair choice? Could Ratha have arrived at a different solution or offered Shongshar another alternative? Why or why not?

2. Thakur senses that Aree and the other treelings can change the Clan's way of life with their special abilities.

What other tasks might the treelings help the Named to perform?

3. In the first chapter, Thakur is made uneasy by the Clan's dance-hunt and its use of fire in the ceremony.

What details of the ritual justify Thakur's concern? How do these concerns foreshadow the conflicts that occur later in the book?

4. The cats of the Clan refer to their herd-animals as "dapple-backs" and "three-horns." Fire is called "the Red Tongue." What other examples of Clan language can you find in the book?

How do these words and expressions help build the writer's fantasy world?

5. In Chapter 14, Ratha tells Thakur that Shongshar's words "give me a feeling in my belly that I don't like."

She is unable to explain this feeling to the other members of the Clan, however. If you were in Ratha's place, what words might you use to explain your reservations about Shongshar to the Clan?

6. What does Bell mean when she states that Ratha's leadership has distanced her from her people? How does holding a position of authority change someone?

7. Is it believable that Ratha would allow the worship of fire to continue after she regains her rule of the clan?

What are her reasons for this decision?

What important differences exist between Shongshar's fire-worship and the fire-dance that Ratha joins at the end of the book?

8. Ratha, Bira, and Thakur have to relearn some of their hunting skills after they leave the Clan. What aspects of Clan life might have made them less able to survive on their own? What do you think the author is trying to say about the effects of civilization on an individual's ability to survive alone?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In Chapter 16, Thakur is forced to bare his throat as a gesture of submission before the fire. He says, however, that he is really submitting to Shongshar: "This talk of serving the Red Tongue's power is nothing but a lie."

How does Shongshar use the Clan's reverence for the fire to build up his own power?

2. One reviewer criticized Clan Ground as being wordy, or full of unnecessary descriptions that simply slow down the story. Do you agree with this criticism? Find some examples of writing in the book that you like or dislike and explain why the author's use of language is good or bad.

3. Compare this book with Bell's earlier novel about the Clan, *Ratha's Creature*. Which do you think is the better book? Does the character of Ratha change more in the first book, or in this one? What about Thakur and Fessran? How much do they change?

4. What role does technology play in the book? What new inventions are created by the Clan and what effect do they have on the group? In what ways can Aree and the other treelings be considered "technology"?

5. What qualities make Ratha a good leader and how are these qualities displayed? What qualities make Thakur a good teacher, both to the cubs and the treelings? Give examples from the book of Ratha's and Thakur's different skills.

How do their differing abilities and attitudes create conflict between the two characters? How do Ratha and Thakur use their differing skills to cooperate?

For Further Reference

Review. *Best Sellers* (April, 1985): 38-39.

Calls *Clan Ground* a timely and "intensely gripping" story about the use and misuse of power, and recommends the book for both adults and young adults.

Review. *Booklist* (September 1, 1984): 58. Praises the suspense and action in Bell's novel while noting that the book is "marred by some didacticism and lack[s] the impact of its prequel."

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (January, 1985): 80.

Praises the "convincing personalities and culture of Ratha and her fellow felines," but finds the book's pace too slow and the writing style excessively wordy.

Review. *English Journal* (February, 1986): 106. Calls *Clan Ground* "a thoughtful and inventive presentation of an alternate world," but finds the characters not as convincingly feline as in the first book.

Review. *Junior Bookshelf* (February, 1987): 52. The critic praises Bell's work for its drama and characterizations, but maintains that the story would have been better served if the characters had been human beings rather than cats. "The dimension in which it moves gains nothing by being set in a feline world."

Review. *School Librarian* (August, 1987): 249. Praises Bell's "strong, clear and interesting" characterizations and her exploration of mature themes such as power and responsibility.

"Clare Bell cleverly maintains her balancing act and keeps her characters convincingly feline."

Review. *School Library Journal* (October, 1984): 164. Praises Bell's emphasis on the evolution of culture, and finds her characters to be "authentically wild and feline and also sensitive, intelligent and complicated."

Related Titles

The story of the Clan's first battle with the Un-Named, and of Ratha's quest to tame fire, is told in Ratha's Creature. After the events which take place in Clan Ground, Ratha's further adventures are related in the book Ratha and Thistle-Chaser.



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