

Dobry Short Guide

Dobry by Monica Shannon

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Overview

Part of Dobry's appeal lies in the reader's ability to identify with the central character. At the outset, Dobry is a typical young boy, who exhibits a mixture of faults and virtues. His impulsiveness leads to mistakes, as when he eats too many chilled tomatoes. On the other hand, he is considerate, stopping to pick up an owl feather for his grandfather's pipe and giving his mother the one perfect apple.

The reader sympathizes with Dobry as he struggles to overcome a series of obstacles and become an artist. First he must learn moderation and develop mature judgment so that he can retain his individuality without being disrespectful toward his mother, who expects him to continue the family tradition and devote his life to farming. His quiet perseverance in drawing and sculpturing local people and farm animals eventually leads to her recognition of his natural talent.

Dobry acquaints the reader with the way of life in nineteenth-century rural Bulgaria and describes customs that twentieth-century American readers will find interesting and unusual. For example, the villagers shake their heads to say "yes" and nod to say "no"; they belch to show their enjoyment of a meal; they take annual baths in the Yanta River; and they exchange gifts at New Year's.

Their houses, clothes, and foods are also unfamiliar to most American readers.

Yet, Shannon clearly demonstrates the universality of important traits such as love of family, appreciation of diversity, and respect for one's physical environment.

About the Author

The date of Monica Shannon's birth is not documented. In an autobiographical sketch in *The Junior Book of Authors*, she says she was born in March but neglects to mention the year. Some sources speculate that she was born about 1905, but that date is inconsistent with both her own accounts of her childhood and the known dates of her employment at the Los Angeles Public Library (1916-1925). This information makes it unlikely that she was born later than 1900 and it suggests that probably she was born a year or two earlier.

Shannon was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, but she is considered an American author because her family moved to the United States when she was about six months old. After living briefly in Seattle, they moved to the Bitter Root Valley in the Montana Rockies, where Shannon's father operated a thoroughbred stock ranch.

Shannon's childhood in the Rockies was one of the most important influences upon her later writing. In her Newbery acceptance speech, she described these "mountains of great, slumbering pine forests, loud with snoring creeks, pillows of snow piled up against the sky."

For her, their art surpasses the best sculpture, painting, or symphony. Her vivid descriptions of natural settings have received high acclaim. Shannon's more sensitive and imaginative characters share her love of nature and find artistic inspiration in mountains, clouds, plants, birds, and animals.

During her childhood Shannon developed the conviction that "All animals are more worthy of respect than people who see little of them imagine."

Her first pet was a bear cub, but her most frequent early companion was Lenore, a St. Bernard her father had imported from Switzerland. With this dog she roamed the ranch, stopping to talk with the Bulgarian immigrants who worked there and visiting the nearby camp of the Flathead Native Americans.

From these encounters she learned to appreciate diverse cultures and heard many of the stories that she would eventually include in her books. Later with her brothers and sisters, she spent many hours fishing and riding horseback, thus deepening her acquaintance with the land around her.

From childhood Shannon was honored for her writing, receiving school awards for stories about the biblical character, Joseph, and another about the American Revolution. In high school, Shannon found little time for writing, as she completed two years' work in a single year, but she continued to win recognition for her verbal skills, competing on the school's successful debate team.

After she graduated from high school, Shannon's family moved to California, where she attended college. After earning a bachelor of library science, she took a job with the Los

Angeles Public Library, where she worked from 1916 until 1925. In 1919 she edited a book published by the library, *California in Print*. In her spare time, Shannon took walks in the woods with her nieces and their friends, telling them stories about the plants, animals, and birds they saw.

For their amusement she began writing down these stories, which a library science professor casually asked permission to read. Since the professor was a former reader for a publishing company, this chance reading led to the publication of Shannon's first book, *California Fairy Tales*, in 1926.

From 1926 through 1934 Shannon devoted most of her time to writing for young adults. During this time she married Elbert Wing, and she moved with him to Three Rivers in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In 1935 Shannon received the Newbery Medal for *Dobry*. After 1935 she published no more books for young adults, but *Dobry* and her two volumes of *California fairy tales* have remained in print, and several of her stories have been recorded. She died in California on August 13, 1965.



Setting

Dobry is set in a small mountain village beside the Yanta River in nineteenth-century Bulgaria before the time of automobiles and mechanized agriculture. Dobry, his mother, and his grandfather do most of the work of cultivating the fields; their oxen are used for plowing, hauling, and other heavy farm work. The villagers pasture their cows in the nearby mountains and take their grain to a nearby village to be ground into flour. The narrative follows Dobry's development from the time he is young enough to enjoy cleaning pots for a gypsy to when he is old enough to leave for art school in Sofia.

