

Dragonfield Short Guide

Dragonfield by Jane Yolen

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Overview

Yolen's dragon stories are among her best, and she experiments with different ways of looking at dragons. In "Dragonfield," collected in *Here There Be Dragons*, she presents a fairly traditional European-style dragon, full of fire and fury, with the principal interest of the story focused on how people react to a dragon suddenly appearing in their otherwise placid community.

Yolen says that, "I wanted to write a story in which the hero knows himself not to be a hero, and the audience knows him not to be a hero, and yet he is a hero despite it all." This antihero is Lancot, a great muscular, handsome man who is terrified of dragons and most other dangerous things.

Yolen combines this interest in a hero who is afraid rather than heroic with her lifelong interest in kites. Her father was a champion kite maker and set a record for most consecutive days and hours flying a kite. In German, the word for kite is *drache*, which also means dragon. Yolen takes the idea of kite-as-dragon and has her characters make a kite that actually looks like a big dragon.

What Lancot and Tansy do with the kite is the stuff of legends.

About the Author

"Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts. She eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen married David Stemple, a college professor, and they have three children, a daughter and two boys. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing.

Setting

Yolen is a master of creating vivid, magical settings for her stories. From mysterious woodlands in which an even more mysterious unicorn lives to a bustling city soon to be destroyed in which the youngster Merlin learns about human nature, Yolen creates places that linger in the mind long after the story has been read. The village, islands, river, and marsh of "Dragonfield" combine to form a place that seems real, that is memorable for what it is as well as for the fantastic adventure that takes place there.

Yolen has set herself the task of describing a place in such a way that implies a story will be told that explains something about the name. She does this partly by naming the spit of land Dragonfield. "Once dragons dwelt on the isles in great herds" adds to the interest of the story by implying that Dragonfield was an ideal place for dragons to live; surely a dragon will appear there in the story. Further, a land furrowed by the claws of dragons, with the remains of the dragons buried in its dirt, sounds like a fine place for an adventure.

Much of the action takes place near a river close to Tansy's home. Her father perishes there and the great battle between kite and dragon takes place there.

The river was an old one, its bends broad as it flooded into the great sea. Here and there the water had cut through soft rock to make islets that could be reached by poleboat or, in the winter, by walking across the thick ice. This turning, green down to the river's edge, was full of cress and reeds and even wild rice carried from the eastern lands by migrating birds.

It is among the islets that Tansy finds many of her medicinal herbs, as well as the rare "dragonsbane" that burns any flesh that touches it.



Social Sensitivity

The era in which "Dragonfield" takes place seems medieval, as well as to the far north of Europe. While much of "Dragonfield" makes the village and the nearby islands seem pleasant, Yolen notes some of the less happy aspects of medieval life, such as, the "three little boys buried under rough stones at the edge of the garden." While dragons may be a spectacular form of death, Yolen reminds that deaths of children were common in the era in which her story takes place. Another infant perishes during the story, indicating how perilous life was for children. This means that Tansy's happy exploration of her environment cannot be entirely innocent fun; no youngster, not even the redoubtable Tansy is safe from the dangers of her world.

Literary Qualities

"That is why there are dragons, after all: to call forth heroes," declares Yolen. This small sentence creates a world of anticipation for adventure in "Dragonfield" and is an example of how well-chosen phrases throughout "Dragonfield" whet one's appetite for reading the story through.

Yolen relies heavily on irony to create suspense in "Dragonfield." For instance, she has already let her audience in on the existence of Aredd, and it is easy to deduce that Da has been carried off and eaten by the dragon, but the villagers and Da's family have no idea what has actually happened to him. Since they believed that all the dragons had been killed in the Dragon Wars. Thus, with each person carried away and each farm animal eaten, the suspense of the story builds, because somewhere along the line everyone must realize that a real, live dragon has returned to Dragonfield.

Yolen ties the irony and suspense to character development adroitly. For instance, noting that Tansy blames herself for not recalling the patch of dragonsbane (fireweed) because if she had paid closer attention to her father, she would have realized that the fireweed being in the marsh meant that a dragon had to be nearby. It forms part of her growing awareness of her part in her family and in her community.

Another irony central to "Dragonfield" is that of the heroic-looking but fearful Lancot. Everyone who looks at him thinks that he is the epitome of heroism. His great muscles, handsome face, and attractive hair all suggest an exceptional man. However, he just wants to run away when informed that a dragon is nearby. As with the presence of the dragon, Yolen lets her audience in on Lancot's true nature, although the other characters in the story do not know it, except for Tansy, who gradually sees the true man, apparently finding his sensitivity more attractive than his hulking exterior.

The irony of Lancot's true personality compared with his false public one creates much of the suspense of the second half of "Dragonfield." Will he run away? Will he stay to build the great kite and then run away? Will he leave Tansy to face Aredd alone or will his love for her overcome his fear?



