

# Coram Boy Short Guide

## Coram Boy by Jamila Gavin

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# Contents

<a href="#">Coram Boy Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>



## Overview

Winner of the 2001 Whitbread Award, *Coram Boy* relates the intertwining stories of Meshak Gardiner and Alexander Ashbrook, two young men of different abilities and backgrounds who nonetheless find their fate inextricably linked. Meshak, the mentally handicapped son of Otis Gardiner, helps his father dispose of unwanted children; generally infants whose mothers think that Mr. Gardiner will transport them to Coram Hospital, a newly-created facility to care for abandoned children. Able to convince the distraught mothers that their newborns will be well-cared for in exchange for a small fee, Mr. Gardiner later hands the infants over to Meshak, who then buries the children in the woods. Years of burying infants and selling older ones into slavery have made Mr. Gardiner rich, but one day he is accused of blackmailing the wealthy mothers of these children. Everyone believes that he was hanged for his crimes and that his son, Meshak, quietly slipped away. Not until years later do people realize what happened to the Gardiners and all of the abandoned children.

## About the Author

Born to an English mother and Indian father, award-winning children's author Jamila Gavin entered the world on August 9, 1941, in Mussoorie, India, a town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Growing up, she spent time in both India and England, though she once told ACHUKA, a Web site devoted to British authors and illustrators, that she saw her mother as her main source of early education.

I remember lessons on the veranda with her in India—learning to read and even learning a bit of French.... I didn't enjoy school. I was naughty and didn't do my best. I didn't enjoy formal learning, and did much better when I found things out for myself throughout the rest of my life.

However much Gavin disliked school, she did enjoy music, studying in both Germany and France before graduating from the Trinity College of Music.

Gavin is known for introducing readers to the Indian world. She often uses her experiences in India as inspiration for her young adult works. Early in her professional career, Gavin worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as both a radio studio manager and a television production assistant. She married television producer Barrie Gavin, from whom she is now divorced, and had two children with him, Rohan Robert and Indra Helen. In 1979, Gavin began her career as an author of children's literature with the publication of *The Magic Orange Tree and Other Stories*.

Other books for children and young adults followed, including the well-received "Surya" series, featuring an Indian brother and sister who set out to find their long-lost father.



# Setting

Set in mid-1700s, *Coram Boy* takes readers on a trip through England, exposing them to the lifestyle of wealthy aristocrats as well as the dreary existence of orphaned children. In the 1700s, children, in general, faced a much different rearing than that of modern Western standards. Children unfortunate enough to be born to the lower classes often were sent to work at a young age to support the family, receiving little, if any, education. Those fortunate enough to attend school, either through their parents' own affluence or by scholarship, often endured mistreatment by miserable school headmasters. Perhaps most of all, orphans found themselves in the worst predicament.

With little social structure in place to care for indigent youngsters, children old enough to work are forced to gain employment, and those too young for work are often left to beg on the street. To be a child, particularly a poor one, in Georgian England was not always pleasant.

Throughout the novel, Gavin takes readers through the English countryside as characters pass through it on their way to the cities of Gloucester and London, as well as on the way to the Ashbrook family's immense estate. Readers get a sense of urban living as Thomas Ledbury describes his family's home in Gloucester as: one [room] up, one down, and his mother smoking her herrings, the chickens and hens strutting in and out of the door as if they owned the place, and all his brothers and sisters tumbling around, the big ones in charge of the little ones, each with their tasks, and his father with shirt sleeves rolled above his elbows and bibbed apron, hammering and sawing, and the geese honking demandingly, the pig snuffling in its box out in the yard and a cow tethered to the shed. That was his home.

Contrasting the Ledbury residence is the grand estate of Ashbrook. As Thomas sees it for the first time, he is in awe and cannot imagine that anyone "normal" lives there.

Alexander Ashbrook's family home begins with: a landscape of smooth deforested slopes which extended into cultivated lawns, hedgerows and paved walkways culminating in an artificial lake. In the middle of the lake stood a small Greek temple. Beautiful ornamental gardens were bursting with flowers.... Dominating it all was the finest house Thomas could ever have imagined: a huge honey-stoned mansion of steeply pitched stone-slatted roofs, gables and elaborate cornices, of tall chimney stacks and mullioned windows.

Through her descriptions, Gavin takes readers into the world of eighteenth-century England. While the wealthy were often fabulously rich, the working classes just had enough to get by. By describing a basic necessity like housing, Gavin relays to her reader information about English social structure. As she continues, the author uses these two polarities to show how a simple thing modern readers often take for granted, a roof over one's head, means much more than that in *Coram Boy*.