Social Sensitivity

Because "peasant" carries negative connotations in American usage, the references to Dobry and his neighbors as peasants may at first seem somewhat snobbish, but the reader quickly realizes the word is used in the European sense, meaning a member of a rural community. In fact, social rank carries little importance in Dobry's village; for example, Semo the schoolteacher and his "Wheat Binder" fiancée are equal in status, and the mayor's pomposity is emphasized more than his authority.

Characters gain recognition based upon accomplishments, as in the cases of Grandfather's stories, Roda's farming, Hristu's shoes, and Dobry's dive to retrieve the gold crucifix.

In general, Dobry and his neighbors are tolerant of other cultures. They admire the artistry of the Macedonian jamal-maker Kolu. They welcome gypsies to the village and greet the arrival of the gypsy bear with great ceremony. The Bulgarian villagers respect the gypsies' wisdom and have adopted their philosophy of "na lay."

A degree of insensitivity can be seen, however, in the relative isolation of Asan and his father, who, unlike the other villagers, are Muslims rather than Christians. Shannon suggests, however, that the distinction is more important to Asan than to the rest of the villagers. Still, Asan's feeling that he is an outsider demonstrates the social division between the Muslims and the Christians, and like Grandfather's tale of Hadutzi-dare, it indicates the Bulgarians' deep resentment of the Turks.

Shannon's narrative itself, however, espouses acceptance of different religious beliefs and cultures.

Because Dobry and his grandfather are the only characters who are not stereotypes, the novel's portrayal of women might be considered somewhat problematic. Only male characters exhibit in any way the individuality that Shannon so admires. Although Neda shares in some of Dobry's early adventures, she degenerates into a stereotype by the novel's end. Unlike several of the male characters, she and Dobry's mother have trouble appreciating Dobry's artistic talents.

Literary Qualities

Shannon is best known for her intense sympathy for all of nature. Her careful observation and vivid, precise imagery bring the natural settings to life. Like Dobry, she considers the moon and the mountains her companions, and she sees human personality traits in the storks, the pig, the goat, and the bear.

Shannon also provides detailed descriptions of village life. The reader becomes an observer at the pepperstringing party, the Christmas celebration, the snow-melting contest, and the parade welcoming the gypsy bear. The completeness of these portraits creates a sense of immediacy, adding to the reader's interest in and acceptance of the characters and their customs.

Shannon's works reflect her talent as a storyteller and lend themselves well to reading aloud. The tales that Dobry and his grandfather tell are in the oral tradition of the legend and the tall tale. In fact, the entire novel has a tone of whimsical fantasy akin to the fairy tales Shannon so enjoyed.

Dobry is episodic in plot, containing many minor conflicts, most of which are quickly resolved. Some of the incidents recounted help to reveal the personality of Dobry or another major character, but most provide a framework for describing the customs of rural nineteenth-century Bulgaria. The individual episodes seem authentic, perhaps because the novel is based in part on the experiences of the Bulgarian artist Atanas Katchamakoff, who illustrated the book.

Generally, the characters are also believable, but Dobry is the only fully developed character who grows and changes. The narrative describes the grandfather as a wise old man, the best storyteller in the region, but Shannon spends more time telling the reader than portraying his uniqueness through his words and actions. Roda and Neda seem even less complex, and the remaining characters are hardly more than stereotypes whose function is to advance the plot.



Themes and Characters

Dobry, the central character of the novel, is a sensitive young boy who wants to become an artist. The early chapters depict him as acting upon impulse, whether in eating too many tomatoes or in making a special kite for his friend Neda. Even then, he exhibits his artistic tendencies: his imagination surfaces when he converses with his companion, the moon, and his careful observation of the individual snowflakes contrasts with Neda's matter-of-fact attitude toward the snow.

Shannon also develops a contrast through Dobry's relationship with the cowherder Asan. Dobry envies Asan's opportunity to go alone into the mountains, but Asan misses human companionship and would prefer to work in the fields with others. Asan feels a special kinship with Dobry, however, perhaps because each, in his own way, is an outsider. Asan's Islam religion tends to separate him from the other villagers, who are Christians; likewise, Dobry's artistic imagination sets him apart.

Trained observers such as Semo the schoolteacher and Kolu the jamalmaker (a jamal is a fireplace with brightly colored tiles) recognize Dobry's talent, as do villagers such as Hristu the shoemaker. Before Dobry can become an artist, however, his perseverance, initiative, and courage must be tested; he must overcome his mother's opposition, find a way to finance his art education, and win the respect of the villagers by retrieving the gold crucifix. As the gypsy woman's prophecy suggests, the artist often leads a difficult and lonely life, and Dobry must prepare himself for what will come.

