

The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp

Short Guide

The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp by Richard Peck

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Overview

The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp, the third of Peck's four comic supernatural novels set in the small town of Bluff City in the second decade of the twentieth century, is an often boisterous adventure fantasy that satirically examines the unfortunately enduring human tendencies toward narrowmindedness and hypocrisy. The novel owes much of its appeal to the lively and eccentric narrative voice of Blossom Culp. Looked down on as a social outcast, she is a girl who, as she phrases it, lives by rules of her own. Gifted with penetrating insights about human behavior, she candidly exposes hypocrisy and bigotry. Gifted with second sight, she frequently makes contact with the supernatural.

In *The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp*, Blossom describes the events of the autumn of 1914 when she enters her freshman year of high school where she must deal with the snobbery of the town's most popular girl, Letty Shambaugh, and her clique of conforming followers. In the course of her first weeks at school, Blossom struggles with her former friend, Alex Armsworth's refusal to admit to his own gift of second sight and his general rejection of her friendship as he pursues popularity and status with a less-than-law-abiding crowd of boys. Blossom's sensitivity and mature understanding of human behavior lead her into a friendship with Daisy-Rae, a poor girl from the country, and reveal the deceitful womanizing habits of Mr. Lacy, the new history teacher. By the end of the novel Blossom has exposed Mr. Lacy as a two-timing seducer, taught Alex Armsworth some lessons in mature behavior, temporarily deflated Letty Shambaugh's ego, used her occult and psychological resources to make a success of the freshman class haunted house project, and most notably taken a trip seventy years into the future.

On a stormy October night in a supposedly haunted farmhouse, Blossom suddenly finds herself a confused outsider in the Bluff City of 1984. In this, the novel's central event, Blossom provides a satirical vision of modern life and discovers that some things—human narrow-mindedness and snobbery—have stayed the same. Fortunately she finds that friendship still exists in this future world where she meets Jeremy, a lonely boy obsessed with computers and science fiction, and who, like Blossom, is treated like an outcast by his peers. Jeremy introduces Blossom to a world of sub-developments, gadgets, fast food, and modern schooling that is stripped of its comfortable familiarity by Blossom's distant historical perspective. In the midst of the impersonal, alien, and chaotic environment of Jeremy's Bluffleigh Heights Magnet Middle School, Blossom meets the same sort of "gang of stuck-up girls" that rule the halls and classrooms of her own school back in 1914. Indeed, the leader of these girls turns out to be the granddaughter of the snobbish Letty Shambaugh in Blossom's 1914 freshman class. Armed with fresh insights about the enduring qualities of human nature, Blossom returns to her early twentieth-century small town world where she continues to defend her integrity and individuality against the pressures of conformity.

As a determined eccentric, Blossom provides satirical commentary and genuine human warmth, making her narrative much more than simply a comic adventure fantasy.

About the Author

Richard Peck was born on April 5, 1934, and grew up in Decatur, Illinois, a town that has found its way into much of Peck's fiction. Decatur appears as the Dunthorpe of *Dreamland Lake* (1973) and *Representing Super Doll* (1974). As it may have been at the turn of the century, Decatur appears as the Bluff City of Peck's four comic supernatural adventure novels about Blossom Culp. Although dreaming of becoming a writer as he was growing up, Peck wrote no fiction until the age of thirty-seven. While in the army, however, he exercised his talents ghostwriting sermons for chaplains of various denominations.

In 1954 Peck attended the University of Exeter in England and received his B.A. degree from DePauw University in Indiana in 1955. In 1959 he earned an M.A. degree from Southern Illinois University and later, in 1960 and 1961, studied at Washington University. Initially pursuing a career in teaching, Peck taught high school in Glenbrook, a Chicago suburb that later became the setting for the satirical *Secrets of the Shopping Mall* (1981), and *Remembering the Good Times* (1985). He later taught at Hunter College High School in New York. In 1971 he left teaching for fulltime writing, publishing his first novel *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* in 1972.

Since then his books for young adults have won numerous awards, including the Friends of American Writers Award for *The Ghost Belonged to Me* in 1976 and the Edgar Allan Poe Award for *Are You in the House Alone?* in 1977. In 1981 *Close Enough to Touch* was named Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association and was a Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award nominee in 1982. Five of Peck's novels have been made into television movies.

Peck has also published poetry in anthologies and such magazines as the *Saturday Review* and writes about architecture for the *New York Times*. In addition to writing, Peck has served as a textbook editor, and from 1969 to 1970 was Assistant Director of the Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C. Peck, who now lives on Candlewood Lake in Connecticut, is consistently acclaimed by both adult and young adult readers for his understanding of his audience and the young characters he portrays. Much of this understanding Peck attributes to his experience in the high school classroom, where, among other things he "learned that teaching is listening."

