

# The Court of the Stone Children Short Guide

## The Court of the Stone Children by Eleanor Cameron

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## Overview

The Court of the Stone Children addresses philosophical questions, such as the nature of time and reality, that have occupied thinkers through the ages. It is also a lively, entertaining story that presents its thought-provoking ideas clearly and concretely, in a simple, readable style that never "talks down" to the reader.

On the one hand, there is a fascinating two hundred-year-old murder mystery to be solved. Clues are found in dreams, in an old diary, and in paintings which which intrigues Nina because she loves the feeling of the past which museums evoke.

Visiting the museum, Nina meets Dominique (Domi), a spirit-girl who lived in France during the time of Napoleon and whose family home has been moved to San Francisco to become this museum. Nina learns that Domi had been told in a dream during her own show scenes of the life of an eighteenth-century French family. The novel is filled with mysterious people and suspenseful situations that build to a satisfying climax. Its believable characters include teenagers and adults, both from the present day and from two centuries ago.

The characters form appealing friendships that span the usual barriers of differing backgrounds, generations, and even centuries.

Interwoven with the murder mystery are discussions by the characters of intriguing subjects: prophetic dreams; the relationship between time and space; mirrors as windows into other lives; and the possible existence of several levels of reality, all simultaneously true. The novel can be read and reread, with the reader's enjoyment deepening each time.

## About the Author

Eleanor Butler Cameron was born March 23, 1912, in Canada. She has lived in California most of her life, where she attended the University of California and the Art Center School in Los Angeles. Cameron has worked in advertising and as a research librarian, and has written since childhood. In 1950 she published her first novel, for adults, *The Unheard of Music*. Since then she has written sixteen novels for children and young adults and has authored numerous articles, as well as a critical work on children's literature.

Her earlier novels for young people— including *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* and its sequels—are imaginative, adventurous fantasies. In her later novels, including *The Court of the Stone Children*, she makes use of her own experiences and actual places, while retaining the magical quality of her earlier work.

Cameron's novels are widely admired for their strong sense of atmosphere and place, their depth of characterization, and their literate, poetic style. She has received many awards, including the 1973 National Book Award and an American Library Association Notable Book Award for *The Court of the Stone Children*.



## Setting

The Court of the Stone Children is set in present-day San Francisco, where Nina Harmsworth has recently moved from her beloved home in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Nina feels alone and sad; her parents are preoccupied, her schoolmates unfriendly, and she hates the ugly, closed-in apartment in which her family lives. One day she meets Gil Patrick, a boy her own age who—like Nina—is considered "odd" by other people. He mentions to her a place he likes, the nearby French Museum, lifetime that Nina would some day come to prove Domi's father innocent of the murder for which he was hanged.

As Nina delves into the mystery, the reader joins her to learn about the life and politics of the Napoleonic era. Nina also locates and rents (all on her own) a beautiful apartment where she and her parents can live happily. And at the museum she finds a second home, several new friendships, and a future career.

Museums are sometimes thought of as dry, uninteresting places, but the museum in this novel is shown to be a warm, human, lively locale. Here, the paintings of a long-dead artist and the figures of children carved in stone are found to hold truths that speak to modern visitors.

# Social Sensitivity

This novel encourages readers to aspire to worthy, even extraordinary, goals. Females appear in important roles and are depicted as being active, competent, and successful in ferreting out long-hidden truth. Those few males who are important characters are on equal footing with the females, and people of both genders show appreciation for each other.

Such violence as is referred to—the killing of Domi's father's manservant and the hanging of Domi's father—takes place "offstage." It is clearly subordinate to the intellectual puzzles of proving the innocence of a wronged man and of seeking answers to universal questions.

The novel's heroes are writers, painters, seekers of truth, and people courageous enough to stand up for what they believe. Painters and painting, for example, are at the center of the mystery, and the Chagall painting is the focus of the story's main theme. Statements by respected writers—including Albert Camus, Henri Bergson, William Shakespeare, and William Faulkner—are quoted, acknowledging the debt of modern thinkers to giants of the past.

The young adults in the novel have high aspirations. Gil has set himself the formidable task of collecting all recorded human expression—both verbal and visual—concerning the subject of time.

And Nina is encouraged in her ambition to become a museum curator, although the years of preparation for such a job are made clear. Thus, a young reader is encouraged to look beyond typical occupations and goals when considering a life's work. And the book reinforces in a dramatic way the importance (and fun) of doing research.