## Social Sensitivity

Several delicate social issues are presented in Gavin's book, including the treatment of the mentally challenged, racial inequality, and out of wedlock pregnancies.

For much of his life, Meshak endures brutality at the hands of his father who does not seem to understand, or perhaps even care, that his son has thoughts and feelings of his own. Few people look kindly on Meshak, using him as a workhorse with little regard for his well-being. At the end of the story, his own father sends him to America as a slave, hoping to be rid of him and the secrets he possesses. Similarly, attitudes towards blacks, as seen in the treatment of Toby, are equally disturbing. Toby is dressed up as a plaything, entertaining rich women at lavish parties. Treated like an object, Toby is owned by Mr. Gardiner for the amusement of others. When the young African child grows older and ceases to be interesting to his guests, Mr. Gardiner intends to sell him into slavery, considering Toby to be an investment that will one day post him a profit.

Unwed mothers is another topic that is explored in *Coram Boy*. Depending on her social situation, a mother often abandoned her child either because she was poor and could not afford to feed it or because she was not married and an illegitimate child would affect her ability to find a future husband. Rather than letting their child starve, poor women would sometimes attempt to find a place in the world for their offspring, a place where the child would have a chance at life. Wealthier families would try to hide any evidence that their daughters were unchaste, sending the unwanted child away to be cared for by someone else. As Gavin notes in the story, for the poor mother and the rich mother, the heartbreak of losing a child was the same. Mothers cried and wailed as they handed their infants to Mr. Gardiner, despondent at losing their child, but hopeful their child would live a better life, a hope that in *Coram Boy* was tragically unfounded.



## Literary Qualities

Gavin imbues her text with a richness of historical details that allows the reader to gain a better understanding of the social climate in the middle of the eighteenth century. Urban areas are described in all of their filth and bustle, as are the docks, filled with all sorts of unsavory characters. Transportation methods are difficult, taking much time to travel about the land, letting readers understand why individuals like Thomas rarely, if ever, left the city in which they were born. The leisurely life of the Ashbrooks, enjoying the services of maids, butlers, and other physical laborers, contrasts sharply with the life of the Ledbury family and with the life of Meshak, who performs hard physical labor all of his life. By adding all of these historical facts to the story, Gavin captures the atmosphere of England in the 1700s and offers a believable scenario for her tale. At the same time, though, the amount of historical material does not overwhelm the reader or pose a problem to the reader unfamiliar with English history. Gavin strikes a balance between providing enough historical information to establish the setting of her story, but not so much history as to confuse or deter the reader.

Another interesting aspect of *Coram Boy* is the way in which Gavin interweaves the life of Meshak, a simpleton, with the life of Alexander Ashbrook. At first glance, the mentally challenged son of an itinerant peddler would seem to have little to do with the heir of a grand estate. However, Gavin carefully crafts a tale that, through a series of plot twists, Meshak turns out to be one of the most important characters in Alexander's life. To the author's credit, the plot's path does not seem forced or contrived, instead flowing smoothly from one page to the next.



## Themes and Characters

Coratn Boy tells the story of Meshak Gardiner, a mentally-challenged young man who helps his father, the peddler Otis Gardiner. Thought to be a simpleton, Meshak is treated by his father as if he were a servant rather than a son. Meshak must care for all of the animals, carrying their belongings and tend to all of the wares as the duo travel around the countryside, selling pots, pans, and a sundry of other items.

It is Meshak who also must keep an eye on the children left in the care of Mr. Gardiner, children who everyone believes are going to a London orphanage, the Coram Hospital. However, in reality, Mr. Gardiner sells the older male children to the military, the older female children to harem-seekers of North Africa, and tells Meshak to bury the infants, dead or alive, in the forest.

Thinking that Meshak is a half-wit, Mr. Gardiner assumes that he does not possess the intellectual capacity to understand what he is doing. However, unlike his father, Meshak is deeply troubled by his work and his sleep is plagued by reoccurring nightmares about the children he buries. His only escape from these haunting images is to enter a trance, where he lies down as if dead and dreams about the beautiful angels he sees in the stained glass windows of churches. He also has faint memories of his mother, a woman who cared for him and loved him, but he knows nothing else of her.

Up until the last chapters of the story, readers receive two versions of Meshak.

One is the opinion that everyone has of him: a harmless simpleton, devoid of any independent thinking. In contrast to this is Meshak's own thoughts, as he expresses his feelings about murdering innocent children.

While it is clear that Meshak knows what he is doing is wrong, he does not act on those feelings. Meshak continues to bury the tiny infants and be haunted by terrible images.