Setting

The primary setting for Peck's story is the Illinois town of Bluff City based on the author's hometown of Decatur as it might have been in 1914. Bluff City is a largely agricultural community with two leading families, two social worlds on two sides of the tracks, and a strong emphasis placed on conformity. It has all the expected charms of drugstore ice cream parlors, streetcars, reputedly haunted houses, and the leisurely pace of an earlier era. But Bluff City also possesses the marks of class prejudice and general close-mindedness. Mrs. Shambaugh, the town's leading socialite, heads the influential Daughters of the American Revolution while her teen-age daughter heads the equally exclusive Sunny Thoughts and Busy Fingers Sisterhood. On the other hand Blossom Culp and her mother, an impoverished Gypsy fortune teller, live in a shack that local political candidates promise to have torn down each election year.

When Blossom Culp's powers of second sight transport her to the Bluff City of the 1980s, the setting becomes an alienating maze of sub-developments, shopping malls, and traffic when seen from the perspective of the past. Blossom's narrative guides the reader through a world of depersonalized architecture, domestic gadgetry, and trendy educational methods where we nevertheless discover that humans themselves have not changed much since 1914. Peck thus employs setting as more than a colorful backdrop for Blossom's adventures. The shifting historical perspective serves the satirical purpose of revealing the familiar as suddenly strange and new so that it can be viewed more objectively.



Social Sensitivity

Since *The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* contains much satire, it should come as no surprise if some readers are bothered by some aspects of the novel.

It is, after all, the purpose of satire to create disturbance, but Peck softens that disturbance with humor. Even so, satire aims at more than disturbance; it hopes to force those readers who are disturbed to reevaluate their beliefs and behavior. Moreover, the satirist is traditionally a sensitive reformer deeply concerned, at heart, about the human condition.

Peck's narrator, Blossom Culp, is unsparing in her exposure of Bluff City's mean-spirited citizens who disguise their bigotry in the clothing of respectable conformity. Readers who expect respectable role models in young adult literature might be dissatisfied with Blossom. But this is part of the point of the novel. Blossom might not possess the manners, the money, the clothes, or the home life to be respectable in terms of her society, but a true satirist herself, she possesses commitment to truth, fairness, friendship, and general human sympathy.

In the characters of Blossom, Jeremy, Daisy-Rae, and even Blossom's frightening and disreputable mother, Peck provides something in addition to a barbed attack on pretentious and hypocritical social values. In these characters the reader can appreciate the condition of those who are pushed outside the borders of society. Beneath the self-assured, resourceful and candid surface of Blossom's character, readers can detect the loneliness of someone who has been shut out of the community.

Her own loneliness, however, evokes her sympathy for others who share her condition—Jeremy the egghead computer nerd, and Daisy-Rae who hides all day in the women's rest room. As in his other novels for young adults, Peck displays a warm sensitivity about the condition of those who are different.

Blossom is different not only because of her lower-class background and commitment to expressing her individuality, but also because of her gift of second sight. Some people might object to Peck's inclusion of the occult in his novel. Objections to anything suggesting witchcraft or satanism in literature have become increasingly more common. It should be noted, however, that here, as in Peck's other novels featuring Blossom Culp, the powers she possesses are more psychic than magical, and are only used in the interest of good. The only involvement of Blossom's psychic gift in this novel concerns a harmless journey to the future where her appearance helps to relieve Jeremy's loneliness. Finally the psychic element in the novel is hardly treated with complete seriousness, being more a comic device to add range to the plot and allow for further dimensions of satire.

Literary Qualities

Much of the novel's humor comes from Blossom's resourceful plotting, through which she arranges embarrassing moments of exposure for those pompous and deceitful characters who deserve such lessons. The appearance of Mr. Lacy's abandoned wife and child (acted by Daisy-Rae and her young brother) at the freshman class haunted house, and the humiliating fortune told for the stuck-up Letty Shambaugh are comic moments that depend on the humor of a pratfall. Much of the comedy is boisterously physical, such as Blossom's fall from a tree while spying on Alex Armsworth and his friends swimming in the nude. The most meaningful comic form used by Peck, however, is satire, a device that defines the whole shape of this novel. Satire is accomplished not only through exaggerating the traits of the characters but more importantly by showing human behavior from a distanced perspective that draws attention to things we would not otherwise notice. Peck's satirical technique involves defamiliarization, that is making familiar things unfamiliar so that we question ideas and behavior that we might otherwise accept without thought. Satirical Defamiliarization in Peck's novel is accomplished first of all by using a narrator, Blossom Culp, who is an outsider. A social outcast who has little to gain or lose from the opinions of others, she is able to comment on the behavior of her peers and superiors in a frank and often disinterested manner.