Throughout the novel, Dobry's grandfather proves to be an unfailing source of education, encouragement, and support. The boy repeatedly asks this wise old man to tell special tales, and the first stories Dobry tells Neda are ones he has heard from his grandfather. A skilled artisan as well as a renowned storyteller, his grandfather tells Dobry that God prefers diversity in nature and individualism in people. He understands Dobry's determination to become an artist, and his arguments persuade Roda not to nag her son about his preoccupation with art.

Roda, Dobry's mother, embodies the forces of conformity and tradition. She carefully observes all the local customs and believes her son should take up the family occupation, farming. Described as strong and full of life, Roda knows how to cure a stomach ache and cultivate the fields, but she believes that Dobry's work is a waste of time. When she sees his creche of ice sculptures, though, she recognizes his talent and provides all the financial support she can.

Dobry's best friend, Neda, shares his early adventures, but she increasingly conforms to feminine stereotypes. She is very cautious and practical; to her, the strange colors in the autumn sky resemble only "the color that an egg white is, before you beat it up or cook it." The old gypsy woman's prophecy compares Neda to "a little spring" that adds comfort and beauty to the area around it. Although she does not really understand Dobry's interest in art, Neda admires his work, and the desire to please her is the impetus for some of his best pieces.



The central conflict of Dobry is between individuality and conformity.

Dobry, who admires the snowflakes because no two of them are alike, represents individuality, while his mother values conformity and tradition, believing that Dobry should devote himself to the land as she has. Dobry's artistic ability sets him apart from the other villagers, establishing his individuality. His sympathy with the world around him contributes to his artistic ability, enabling him to see images in the clouds and rock formations, as well as to understand more fully the people and animals he knows. From his grandfather he learns that even the simple act of eating links him to nature, as the sun and rain that make the grain for his bread become part of him whenever he eats that bread. Nature is vital as a stimulus for Dobry's imagination, and in turn his imagination leads him to fuller perception of his physical environment.

The gypsy song "na lay," translated as "Only now this moment lives," expresses another aspect of the theme. This phrase is a variation of the poetic theme "carpe diem," or "take advantage of this 352 Dobry day," and Shannon suggests that the Bulgarian villagers have adopted the gypsy philosophy of accepting and enjoying the present as it is, rather than wasting time in reliving the past or anticipating the future. Thus, when Dobry is in the mountains, he can forget his mother's displeasure and enjoy the beauty around him. In addition, "na lay" includes the artistic detachment that allows Dobry to see clearly and portray truthfully the subjects of his pictures and sculptures. The philosophy of "na lay" inspires Dobry to do whatever he must to become an artist; to accomplish physically challenging feats, such as diving for the gold crucifix, and to leave his family to study in Sofia.

A minor theme is Dobry's easy acceptance of cultural differences. He likes and respects the gypsies who come to his village, he admires and imitates the Macedonian jamal-maker Kolu, and he is one of the few villagers with whom the Muslim Asan does not feel like an outsider.



Topics for Discussion

1. The novel opens with an unusually early snowfall. What basic theme, later emphasized by Dobry's grandfather, do the snowflakes introduce?
2. Early in the novel, Dobry goes out late at night and gathers tomatoes for his grandfather and himself. He also brings back an owl feather for his grandfather. But he makes himself sick by eating his share of the tomatoes that night. What do these actions reveal about Dobry's personality at that time?
3. Dobry frequently sings the gypsy song "na lay" ("Only now this moment lives"). How do his actions and those of the other characters illustrate this theme?
4. The narrative describes Dobry's mother as patient, intense, and strong.

She refuses to consider a second marriage because she has devoted herself to her son and her fields. What do these fields represent to her? Why is she so unhappy about Dobry's continuing interest in drawing? How does she become reconciled to Dobry's future as an artist?

5. Dobry's grandfather is a skilled artisan who can carve a flute, make a kite that reproduces the cry of a stork, and weave tomato vines so that the tomatoes can be both protected from and preserved by the snow. He is also something of a philosopher, but he is better known as the best storyteller of the entire region. How do his talents increase his sympathy for and understanding of Dobry?

6. Dobry's grandfather tells a number of tales, usually to emphasize a point that he wants his listeners to remember.

The earliest of these is his story of the three creations and the three types of men created. What is the underlying meaning of this tale, and in what way is it told at an appropriate time?

7. At the mill, Grandfather tells about the battle between Hadutzi-dare and the Black Arab. What is the underlying meaning of his story? Why should Dobry hear the story at that time? When does he think of it again?

8. Dobry's favorite tale is his grandfather's account of their poplar tree, the only one in the village. What parallels exist between Dobry and the tree? In what ways is the tree an omen of his future?

9. After winning the snow-melting game, Dobry's grandfather makes up a new tale about Pinenik, Firnik, and the Betrothal Feast. According to this tale, what is strength? To whom is this story told? What are some other possible reasons for his telling this story to that audience at that time?



