

Dragon's Bait Short Guide

Dragon's Bait by Vivian Vande Velde

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Contents

Dragon's Bait 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.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

Dragon's Bait is fast-paced adventure featuring a fifteen-year-old girl and an unusual dragon. Vande Velde takes considerable care in developing both characters, making Alys a thoroughly credible girl thrown into an incredible situation, and Selendrile a mesmerizing, ominous, and mysterious dragon with the ability that only golden dragons have of being able to change into other "beasts" (he considers human beings to be "beasts," too). Alys is falsely accused of being a witch so that a greedy neighbor can steal her father's land. Her father dies during her mock trial, and she is tied to a stake on a hilltop, there to await the passing of a dragon, who is expected to eat her. She quite naturally wants revenge on the village that brought about her father's death and wrongfully condemned her to die a horrible death. She is joined in her plotting for revenge by a dragon, who tells her that he enjoys revenge.

He takes time off from eating knights in armor to help Alys. Vande Velde makes sure that the realization of the dragon's menacing attitude toward people is never far off; suspense is thereby sustained throughout this page turner, Dragon's Bait.

About the Author

Vivian Vande Velde was born in New York City on June 18, 1951, to Pasquale and Marcelle (nee Giglio) Brucato. Her father was a linotype operator. She remembers making up stories to entertain herself when she was a child. She attended the State University of New York at Brockport from 1969 to 1970 and the Rochester Business Institute from 1970 to 1971. In 1974, she married computer analyst Jim Vande Velde. They have one daughter.

Vande Velde reports that she feels inspired by good writings by others; she wants to write as well or better than they do. To her, people with selfdoubts make the most credible characters, and she likes to have them discover that they can cope with the difficulties of their lives. Believable characterization is one of the hallmarks of her fiction. In 1986, one of her books, *A Hidden Magic*, was named one of the Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year.

Setting

Events take place in a Christian territory that approximates medieval Europe. The villages of St. Toby's-by-theMountain (St. Toby's for short) and Griswold are the scenes of most of the action. They are separated from each other by a mountain. Griswold is about three day's riding on horseback from a sea port. The villagers are by and large superstitious; those of St. Toby's readily believe that Alys is a witch on very flimsy evidence and are all too willing to execute a girl who has been a friend and neighbor all of her life. The roads are muddy; the homes are spare; and farm animals are kept in people's yards. Beyond the villages are farms, some deserted, and woodlands.

Dragon's Bait conveys well a rural atmosphere in which people survive primarily by hard physical labor.



Social Sensitivity

To her credit, Vande Velde does not dodge the obvious questions that arise out of the situations she creates. When the dragon Selendrile takes human form, he is naked—no clothes miraculously appear without explanation; further, being after all a dragon most of the time, he finds Alys's embarrassment at his nudity odd and even funny: "Humans," he sighed in a tone which reminded Alys that—whatever was the dragon equivalent to seventeen years old—dragons lived for hundreds of years. "Sometimes I forget." He finds himself some clothes which Alys must care for when he takes the forms of other creatures.

Alys's desire for revenge might be unsettling to some readers, but her anger is very well motivated. The ending in which she forsakes revenge seems designed to suit those readers.

In any case, the principal interests of the story are Alys's relationship with Selendrile and Alys's growth into a mature competence that enables her to cope even when under great stress.

Revenge, while important as motivation, actually takes a back seat to these other aspects of the novel.

Literary Qualities

The most important element in *Dragon's Bait* is the relationship between Alys and Selendrile, which provides much of the tension in the novel. This is an unusual twist; in fantasy adventures such as this one, the action usually creates most of the tension—for instance, battles with evil wizards or sword fights with knights. In *Dragon's Bait* the uneasy relationship between two characters who are suspicious of each other provides momentum to the story. *Dragon's Bait* is quick paced, with deft prose describing situation and scene. The only disappointment in the book may be its ending, which is the stock ending of many a young adult book: Alys decides revenge is not such a good idea; she wishes Atherton had not been killed. This remorse seems out of character, especially since the evil done to Alys was extreme—her father killed, her life ruined, her being left to be eaten alive.



Themes and Characters

Alys has been struggling to learn her father's trade as a tinsmith because he has been very sick from an epidemic that engulfed her village. While he has slowly recovered, she has helped him to make enough tin wire, buttons, and other wares to earn money to help them survive. Hers is a male-oriented society. It is unusual for a girl to learn her father's trade; the man is supposed to take on male apprentices if he has no sons of his own to carry on his work. Perhaps this is why the villagers of St. Toby's so readily believe that Alys is somehow fey, being associated with dark magic. She had let herself dream of actually becoming a tinsmith.

Intelligent, strong willed, and tough, Alys makes for an attractive main character. She is also impulsive, which is sometimes nearly her undoing, but which at the right moment saves her.

In one scene, she has been tied to a stake with burning brands around her to attract the dragon's attention. Her first impulse is simply to give up, but when she realizes that her hands have been badly tied, she frees herself. Reasoning that she is going to die anyway, she goes out of her way to attract the dragon flying overhead. In spite of her efforts to anger and irritate the dragon—she even kicks it—it does not eat her. Her unusual behavior—few people really want dragons to notice them—has captured his interest.

Through her relationship with the dragon Selendrile, Alys grows as a person. At first filled with undirected anger, she learns to think about what she feels. Selendrile encourages her quest for revenge, but when she wants him to devise the nature of the revenge for her, he refuses to do so. He drops hints here and there, and he does come up with some ideas of his own, but in general he makes Alys think for herself. At first she sees herself only as a victim; she submits to her unjust fate.

By the novel's end, she has learned that she can take action on behalf of herself and others. That she comes to believe that revenge is largely futile develops perhaps too quickly to be entirely credible, but her development into a strong and interesting person is well shown.