In terms of the Bluff City world of respectable people she is unsophisticated and naive. But her comments on Bluff City life reveal a point of view that is attentive, intelligent, and unbiased.

Blossom's distanced perspective reveals the absurdity of what is often accepted as normal. This is especially apparent when she is transported to the Bluff City of 1984. Here the reader's own world is seen not only from the point of view of someone who would probably be an outsider at any time in history but also from the perspective of an earlier time. The suburban landscape that the modern reader accepts as normal is seen as cold, alien, and absurd when viewed from a disorienting historical perspective. Likewise, the portions of the novel set in 1914 create a distanced satirical point of view by placing typical human behavior in the less familiar context of the past. Peck's satirical techniques can be compared to those of Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), where the familiar is made alien by changing its size. Peck's use of an eccentric, alienated narrator can also be compared to Mark Twain's use of Huck Finn who, like Blossom Culp, narrates his adventures from the honest perspective of a social outcast.

By disorienting the reader through shifting historical viewpoints and employing a distanced outsider as narrator, Peck uses traditional satirical devices to criticize human behavior and reveal some of its absurdity. Peck's novel manages to entertain with fastpaced humor while at the same time challenging the reader to see human strengths and weaknesses from new perspectives.

Themes and Characters

Although *The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* is a comic fantasy centered in Blossom Culp's gift of second sight, magic and the supernatural are not so much themes as they are a means of developing themes. The central topics of Peck's novel involve alienation, bigotry, hypocrisy, friendship, conformity, and individuality. These are essentially embodied in the wide range of colorful characters observed by Blossom both in the Bluff City of her own time and the Bluff City of the future.

Blossom's acute powers of observation, her position as a social outcast, and her unsparingly frank narrative voice allow for the often comic exposure of the failings of her peers and superiors. Snobbery is embodied in the mean-spirited Letty Shambaugh whose exclusive club of back-biting, stuck-up, and cowardly girls is hypocritically called *The Sunny Thoughts and Busy Fingers Sisterhood*. Hypocrisy is also embodied in the charming and handsome history teacher, Mr. Lacy, a twotiming seducer who has cruelly abandoned a wife and child to pursue a womanizing career. The pressures of social conformity are expressed in the desperate attempts of Alex Armsworth to gain popularity and acceptance among his peers at the expense of true friendship with Blossom. Having, like Blossom, the gift of second sight, Alex is afraid to be himself and succumbs to the pressure to be part of the crowd.

Blossom's narrative perspective, being that of the excluded outsider with a will of her own, makes the novel more than just a comic attack on closeminded conformity. The novel's many eccentric characters offer a celebration of individuality and the ability to establish honest and caring friendships in a world seemingly controlled by self-serving bigotry. Blossom meets and befriends Daisy-Rae, an illiterate and essentially homeless country girl who has come to the city so her younger brother can attend school while, conscious of her alien status, she hides in the girl's lavatory during the day. We also meet the independent and reclusive retired farmer, Old Man Leverette, who is the constant victim of local schoolboy pranks. And there is Blossom's mother, a stern gypsy woman who maintains herself by telling fortunes, disregarding the town's opinion of her, and occasionally stealing a chicken or two. Finally there is Blossom herself who goes her own way regardless of what her peers or superiors think and is sympathetic and loyal to those people she likes. Like all the outsiders in the novel, she lives by her wits, surviving despite the treatment she receives from the so-called respectable citizens of Bluff City.

Sympathy for the outcast and derision for the narrow-minded is also expressed in Blossom's narrative of her experience in the Bluff City of the 1980s. Here Blossom feels sympathy with the lonely Jeremy who escapes the pressures and taunts of his peers and his trendy older sister by withdrawing into his world of computers and science fiction. Jeremy's divorced mother, however, appears as mechanical and as programmed as her kitchen gadgets.



The dull uniform architecture of Jeremy's "magnet" school reflects the conformity that is taught there. And like Blossom's school in 1914, Jeremy's has its own queen of conformity, the granddaughter of Letty Shambaugh.

It is primarily through Blossom's honest, comic, and often terse but sensitive narration that the book's commitment to individuality and honesty is stressed. Blossom follows her own rules throughout her escapades and those rules emphasize not only the often comic exposure of hypocrites and bigots but also the display of human sympathy for those who are excluded, neglected, or scorned by the conforming mainstream of society.



