

The Curse of the Blue Figurine Short Guide

The Curse of the Blue Figurine by John Bellairs

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Curse of the Blue Figurine Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	9
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	10
For Further Reference.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13

Overview

The *Curse of the Blue Figurine* is typical of most of Bellairs's adventure novels. It contains elements of the supernatural, which gives the adventures of his young hero an air of mystery. The main character, like most of Bellairs's heroes, is a somewhat timid boy, physically awkward and withdrawn from his schoolmates, who scorn his lack of athletic skill and resent his superior ability as a student. Yet young Johnny Dixon possesses the courage that Bellairs believes all truly good young people have. In this tale, Johnny teams with his mentor, Professor Childermass, a professor at a university near Johnny's New England home, to defeat the evil spirit of a longdead priest who had dabbled in witchcraft. The mutual support the young boy and the aged professor offer each other and the willingness of each to endanger himself in order to protect the other demonstrate the capacity for courage and selflessness within apparently unheroic individuals—the kind of characters with whom most readers can identify.

Bellairs's heroes are far from perfect: Johnny's troubles begin when he uses accidentally acquired supernatural powers to strike back at a school bully.

That kind of defect only makes Johnny more human. Bellairs's flawed hero, who nevertheless is capable of great courage, serves as an admirable model for the reader.

Bellairs has a rare ability to recreate a sense of the warmth and comfort of home and of the imaginative experiences of the young. Although *The Curse of the Blue Figurine* is set in the 1950s (as are all Bellairs's novels for young adults), his descriptions of both the pleasures and pains of childhood are timeless. He recreates the joy of sitting before a fire on a winter evening drinking hot chocolate as easily as he depicts the torment suffered at the hands of cruel schoolmates or an unthinking teacher. His recreation of life in the 1950s adds another dimension to the experiences of many young readers.



About the Author

John Bellairs was born on January 17, 1938, in Marshall, Michigan, a small, picturesque mid-Michigan town which has endeavored to sustain its heritage by preserving its magnificent nineteenth-century commercial and private buildings. Bellairs, whose father managed a saloon on Marshall's main street, was taught at the local Catholic school and attended St. Mary's, the town's Catholic church. A short, chubby child, he lacked the athletic ability to join his schoolmates in playground sports and turned instead to reading encyclopedias, history books, and novels. This imaginative exercise would later enable him to turn his childhood experiences into material for his earliest novels. He later left Marshall to attend Notre Dame University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1959; he earned a master's degree at the University of Chicago in 1960 and began working on his doctorate. While doing so, he accepted a series of teaching appointments that were to lead him to Minnesota, Illinois, and finally Massachusetts, where he presently resides.

In the meantime, he had begun writing imaginative literature. The first-published of these works was a humorous treatment of his childhood Catholicism titled *St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies* (1966); this was later followed by a short, fairy-tale satire on scholarship titled *The Pedant and the Shuffly* (1968) and later by Bellairs's first full-length novel, *The Face in the Frost* (1969), a magical tale pitting good wizards against evil sorcerers in a fantasy setting of imaginary kingdoms existing during an indeterminate time.

These "adult" tales were to bear the seeds of Bellairs's later children's tales, the first of which appeared in 1973, when Bellairs published *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*, a novel based in part on his home town experiences. This novel set the pattern for the novels for young adults which would follow: it turned Bellairs's home town of Marshall into an imaginary town of New Zebedee, Michigan; and Bellairs created a young hero who (like the young Bellairs himself) is pudgy and non-athletic and feels isolated from his playmates and peers, but who, nevertheless, finally exhibits the kind of courage and self-sacrifice that can save family and loved ones. This combination of the occult, the outwardly comic but inwardly courageous young hero, and the value of love and allegiance to family and friends was to form the basis for almost all of Bellairs's future novels for young adults. Two of his novels, *The House with the Clock in Its Walls* and *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn*, have been adapted as television dramas for the Public Broadcasting System's *Wonderworks* series of children's television dramas.

Setting

The *Curse of the Blue Figurine* is set in the imaginary town of Duston Heights, Massachusetts, in 1951, but many of the details of the novel are drawn from memories of Bellairs's own childhood in Marshall, Michigan. In this novel, Johnny accidentally revives the evil spirit of a long-dead priest, Father Baart, and he and Professor Childermass must prevent the wraith from assuming an earthly form. The novel's Father Baart is named after a real-life Father Baart (actually a highly respected parish priest) who lived in Marshall during the nineteenth century, and Professor Childermass is modeled loosely after Bellairs's own grandfather.



Social Sensitivity

Because Johnny is a young person beset by problems—primarily those created by cruel schoolmates—the novel provides insight into the anxieties, real and imagined, of such a young, sensitive person. Children can identify with his difficulties, and parents can understand them. The fact that Father Baart, as a Catholic priest, apparently consorted with evil spirits could cause some difficulties for readers of that faith. However, Father Baart returns only as a ghost and most readers would probably acknowledge that an occasional priest strays from his original vocation.