Finally, many young adults feel themselves to be oddities among their peers, finding it difficult to "fit in" with a more popular crowd. The novel makes clear that it is important to find one's own way in life, even though that road may lead in a different direction from the main highway.



# Literary Qualities

Cameron's style reflects the multiple levels of thinking required by the contents of *The Court of the Stone Children*.

Just as the mystery requires Nina to gather factual details to solve it, Cameron uses vivid, specific details to involve all the reader's senses: the aroma of Auguste's fresh-baked bread, the softness of a deep-piled carpet, and the hard, inharmonious sound of a museum bell. Colors are used not only as sensory details but also as symbols.

For instance, the greens and blues that prevail in the Chagall painting are echoed in time-student Gil's intense blue-green eyes and in the moss-green rug and wallpaper of the house where the centuries-old mystery is at last solved. Similarly, the stone children not only appeal to the reader's senses with their intriguing appearance, but also symbolize the lasting quality of human relationships.

On a more abstract level, just as there are non-factual questions raised by the novel, there is a mysterious, ambiguous mood that pervades the book. Although Nina is the only one who actually sees Domi, at times others are aware of an unexplained presence in the room. And Domi's spirit-cat Lisabetta, invisible to most human characters, is seen at one point by Auguste's cat. The reader continually has the feeling that what one sees may not be the whole truth.

Cameron's use of mood suggests that, even though definite answers may not be found to some questions, the quest for answers is itself valuable.

Cameron gives authenticity and importance to the story by including historical events and personages, including respected authors and painters, and presents historical and cultural information as an integral part of an entertaining story. Her vivid descriptions, sensory images, and rich characters fully involve the reader in a suspenseful, logical plot. These qualities engage the reader's mind, imagination, and emotions and form a memorable reading experience.



# Themes and Characters

The characters in *The Court of Stone Children* are of several generations, some of whom come from the past to influence events in the present. Several young adults are major characters, with Nina the most important. Also significant are Gil, a boy of this century, and Domi, a spirit-girl from the past.

Several adults are also important, but they assist, rather than lead, the younger characters' search for answers to the novel's puzzles.

Although Nina likes solitude, she also needs friends. She feels unhappy and insecure in her new home and in her school relationships, but has determined to improve her life. Nina loves old things (her "museum feeling," as she expresses it). The past represents a kind of security for her. She is drawn to Gil at least partly because he seems secure within himself. And although Nina is very bright, she realizes less quickly than the reader that Domi is actually from another century.

Gil understands Nina's loneliness and feeling of "strangeness," but doesn't care that people think him odd. He has an inner vision—a life goal—which he refers to as his "project," the compilation of all recorded human thought about the subject of time.

Domi appears to Nina as a girl of her own age, although in Domi's own lifetime she had grown older and died.

Even though the museum is her own French home, she feels uncomfortable because many personal articles are in display cases rather than lying about the rooms. Cherishing the memory of her father, she is certain he was innocent of the charges against him and is determined to see him vindicated. She appears only to Nina, with whom she feels a special rapport.

Several members of the museum staff are important characters. Mrs. Henry (Mam'zelle) is owner and curator of the museum and was responsible for bringing Domi's home from France to San Francisco. She sees herself in Nina and when the girl mentions her desire to become a curator, Mam'zelle encourages her. Mrs. Staynes, the museum registrar, is writing a book about Domi's father which portrays him as a murderer. Nina must find a way to disprove the accepted historical fact and convince Mrs. Staynes of the error. The caretaker Auguste has an "old-world" air about him and owns a cat named Lisabetta, an eerie reminder of Domi's spirit-cat of the same name.

Both Nina's and Gil's parents are flat characters, but together they express various attitudes toward time and human experience. Of importance also are Mrs. Kendrick, Nina's landlady, who searches for her other—more youthful—self in mirrors and Mrs. Threlkeld, the elderly owner of a house which Nina first sees in a dream.

The stone children, replicas of actual children of Domi's time, now stand in the museum courtyard and also function as characters. Though the stone figures never actually





move or speak, they convey emotions to Nina, sometimes seeming warm and inviting, while at other times seeming to withdraw into a private world. One of them is particularly important: Odile, who appears in Nina's dream and whose diary provides essential clues that help solve the mystery.