10. Dobry tells Neda three stories: the origin of the cuckoo, Andrino and his shadow, and the animals Noah forgot.

What is his purpose in telling each story? How do these tales demonstrate the growth of his imagination? In what ways is the Wickerwockoff story especially appropriate for Neda?

11. When Dobry and Neda ask the gypsy woman to tell their fortunes, what does she say to each of them? How accurate is each fortune?

12. Why does Dobry choose to exchange jobs with Asan? How do the interests and aptitudes of the two young men differ? What does Dobry gain from the exchange?

13. As he leaves to study in Sofia, Dobry tells Neda that he will return for their betrothal feast. Will he return?

Does Shannon hint that he might not?

Do you think he should return?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The narrative does not describe Dobry's house in detail, but references to the jamal, the overhanging second story, and the oxen stables downstairs suggest that rural Bulgarian houses in the nineteenth century were very different from most houses in the United States. Describe the typical Bulgarian house of Dobry's time.

2. In relating the activities of Dobry's family, Shannon mentions several saints, rituals, and customs of the Greek Orthodox Church. Investigate some of the differences between the Eastern and Western Christian traditions and observances. Are any of these traditions unique to Bulgaria?

3. While Shannon describes the clothes of outsiders, such as Bekir the gypsy and Kolu the jamal-maker, she says little about the clothing worn by Dobry, his grandfather, and their fellow villagers. What types of clothing did the men, women, and children of nineteenth-century Bulgaria wear?

4. Dobry and his grandfather have their wheat ground into flour at a waterdriven mill. In the nineteenth century such mills were common in the United States too, though most have now been replaced by large, electric-powered mills. What kind of machinery did water-driven mills use? In what ways was this operation different from that of modern mills?

5. Dobry quotes his grandfather as saying that God emptied out his sack of mountains when he reached Bulgaria.

Research and describe the types of landscape in Bulgaria.

6. Dobry mentions grain, tomatoes, apples, and red peppers as crops cultivate in his village. What are today's agricultural products of Bulgaria? Have these products changed since the nineteenth century? How have the methods of production changed? What manufactured goods are now produced in Bulgaria?

7. Dobry's first "sculpture" is the stork kite he makes for Neda. The storks' arrival in the village signals the beginning of spring, and their departure in the fall means that winter is near. Can storks be seen in the Bulgarian mountains today? What other birds and animals may be found there?

8. Dobry and his family have many uses for the dran bush found in the nearby mountains. Dobry uses the wood for carving, his grandfather predicts the next year's luck by holding a branch over a lighted candle, and Dobry and Neda will gather the berries for their betrothal feast. What do the leaves, flowers, and berries of the dran bush look like? What familiar plants does it most resemble? What are some of the other plants native to Bulgaria?



9. The visits of Kolu and the gypsies suggest that trade with people of other cultures has influenced customs in Dobry's village. What are some of these cultures, and how did each influence the customs of Bulgaria?

10. The tale of Hadutzi-dare mentions the conquest of Bulgaria by the Turks.

The country's strategic geographical location has led many other nations to invade it. Who are some of these invaders, and how has each changed the customs and government of Bulgaria?



For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 28. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982. Contains a brief bibliography, a list of Shannon's works and their adaptations, and a limited biographical account, which draws heavily upon Shannon's Newbery acceptance paper.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Presents a brief biographical entry, a list of Shannon's works, and a short critical evaluation with emphasis upon *Dobry*.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Howard Haycraft, eds. *The Junior Book of Authors*. 2d ed. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951. Contains Shannon's autobiographical sketch with the added note that *Dobry* received the Newbery Medal in 1935.

Mainiero, Lina, ed. *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*. Vol.

4. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982.

Includes a short biographical sketch, a list of Shannon's works, a brief bibliography, and a few critical comments focusing upon *Tawnymore* and *Dobry*.

Miller, Bertha Mathony, and Elinor Whitney Fields, eds. "The Newbery Award 1935: *Dobry*." *Newbery Medal Books: 1922-1935*. Boston: Horn Book, 1955. A brief description of the novel with a paragraph excerpt, a biographical note by one of Shannon's long-time friends, and Shannon's Newbery acceptance paper.

Related Titles

Shannon's first novel, *Tawnymore*, is, like *Dobry*, the story of a young boy's adventures as he grows up; it too is set in a more picturesque past. The legends and tall tales in *Dobry* resemble the stories in *California Fairy Tales* and *More Tales from California*. Likewise, the detailed descriptions and poetic cadence of *Dobry* echo the vivid imagery and musical language of *Goose Grass Rhymes*. The language in all of Shannon's works reveals their origin in the oral tradition, and her ever-present themes include individuality, cultural diversity, and the interrelationship of nature and humanity.



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