Otherwise, the story is uplifting and moralistic. Johnny derives momentary pleasure in using the power of the blue figurine against his tormenter, Eddie Tompke. But as soon as the figurine causes real harm, Johnny feels sorry for wanting revenge, a reaction that humanizes Johnny in the reader's eyes. In addition, the determination and courage he shows later, when the welfare of his loved ones is at stake, combine with his shortcomings to make him a believable and admirable character.

Likewise, Professor Childermass represents a delightful model of the older generation. He is wise, learned, experienced, yet has a child's capacity for enjoying the simplest kinds of pleasures. He actually enjoys having Johnny as his companion and fellow adventurer; and when real danger comes, he exhibits exactly the kind of fearlessness that all children want to believe their parents and other adults possess. By illustrating the capacity of the human spirit to rise above its frailties, Johnny and the Professor ultimately provide admirable role models both for young readers and for their parents.



Literary Qualities

In his earliest writings, *St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies* and *The Pedant and the Shuffly*, Bellairs demonstrated an ability to link the usual and the unusual in a particularly childlike way. In one work he describes a character as emitting "a little cry that usually sounded like air escaping from a leaky valve on an automobile tire"; he describes a voice as "ominous, like soapy water drizzling from an overflowing bathtub." He brings that same ability to his novels for young readers. The added dimension of the supernatural creates an atmosphere of adventure just unreal enough to excite his readers without frightening them.

This combination of the familiar and the adventurous has a strong appeal to a young person's imagination.

Bellairs expresses youthful fears poignantly, vividly recreating the dreams and imaginings that young people undergo as they attempt to adjust their desires to everyday reality. His supernatural adventures are, in many ways, simply extensions of the kinds of adventures all children conjure up as they sit in the comfort of their homes, dreaming dreams that make the impossible seem possible. For example, as Johnny Dixon sits within the comfortable warmth of his grandparents' home, he thought about how great it would be to be an archeologist, wading through sand while the hot sun sizzled in the sky. Or exploring by moonlight, which was much more dramatic. Johnny saw himself wandering among the columned walls of the temple of Dendur or Karnak at night, when a pale, silvery moon fell upon the mysterious hieroglyphs and the carved shapes of pharaohs and beast-headed gods.

Yet all of these imaginings are set within a comfortable context of the home: it was warm and comfy in the big old house. A coal fire was roaring in the furnace in the basement, and the register in the floor breathed warm air into the room. The black Sessions clock on the sideboard ticked quietly and reassuringly. The dining room table was covered with a white linen cloth, and on it were good things to eat: roast beef, cabbage salad, mashed potatoes, and plenty of thick dark-brown gravy.

And for dessert there would be either chocolate pudding or lemon meringue pie. The food that Gramma Dixon made tended to be the same, day after day, but it was always good.

Bellairs combines the familiar and the adventurous to capture the ambivalent attitude of the pre-adolescent who reaches out towards imaginable horizons of adventure, yet holds to the comfortable familiarity of home and family.



Themes and Characters

Bellairs typically gives his young heroes surrogate parent figures—frequently old enough to be grandparents—who provide the kind of understanding and patience lacking in the heroes' parents. In this case, Professor Childermass's role is reinforced by Johnny's own grandfather and grandmother, who take him in after Johnny's mother has died of cancer and after his father, an Air Force pilot, has been shot down and taken prisoner in the Korean War. In turning to his grandparents and Professor Childermass for moral guidance and emotional support, Johnny follows the pattern of many of Bellairs's other heroes, who look to elderly companions for parental support.

Professor Childermass is half-child, half-sage: a learned scholar who delights in sharing chocolate cake with his young friend and who takes his protege on trips and adventures. Since Johnny is more at home in the library than on the playground, he is naturally drawn to his older friend, and together, they make formidable foes for the evil forces that arise out of the netherworld.

In many of Bellairs's novels, his young heroes are motivated by a desire to help their family out of financial difficulties; but in this case, Johnny gets into trouble through less admirable circumstances. Bullied by one of his schoolmates, Johnny accidentally discovers a figurine with magical powers. When a desire to get back at the bully actually leads to an injury to Johnny's tormentor, Johnny begins to understand the figurine's destructive capability. He can't get rid of it because the spirit of Father Baart needs it to assume an earthly form, and the ghost keeps pursuing Johnny. The resulting adventures test both the courage of Johnny and Professor Childermass and their willingness to endanger themselves to save each other. Their adventures with the supernatural add a dimension of danger to their exploits that makes their courage even more admirable.