Topics for Discussion

1. Blossom says she is someone who lives by her own rules (Chapter 1). She never tells us exactly what these rules are, but we may be able to guess on the basis of her own behavior and her opinions about others' behavior. What seem to be the rules that Blossom lives by?

2. Discuss Blossom's reactions to what she sees in 1984. What sort of general criticism of modern life might Peck be expressing through these reactions of a girl from an earlier time?

3. Who are the conformists and who are the nonconformists in Peck's novel?

What are the chief characteristics displayed by the conformists? What characteristics describe the nonconformists?

4. Blossom's friend, Alex Armsworth, comes from the high society of Bluff City, shuns Blossom's friendship, and seems to be a committed conformist.

Why then does Blossom care about him? What redeeming characteristics does he possess?

5. Discuss your reaction to Blossom Culp's behavior and her opinions. Do you agree with all her observations and attitudes about her society and about the society she sees in the 1980s?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Using newspapers, magazines, or other library resources, find out what was happening in the United States during the fall of 1914 when the events of Peck's novel take place.

2. Find out something about satire.

Present an extended definition of satire with some examples. What aspects of Peck's book fit this definition?

3. At least one reviewer (Yoke) has compared Blossom to Huck Finn, the narrator of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Read Twain's novel and report on the similarities and differences between Blossom and Huck.

4. Being a satire, Peck's novel attempts to disturb some people's assumptions about what is respectable, correct, or important in life. Which if any of your own assumptions did you feel were attacked in the novel? How did you respond to this?

5. Use your library's resources to find two or three reviews of Peck's novel. Summarize these reviews and discuss your agreement or disagreement with the reviewers.

For Further Reference

Crew, Hillary. "Blossom Culp and Her ilk: The Independent Female in Richard Peck's Young Adult Fiction." *Top of the News* 43,3 (Spring 1987): 297-301. Crew notes especially the theme of isolation and loneliness contained beneath Blossom's bravado. Crew discusses this theme as a prominent one in much of Peck's fiction.

Gauch, Patricia. Review. *The New York Times Book Review* (December 18, 1983): 21. The reviewer finds the novel to be inferior to its predecessors in the series and finds Blossom's journey to the future to be too laden with dull social commentary.

Peck, Richard. *Anonymously Yours*. New York: J. Messner, 1991. In this autobiographical volume, Peck especially emphasizes how he became a writer for young adults and how material from his life is utilized in his fiction.

———. "In the Country of Teenage Fiction." *American Libraries* 4 (April 1973): 204-207. Peck here writes about young adult needs in relation to young adult literature.

———. "Some Thoughts on Adolescent Literature." *News from ALAN* 3 (September-October 1975): 4-7. In this article Peck outlines what he sees as the identifiable characteristics of young adult fiction.

———. "Richard Peck." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990:165-167. In this sketch Peck provides thought on his own education, on what made him a writer, and gives some advice for aspiring young writers.

Yoke, Carl B. "Third in Series Maintains High Standard." *Fantasy Review* 7,7 (August 1984): 50. Yoke finds that Peck's characters echo those of Mark Twain and Booth Tarkington.

He stresses that Peck's novel is concerned primarily with values.



Related Titles/Adaptations

The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp is the third of four novels featuring Blossom Culp and Bluff City at the beginning of this century. The opening book of the series, *The Ghost Belonged to Me*, is narrated by Alex Armsworth and involves a ghost of a drowned girl who appears to Alex in his family's barn requesting burial among her own people in New Orleans. Alex, Blossom, and Alex's eighty-five-year-old Uncle Miles travel to New Orleans by train to bury the girl's skeletal remains. Blossom makes her first appearance as a narrator in the second novel of the series, *Ghosts I Have Been*, in which Blossom is brought into contact across time with a boy tragically drowned in the sinking of the Titanic. Among other exiting incidents in this novel, Blossom meets the Queen of England. In the fourth novel of the series, *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death*, Blossom helps prevent her suffragette history teacher from losing her job and uses her psychic powers to restore an ancient Egyptian princess to her tomb. All these novels display Peck's talent for satire and for capturing the colorful atmosphere of early twentieth-century American small town life.

The first novel of the Blossom Culp series, *The Ghost Belonged to Me*, has been made into a TV movie by Walt Disney Productions. Entitled *Child of Glass* (1978), the film differs from Peck's novel in being set entirely in New Orleans where the Armsworth family has purchased a mansion from the Civil War days. The film also adds the discovery of a lost Civil War treasure to the plot.



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