Themes and Characters

A good dragon story usually requires an interesting dragon, and Yolen offers one that is frightful and dangerous. "His name in the old tongue was Aredd and his color a dull red. It was not the red of hollyberry or the red of the wild flowering trillium, but the red of a man's lifeblood spilled out upon the sand." Aredd is a lonely dragon, having hatched from its egg many years after human beings think that they have destroyed the last of all dragons. Therefore, Aredd knows no dragon lore and has no idea of his history. That he therefore acts primarily on his instincts is only natural and will help seal his doom. That his color is the color of blood is a good touch, suggesting as it does the menacing nature of the giant animal. His "tail was long and sinewy" and "Great mountains rose upon his back." "His jaws were a furnace that could roast a whole bull. And when he roared, he could be heard like distant thunder throughout the archipelago." This is an imposing adversary, something to run and hide from, which is Lancot's first impulse.

Even so, it is melancholy to think that Aredd is the last of his kind.

The principal characters of "Dragonfield" are the sisters Tansy, Rosemary, and Sage, as well as the frightened hero, Lancot. The girls were not originally named for herbs of healing, but have been given those names as they grow up, being daughters of a healer and having shown affinity for the healing arts. Tansy acquires an even newer name; she was once called Tansy after the healing herb but was later known as "Areddiana, daughter of the dragon." This bit of character description foreshadows events in "Dragonfield."

Yolen sharply sketches in her characters, moving quickly to the action. Rosemary is the eldest and is a weaver. She has a plain but honest-looking face and her skin is dark. She prefers to spend most of her time in the cottage. "She had her mother's gray eyes and her passion for work, and it annoyed her that others had not." Rosemary is predictable this way; she is forever fussing about work, much as her mother does. To her exasperation, she is tied to sisters who do not share her passion for homemaking. For example, Sage is beautiful, but somewhat simple. She has golden skin and prefers to stare out the window at the sea rather than work. "She was waiting, she said, for her own true love." Sage is full of romantic notions about heroes and dragons, so it is surprising to observe that she finds true love close to home, in a young, courageous fisherman.

Their parents May-ma (mother) and Da (father) have had three sons who perished and are buried near the family's garden.

The third daughter is Tansy, who possesses no special color but seems to blend in with her surroundings, "sparkling by a stream, golden in the sunny meadows, mousebrown within the house." She causes trouble to her mother by learning to walk early, "always picking apart things that had been knit up with great care just to see what made them work." Curiosity is an important part of Tansy's character, because it often leads to trouble, and eventually to a dragon, but her ability to reflect the wild lands she loves



turns out to be a powerful attraction for Lancot, whose innate fear is overwhelmed by the wonders he finds in Tansy's face.

Tansy has a warm, sensitive personality.

When she says to her father, "Poor May Ma, she speaks to herself for none of the rest of us really talks to her," she shows she has more sympathy for others than her sisters have, and it helps to show why Tansy is a particularly gifted healer. When she plucks up the fireweed or flamework, she shows how tough she is, because the plant raises blisters on her hand. That she cheerfully shows the fireweed to her father, even while being burned, shows how deep her curiosity is; a little pain does not stop her from trying to learn all she can about her surroundings. All in all, this makes her a very attractive figure, someone whose company is likely to be fun.

Yolen says that she wrote "Dragonfield" to explore the notion of a hero who was cowardly. When Aredd kills people and livestock, five village boys are sent away to find a hero to slay the dragon. After many disappointments, they are certain they have found him: "They knew him [Lancot] for a hero the moment he stood. He moved like a god, the golden hair rippling down his back. Muscles formed like small mountains on his arms and he could make them walk from shoulder to elbow without the slightest effort." It turns out that Lancot is all show, cadging free drinks by showing off his muscles and earning spare change by telling outrageous stories of heroic deeds that never actually happened. Even so, the boys do not mind his stealing their money while they sleep, so sure are they that Lancot is a true hero. Even so, they mention nothing about the dragon to the giant of a man.

Yolen says that the resemblance of the name Lancot to Lancelot is deliberate, probably intending to point out the contrast between Lancot's cowardice and the legendary knight Lancelot's courage in warfare. "He [Lancot] knew he was no god."

"Heroes and gods were never afraid and he was deadly afraid every day of his life." A notable aspect of Lancot is that in spite of his fear and the vagabond way of life, he is not the stereotypical handsome hulk without intelligence. He is an intelligent man and has a spiritual nature that few would guess existed.

When Lancot looks at Tansy near the river, he notes, "Yesterday she [Tansy] had seemed no great beauty, yet here in the wood, where she reflected the colors of earth, water, sky, she was beautiful indeed."