Prominently displayed in the museum is a painting by Marc Chagall titled *Time Is a River Without Banks*. The painting expresses the novel's central theme: that time cannot be compartmentalized into past, present, and future, but is a continuous whole. The reader's understanding of what is "real" at any given moment is challenged. Paintings, mirrors, dreams, and memories may be human attempts to capture time, or ways of tapping into other levels of reality.

Other themes are found in the novel as well: the impossibility of reducing all human experience to formulas; the lasting impact of qualities such as love, friendship, loyalty, and courage—undimmed by the passage of time or by distance; the power of great determination to triumph over seemingly impossible odds; the range of human emotion, including the hating and loving of the same person at the same time; and the need to accept those who are "different."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Not until near the end of chapter seven, does Nina know that Domi is not a flesh-and-blood person in the present.

When did you first suspect that Domi was of a former time? What are the clues?

2. When Nina first meets Gil, she is envious of him because he is secure.

Why is he secure? Why is she insecure?

3. In what ways are Nina and Dominique alike? Different? Which would you prefer for a friend? Why?

4. What part does the amethyst ring play in the story? When Domi's hand merges with Nina's what happens to Nina? What does this situation reveal about Nina?

5. What are the main differences between the first apartment that the Harmsworths live in in San Francisco and the one Nina finds? Which place is more like Auguste's cottage?

6. Nina discovers two different types of proof that show Kot was innocent of the murder of his servant, Maurice. What are they? Why are both necessary?

7. Several times Nina describes her "museum feeling." What is it? Have you ever had a similar feeling about a place?

If so, describe it.

8. Some people think museums are dull, lifeless places. How does Cameron make her museum seem like an exciting place?

9. Are the people and events of this story believable? Why or why not? Does it seem possible for a person to exist in two different times? If so, how?

10. Both Nina and Domi have prophetic dreams. Can you recall them? Do you think people do have such dreams?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Gil's father, Dr. Patrick, is a physicist. What is a physicist? In chapter twenty, Dr. Patrick says that he "takes delight in the Uncertainty Principle," the idea that there's "something reasoning can never quite get at," and says "I hope it never will." He comments that this makes him a traitor as a scientist. How is he a traitor?
2. Describe or draw the stone children as you imagine them.
3. Read *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. Compare Alice's experiences with Mrs. Kendrick's ideas about mirrors.
4. Throughout the story there are various statements made about the nature of time. Choose one such statement to attack or defend in an essay.
5. Select one of the painters mentioned in the book for a short biographical essay. Be sure to include a description of his style, as it is described by a critic or biographer.
6. The novel includes statements about Napoleon Bonaparte by people who supposedly lived during his reign.

Read a biography of Napoleon and write a short report. Kot implies in the novel that Napoleon changed his attitude toward himself and others after he rose to power. Do you find any evidence that he did?

7. Mrs. Henry lists the many areas of knowledge needed by a museum curator. Select a career that interests you and research the qualifications needed. How much is formal education, and how much practical experience?
8. Sometimes in the novel, characters (and the reader) are given glimpses of a future event. Sometimes, some event or feeling suggests what is about to happen (foreshadowing). Reread one such section and write a short paper about premonitions.

## For Further Reference

Cameron, Eleanor. *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1969. In this book of critical essays, Cameron discusses her personal experiences with children's literature, as reader and as writer. There is also a lengthy bibliography of works for children, as well as critical material.

"Into Something Rich and Strange: Of Dreams, Art, and the Unconscious." In *The Openhearted Audience: Ten Authors Talk about Writing for Children*, edited by Virginia Haviland. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1980. In this article, Cameron discusses the role which the writer's unconscious mind plays in developing the material of a novel, including character, setting, and organization.

Wersba, Barbara. Review of *The Court of the Stone Children*. *The New York Times Book Review* (November 4, 1973): 28. The writer praises Cameron's "luminous" style and takes note of the novel's melancholy mood.

## Related Titles

Cameron's Mushroom Planet books (*The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*, *Stowaway to the Mushroom Planet*, *Mr. Bass' Planetoid*, *A Mystery for Mr. Bass*, and *Time and Mr. Bass*) are humorous, exciting space fantasies aimed at younger readers, but also fun for young adults. The mushroom people, especially Mr. Bass, are fascinating characters; and the human boys are typical children who get involved in fantastic adventures.

Her realistic books feature interesting characters, who deal with many common young adults problems. Especially well drawn is Cory (in *A Spell is Cast*), a shy girl who longs to become part of a family and to be able to make friends her own age. Her problems are presented believably in a very mysterious, almost Gothic, setting.



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