The other important character is Selendrile, an exceptionally interesting dragon. Most readers know what dragons are supposed to be like: they breathe fire, eat fair maidens, fly, and gather hoards of gold. When an author wishes to defy this archetype, he or she usually makes the usually fierce dragon friendly, even gentle. This latter image has become commonplace in modern literature for young readers.

Selendrile is not quite either sort of dragon. He can be gentle when it suits him, but he is always menacing. For one thing, he regards human beings as "beasts," and he eats them. On the other hand, he has no special taste for fair maidens, asserting, "Dragons don't ask for maidens. Dragons are offered maidens." He explains further, "Is a king likely to be a maiden? Or a village headman? It's the men who make the laws which



decree that maidens be offered." This defies Alys's images of grief-stricken kings and knights suffering at the loss of their loved ones, but Selendrile is no romantic. Instead, he is a hard, cold realist who treasures no illusions about the world.

The most unusual aspect of Selendrile may be his combination of menace and thoughtfulness. He is as fully realized a personality as any human character might be, with contradictions being as much a part of him as they are of human beings. It is his menacing nature that sustains much of *Dragon's Bait's* suspense; he could at any moment turn on Alys. Whenever he seems bored or irritated Alys fears he will kill her. Selendrile's menacing behavior plays a key role in Alys's development; she has to be on her guard at all times, and in thinking about what is really going on behind Selendrile's beautiful but cold eyes, she learns to think past people's surfaces to what lies within their hearts. His ability to change into a human who looks like a seventeen-year-old boy enables him to share in much of Alys's efforts to revenge herself upon those who have wronged her.

His good looks bewitch some women; Alys fears that his cold eyes will give him away, but they never do. In looking past his handsome surface, Alys reminds herself that he is not just a couple of years older than she, but is in fact hundreds of years old. At all times, Selendrile is depicted as alien to human beings; his thoughts, emotions, and needs are those of a distinctly unhuman creature. Altogether, Selendrile is a wonderful creation.

Dragon's Bait has a number of villains. The entire village of St. Toby's may be viewed as villainous; those who wanted to kill Alys are joined in their villainy by those who knew better but did not speak up. Principal among the village's villains are the wheelwright Gower, his wife Una, and their daughter Etta. Described as ambitious, Gower wants to own the tinsmith's shop which is next door to his. He quickly takes over the shop once Alys and her father are out of the way. He and his family make up the story about Alys being a witch in order to have her killed. Etta is particularly notable for her crude lies about Alys casting spells. The other major villain is Inquisitor Atherton, who lives in Griswold. He comes to St. Toby's to conduct Alys's trial, but he has already made up his mind. He gains satisfaction from executing people and so makes sure that Alys's trial is a sham.

He is a nasty, abusive, and greedy man *Dragon's Bait* 3049 who falls into the trap set for him because of the lure of money. Alys's reaction to his death is interesting; she wanted his reputation destroyed, but she decides that she did not want him killed. On the other hand, Selendrile probably did other people like Alys a favor by putting a permanent end to his cruelties. Besides, Selendrile was fighting for his life at the time.

Although not as fully developed as Alys and Selendrile, the antagonists are more than stereotypical villains. Atherton sees himself as going about the work his profession requires of him.

Gower takes genuine pride in his work and seems to care about his family, which gives him some redeeming qualities that make him a round, full character.



Topics for Discussion

1. At the end of Dragon's Bait, Alys and Selendrile decide to stay together.

How will their relationship continue to develop?

2. Are you satisfied by the ending?

Why or why not?

3. Would you like to see more violent action in Dragon's Bait? Why or why not?

4. What do you think of the relationship between Alys and Selendrile?

Does it hold your interest?

5. Is Selendrile a believable figure?

How does Vande Velde try to flesh him out?

6. Why does Alys change her mind about revenge?

7. Why do the people of St. Toby's tolerate having Gower, a man of great treachery and evil, living in their midst as a trusted tradesman?

8. What is the significance of the witch who lives behind the waterfall?

9. Why do women in general find Selendrile very attractive in his human form? Why is Alys not mesmerized by him as many other women are?

10. Alys has every reason to be suspicious of a dragon who considers human beings to be beasts and who has said that he eats people. Why is Selendrile suspicious of her?

11. Are there aspects of Dragon's Bait's society that you would like to know more about? What are they? How would they have enhanced your enjoyment of the book?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Selendrile to dragons found in other fantasy tales. How are they alike? Is there anything that makes Selendrile special?

2. Is Alys a strong female figure or weak one? Some feminist critics have complained over the years that swordand-sorcery fantasy features strong men but weak women. Does Alys satisfy their desire to see female characters take charge of their own lives?

3. The events in Dragon's Bait seem to take place in a medieval society.

What were medieval beliefs about witches? Are these beliefs accurately portrayed in Dragon's Bait?

4. Is the medieval Christian church properly portrayed in Dragon's Bait?

Did clerics do what Atherton does?

5. What are the best parts of the novel? What makes them work?

6. Write a new chapter for the novel, continuing the adventures of Alys and Selendrile. What do they do next?

7. What does Vande Velde do to make the imaginary character Selendrile seem realistic?

8. Vande Velde has said that she likes to create characters who discover that they can cope with life. How is this reflected in Dragon's Bait?

9. As a main character in a swordand-sorcery fantasy, how does Alys measure up? How does she compare with male and female characters in other such fantasies?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Vande Velde, Vivian." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 62. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 182. Presents some comments by Vande Velde about her work.

Related Titles

Vande Velde has written a number of fantasies for young adults. The most significant of these is probably *User Unfriendly*, which involves young people becoming caught in a computer fantasy role-playing game.



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