Topics for Discussion

1. Eddie Tompke enjoyed making Johnny Dixon's life miserable; yet when Johnny uses the power of the figurine to get back at Eddie, he feels guilty. Have you ever wanted to "get back" at someone and then felt guilty when you saw them suffer? Do you think that feeling of guilt is good or bad?

2. Do you have any real-life "bullies" you have to deal with in school?

Describe them. Why are you afraid of the bullies? How do you imagine you might defeat them?

3. Compare the magical power of the blue figurine with Professor Childermass's personal courage when he tries to save Johnny near the end of the story.

Does the story indicate that real power lies in the supernatural or in a person's own will? What lesson might Johnny himself learn from his experience?

4. Early in the story, Johnny imagines himself as an adventurer, wandering amid the pyramids and monuments of Egypt. Have you ever had similar dreams? What are they? Why do you have them?

5. How adequate as parental substitutes are Johnny's grandparents and Professor Childermass? What do his "Gramma" and "Grampa" provide for him? Is Professor Childermass just an older friend—or also a kind of playmate?

Do young people need what these three provide Johnny? Why or why not?

6. In the final confrontation scenes, when Professor Childermass challenges the ghost of Father Baart in order to save Johnny, do you think that most people would display that kind of courage?

7. Johnny temporarily lost his father because his father went off to fight a war for his country. Discuss whether fathers should be willing to pay such a price. If you have to make a choice—your country or your family—which should you choose? Why?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Bellairs claims that he creates stories that appeal to young readers because he has the same type of imagination. Do you agree? Use the adventures of Johnny Dixon and Johnny's own view of himself, his family, and his schoolmates in your discussion.

2. Professor Childermass is a college professor, yet he seems to understand the mind of a young person like Johnny almost as though he is a child himself.

Does Professor Childermass show qualities that would make him a successful teacher in your own school? If so, what are they?

3. There are elements of the supernatural in the story. Would the fact that a reader did not believe in ghosts make the story so unbelievable that there would be no point in reading it? Would it have been a better story if there were no ghosts or magic figurines?

4. For a time, Johnny has no parents to guide or protect him. In our modern era there are many children who spend a good deal of time at home alone because their parents are either at work, are separated, or are not at home for other reasons. In light of this modern situation, how serious is Johnny's situation? Do modern children need parents at home as Johnny seems to, or have they outgrown that need? Are they better off or worse off than children in the 1950s?

5. Religion plays an important part in Johnny's life. Does it play an important part in the life of children of the 1990s?

6. The novel deals in part with the effect of the Korean War on one family in the 1950s. For a research project, investigate the effects of the Vietnam War on families, concentrating either on the family as a whole, on the parents, or on the children.

For Further Reference

Carter, Lin. *Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Fantasy*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1973. A positive response to Bellairs's first novel, *The Face in the Frost* (1969), Carter's brief assessment of Bellairs's combination of humor and bizarre fantasy provides some insight into the qualities that underlie his later novels for young readers.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*, vol. 2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. Biographical and professional information for Bellairs's early career.

Elleman, Barbara. Review. *Booklist* 79 (June 15, 1983): 1335. Praises Bellairs's artistry in blending supernatural and natural elements to provide depth and dimension to his stories.

Evory, Ann, and Linda Metzger, eds.

Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, vol. 8. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Biographical and bibliographical information.

Lewis, Selma. Review. *New York Times Book Review* (September 25, 1983). A very appreciative review.

Recchia, Edward. "You Can Take the Boy Out of Michigan, But..." *Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature Newsletter* 17 (Fall 1987): 1-17. (Available through the Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.) A biographical/critical essay on Bellairs, focusing on the effects of his Marshall, Michigan, boyhood on his later writings.

Related Titles

The Curse of the Blue Figurine is the second of the Johnny Dixon adventures, which began with *The Mummy, the Will, and the Crypt*. These two novels, published in 1983, introduce Johnny Dixon as Bellairs's main character, Professor Childermass as his friend and elderly patron, and Duston Heights as the main location for the action. In *The Spell of the Sorcerer's Skull* (1984) and *The Revenge of the Wizard's Ghost* (1985) Johnny and the professor continue to save each other from evil supernatural forces.

In other novels, Bellairs introduces other young heroes, such as Anthony Monday, who appears in *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn* (1976), a novel set in Minnesota, and reappears in *The Dark Secret of Weatherend* (1984). But whether the novels are set in New Zebedee, Michigan, in Duston Heights, Massachusetts, or in Hoosac, Minnesota, and whether the characters are named Lewis Barnavelt, Johnny Dixon, or Anthony Monday, all draw on John Bellairs's memories of his childhood— his fears, his pleasures, his dreams. The locations and names vary, but Bellairs's young heroes remain steadfast in their determination to overcome their fears and inadequacies to prove that they, like their readers, are capable of more than they are often given credit for.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996