Mr. Gardiner, on the other hand, has a shrewd mind but only one goal in life, that is to make money and join the upper classes.

When his blackmail scheme is discovered and people realize that the children he claims to rescue instead end up as slaves or dead, Gardiner is sentenced to hang. However, already being a man of wealth and with secrets on high-ranking officials, a different man is sent to the gallows in place of Mr.

Gardiner. Mr. Gardiner, unbeknownst to others, makes his way to London, establishing himself as Philip Gaddarn, philanthropist to Coram Hospital. No one knows how he earned his great wealth, but, trying to influence others' opinions about his character, Mr. Gaddarn donates large sums of money to the orphanage and claims to place children in families to learn a trade. Actually, readers learn, Mr. Gaddarn uses his connections to the hospital to continue his child-trafficking trade and blackmail service.





Introduced a bit later in *Coram Boy* are the characters of Thomas Ledbury and Alexander Ashbrook. While Thomas is from a poor family and Alexander from a rich one, the two are brought together by a common love for music. Both students earned scholarships to the exclusive choir school at the cathedral of Gloucester. Thomas is an open boy, full of joy, and always ready to entertain others. He has a fine voice and talent for music but also recognizes the superior abilities of Alexander. While spending a summer vacation with Alexander and his family, Thomas's good nature brings happiness to the estate and Alexander's family regards him fondly, in spite of his lowly social status.

Alexander's family welcomes Thomas as a pleasant opposite to the moody, often introverted Alexander. Alexander wishes to pursue his love for music, much against the wishes of his father, Sir William Ashbrook.

But with the help of his mother, Lady Ashbrook, Alexander manages to attend the cathedral choir school, though Sir William insists that he return as soon as his voice breaks, or begins to deepen and sound more masculine. When the dreaded event happens, Alexander is summoned to the family estate, and Sir William insists that he, being the eldest son and heir to the Ashbrook land, begin learning how to manage it. The thought of losing his music proves to be too much for Alexander, who leaves the estate, preferring to lose his inheritance rather than his passion for music.

But before Alexander leaves to pursue his musical education, another character appears who plays a small, but important role in the book's development, a role that will eventually bring together the Ashbrook and Gardiner families. Living with the Ashbrooks are Mrs. Milcote, cousin to Lady Ashbrook and governess to the Ashbrook children, and her musically-talented daughter, Melissa. A demure and beautiful girl, Melissa forms a close friendship with Isobel, the eldest Ashbrook daughter. In turn, Melissa and Alexander quickly fall in love, a love that is consummated the night Alexander leaves the estate. Unbeknownst to Alexander, Melissa becomes pregnant with his child, a son secretly handed over to Otis Gardiner with the expectation that he will safely deliver it to Coram Hospital.

Instead of burying the child, Meshak decides to flee with it and takes the infant to Coram. Upon seeing Melissa earlier in the novel, he decided that she was the angel he dreamed about in the flesh and wants to protect her child. This child is called Aaron by the staff at Coram, and he develops into a boy with extraordinary musical talent, a gift that will one day lead him back to his father. While at Coram, Aaron strikes up an unbreakable bond with Toby, an African child Mr. Gardiner, while posing as Mr. Gaddarn, actually delivered to Coram. Purchasing the infant as he came off of a slave ship where he was born, Mr. Gardiner considered Toby an investment, intending to sell him as a slave as soon as he was old enough. Meshak, known to the boys as Mish, looks after Aaron and Toby, making sure they stay safe, particularly his beloved Aaron.

Actual historical figures appear in the novel including George Frideric Handel, famous for his *Messiah*. Handel appears in the novel as the organist for Coram Hospital's chapel. In real life, Handel actually did perform his *Messiah* at Coram Hospital.



Another historical character who makes an appearance in the book is Charles Burney, an important figure in English music during the eighteenth century. As well, the painter William Hogarth turns up in Gavin's novel, in a reference to a portrait of Sir Coram by Hogarth that Aaron noticed hanging in the main staircase of Coram Hospital, an actual work that still exists in the Coram facility.

Through all of these characters, Gavin relates many themes to her audience. Through the character of Alexander, readers understand that despite all of the wealth that may come with it, Alexander would never be happy as master of the Ashbrook estate.

Astutely realizing that a poor, disinterested manager would waste the family's holdings, Alexander bravely makes the decision to pursue his passion on his own terms, choosing a life of poverty and music over a life of money and no music. While he does not wish to dishonor his family or the Ashbrook name, Alexander realizes that more dishonor would be done if he neglected his musical abilities in favor of becoming a gentleman.