This is an intelligent observation made by someone who can see the attractive spiritual essence of Tansy. What may seem like a child's activity—enjoying flying a kite—is actually lovable in Lancot, and his comment shows that he realizes that Tansy is someone he can tell about his potentially embarrassing feelings. Tansy herself picks up on Lancot's spiritual nature quickly.

When Lancot says that a mage he had met called kites drache, it is as if, without yet realizing it, Lancot and Tansy are in for a spiritual partnership. "Correspondences," Tansy declares. "Like calls to like," she says upon hearing that drache also means kite.



The result of their partnership is not entirely predictable. Throughout "Dragonfield," Yolen has shown that she will kill off even pleasing characters such as Da, which means Tansy or Lancot or both could die in their attempt to battle the dragon. However, both Tansy and Lancot grow during the story, and this is more important than most of the action. Tansy learns to take responsibility for herself and her actions, while Lancot learns that there are aspects of life that he must face up to, rather than run away. The menacing jaws and "teeth as large as tree trunks, as sharp as swords" remind him of just what he must face in order to fulfill his union with Tansy. Yolen's dragons tend to represent people's fundamental fears of unknown dangers, and her stories about them, as with "Dragonfield," tend to be about how people cope with those fears.



Topics for Discussion

1. Tansy twice mentions "correspondences," as if the concept were important. What does she mean?
2. Why would Yolen want her audience to think of Lancelot when they see the hero's name Lancot?
3. Why would Yolen make Lancot a thief who steals from the sleeping boys?
4. Why does Lancot stay with Tansy to face the dragon rather than running away as he planned? What does this imply about the nature of courage?
5. At the end of "Dragonfield," Yolen repeats her opening description of the spit of land, but makes some changes to it. Why does she repeat the description? What do the changes mean?
6. How has Tansy changed by the end of "Dragonfield"?
7. How does Lancot change by the end of "Dragonfield"?
8. What are instances of irony in "Dragonfield"?
9. What is the significance to "Dragonfield" that Aredd knows nothing about his ancestry?
10. Does Yolen do a good job of exploring how a coward becomes a hero in "Dragonfield"? Explain.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some characters in "Dragonfield" are called by names other than the ones they were given at birth. For example, the three sisters are called after healing plants, and Tansy even receives a newer name, Areddiana, after the dragon she helped slay. What cultures give people names based on their association with plants, animals, or other aspects of the natural world? What is the purpose of such names?
2. How does Yolen use irony to heighten suspense in "Dragonfield?"
3. Does Aredd resemble any of Yolen's other dragons? In what ways is he unique? What does he share with Yolen's other dragons?
4. From clues in the story, can you identify where in the world "Dragonfield" takes place? Can you identify the era?
5. How does Lancot contrast with Lancelot of King Arthur's Round Table?
6. Tansy, rosemary, and sage are healing herbs according to Yolen. What do they heal? What is their history in medicine?
7. Aredd is a magnificent dragon. Based on Yolen's descriptions of him, draw or paint a picture of Aredd, showing him in all his fearsome glory.
8. What is the geography for the events in "Dragonfield?" Draw a map showing where all the islands, the river, the marshes, the shore, the homes, and the village are, following as you do the descriptions in "Dragonfield."
9. Write your own story about what would happen if someday another long lost dragon egg were to hatch near Dragonfield.



For Further Reference

Publishers Weekly (November 1, 1993): 81.

The reviewer of *Here There Be Dragons* says, "Dragon-lovers and maybe even dinophiles will unite to celebrate Yolen's . . . virtuosic poems and stories about dragons."

Rogers, Susan L. *School Library Journal*, vol.

40, no. 1 (January 1994): 117. "There are evil dragons as well as good ones in this collection," says Rogers, "and after experiencing their variety and might, readers won't be able to help echoing the author's hope that they will return some day."

Yolen, Jane. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales."

Locus, vol. 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

———. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus, vol. 26 (January 1991): 4,78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

"Yolen, Jane." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 75. Edited by Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 223-229. Telgen provides a list of Yolen's publications with a short biography.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Yolen has written many novels and short stories that contain dragons. She may have gotten her start with "Cockfight," which appeared in an anthology of stories about dragons. This tale of dragons forced to fight for the entertainment of humans became the basis for a trilogy of novels about the dragons of Astar IV, which take place on a planet other than earth, *Dragon's Blood* (1982), *Heart's Blood* (1984), and *A Sending of Dragons* (1987), which have been recently reprinted and are among Yolen's most popular works. Some of Yolen's short stories and poems about dragons were printed in *Here There Be Dragons* (1993). This collection shows the wide variety of dragons and mythological sources for dragons that Yolen has written about. For instance, "One Ox, 102 Dragonfield Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" is set in China and features Chinese dragons, although the ending has a European flavor, whereas "Great-Grandfather Dragon's Tale" is a telling of the St. George versus the dragon tale from the dragon's somewhat surprising point of view.



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