Friendship also plays an important role in *Coram Boy*. Though from opposite sides of the social spectrum, Thomas and Alexander develop a deep and lasting affection for each other. Alexander looks above Thomas's origins and respects him for what he is as a person: good-natured, honest, and loyal. Bonds between Isobel Ashbrook and Melissa Milcote are similar. Though related, the two girls occupy different rungs on the social ladder. However, as in the friendship between Thomas and Alexander, social standing does not affect their relationship.

Melissa relies on Isobel to help keep her pregnancy a secret, and Isobel even aids Melissa in delivering the child. Only eight years after the incident does the truth come out once Alexander returns home.

In Gavin's characters, readers get a sense of the social injustice that is present in mideighteenth-century England. Children born to poor mothers are abandoned by the side of the road to die. Orphaned children are left to beg in the streets, or worse, sold into slavery or to the military as conscripts.

Talented young men, like Alexander, are discouraged from pursuing a career in music as it would not befit a landed aristocrat.

Mentally challenged individuals, like Meshak, are mistreated and thought of as without feelings. Black-skinned persons, like Toby, are valued only for entertainment purposes and regarded as something like a pet, certainly not like a human being. While many of these attitudes have changed as society progresses through the centuries, readers are well aware that some have not. In *Coram Boy*, Gavin allows readers to measure how far Western culture has advanced and how much more still needs to be accomplished.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Otis Gardiner not abandon Meshak at birth, realizing him to be mentally challenged?
2. Why do few people care about the fate of orphans in mid-eighteenth-century England?
3. Is Alexander's befriending of Thomas believable considering their wildly different social standings?
4. How could Otis Gardiner transform himself into Philip Gaddarn, benefactor of Coram Hospital, without anyone seriously questioning his background?
5. Why is becoming a musician an unsuitable profession for a gentleman like Alexander?
6. Why does Toby not like the prospect of having to live in the Gaddarn household?
7. Why does Toby not tell anyone about Mr. Gardiner's secret tunnel and sale of orphan children?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the city of London in the 1700s.

Describing the conditions in the capital, present a report explaining what factors would cause a woman to abandon her child in the city.

2. Otis Gardiner sells young boys for service in the navy. Research common military recruitment techniques from this time, and compare them to modern standards.

3. Until Coram Hospital was founded around 1741, orphanages in England were of poor quality and did not care for children very well. Investigate the origins of Coram Hospital, and record how this institution changed the way orphans were cared for in England.

4. A gentleman's life has the outward appearance of being an idyllic one. Before looking for more information about aristocratic life, create a list of what you think the life of a gentleman or gentlewoman is like. After researching the subject, compare your original impressions with the information you find.

5. Sir Thomas Coram, George Frideric Handel, and Charles Burney are all actual individuals from history who appear in Coram Boy. Select one of these men and look for more information about him, relating what you learn to the character's importance in the story.

6. The women of the Ashbrook family appear to be educated but do not discuss their future beyond marriage. Search for more information about the life of an upper-class English woman of the mid-1700s and compare her life to the life of a contemporary woman.

7. While a new student at the cathedral choir school, Thomas was abused and mistreated by the other boys in a practice commonly referred to as hazing.

Find out more about this subject and contemporary attitudes towards this mistreatment of newcomers.

## For Further Reference

"Gavin, Jamila." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 125. Detroit: Gale, 2001. This entry presents a short overview of the author's life, including critical reception of her children's books.

Oravec, Kristen. Review of *Coram Boy*. *School Library Journal* (November 2001): 154. In her positive review of the book, Oravec claims that Gavin "skillfully weaves the various [plot] threads together, and the characters are well drawn."

Review of *Coram Boy*. *Kirkus Reviews* (September 2001): 1358. Offers a favorable assessment of the novel, recommending the book to fans of historical fiction.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

For readers who enjoyed the historical aspect of *Coram Boy*, Ruth K. McClure's nonfiction work *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (1981) discusses the origins of the institution and its effect on English treatment of orphans. Other works depicting the despair of English orphans and slums include the classic novel *Oliver Twist* (1838) by Charles Dickens. Here Dickens tells the story of a young orphan boy who turns to a life of crime before being rescued by a generous benefactor. Readers interested in a modern twist might wish to check out Melvin Burgess's 1996 work *The Baby and Fly Pie*. Set in a future London, the orphan Fly Pie survives life on the gritty streets by digging in rubbish heaps. One day he discovers a stolen baby, a child whose safe return is worth a seventeen million pound reward. Together with his sister, Fly Pie tries to take care of her, find the child's parents, and hopefully begin a new life of his own.



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