

Dukes Short Guide

Dukes by Robert Newton Peck

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Overview

With the present-day issue of the plight of the homeless, it is ironic to read *Dukes*, a novel set almost a century earlier, and draw parallels between the historical characters and today's homeless people.

Lucky, a young girl, Nose, an old geezer, and Baptist, a deaf and mute black man, travel from Florida town to Florida town playing music to drum up an audience and contenders for their bare-dukes-only boxing match. Any man paying ten dollars can challenge Baptist and win one hundred dollars if he can knock the boxer down. Townspeople pay a dollar apiece to watch the event, with children attending free.

This motley crew of three makes a living in this fashion, squirreling away extra money that never seems to be enough to buy themselves a little land and a home of their own.

The inner dignity of human beings strikes a universal chord, no matter the social or economic status of the reader.

In this time of peer pressure and the desire to be anonymous within a group, there is a lesson in this novel, of individuality and pride of knowing right and wrong, that young adults would do well to heed.

About the Author

Robert Newton Peck, the son of Haven and Lucile (Dornburgh) Peck, was born on February 17, 1928, in a rural Shaker community in Vermont.

He has been a farmer, a lumberjack, a hog butcher, and a paper mill worker.

From 1945-1947 he served in the army and was stationed in Italy, Germany, and France. After returning to the U.S., he attended Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and received his bachelor's degree in 1953. He married Dorothy Houston, a librarian, in 1958. The Pecks have two children. Peck's first book, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* (1972), launched his prolific writing career.

The book is based on Peck's own boyhood in rural Vermont and his relationship with his father. The importance of a parental bond occurs in several of Peck's books.

Peck says he writes for no certain age level, and most of his books cross the lines between adult, young adult, and children's literature. Many of his works are set in rural Vermont in the 1920s and 1930s or, in the case of his historical novels, in the Revolutionary War period. Early twentieth-century Florida is the setting for several of his later works.

In 1974 his series of Soup books was begun with the publication of *Soup*. A childhood friend of Peck's inspired these books about the misadventures of two best friends. His *Soup for President* won the 1982 Mark Twain Award. Another series for the same third to sixth grade readers started with the 1977 publication of *Trig*, the story of a tomboy. Peck publishes an average of three books a year. Having written two books on the craft of writing for adults, he is in demand as a speaker at writing workshops and seminars, yet he also takes time to answer his fan mail. His hobbies include playing ragtime piano, writing songs, and skiing.



Setting

Dukes is a historical novel set in the early nineteenth hundreds in and around Caloosa, Florida. The people in that town are almost as poor as Lucky, Nose, and Baptist, although the townspeople do have homes or shanties, while the unlikely trio live out of their wagon.

The Dukes threesome camp outside of town and set up a square ring of posts and ropes for the fights. The night before the first fight they were lucky enough to catch a mess of catfish for supper. But on fight night they ate only a can of beans.

The entire story takes place in three days: from the Dukes' wagon arriving in Caloosa, through the fights on that night and the second night, to the consequences of the last fight, which forces a change of life on the third day.



Social Sensitivity

Because the book is set in the early nineteenth century, the racial attitudes of that era are reflected in the novel.

Black people are not respected as individuals and are relegated to the status of lower-class citizens. When the townspeople gather around the Dukes' wagon to hear music, the blacks stand behind the crowd.

The author hints that Nose didn't treat black Baptist with much respect until Lucky came along. Toward the end of the book, Nose does feel remorse and acknowledges that he might be burning his fighter up, but he doesn't see a way out of the situation.

When the fat white sheriff shoots Baptist, the reader has the feeling the story would have ended differently if the fighter had been a white man.

The scene of two obese women fighting in the mud and tearing each other's clothes off is a curiosity to Lucky. After she sees a few minutes of the fight, her two guardians and she, herself, want to leave, because the sight is not one that decent people should see.

Later Nose points out to a church-going man that he was seen at the mud fight, spotlighting the hypocrisy of people who stand in judgement of others.

Baptist's violent death surprises the reader, primarily because it is not a great cause of grief for Lucky and Nose, although they both love him.

Lucky sees death as an escape for Baptist because he dislikes fighting and hurting other men.

Nose reacts as he does to many things he can't change; he finds solace in a bottle of whiskey. Lucky dislikes it when Nose drinks because he is wasting money that could go toward the purchase of their home place. It also harms him physically, as he has to sleep it off the next day. In this respect, Peck has served young adults a message they need to hear from a peer's point of view.



Literary Qualities

Peck uses symbols to develop his themes. Duke is a title of nobility. Although the travelers use the name Dukes for their business because it means prize fighting with bare fists, Peck employs the title as a symbol which transcends social standing and measures the dignity of human worth.

Another obvious symbol is the "Home Sweet Home" sign that Lucky purchased years before the story begins. She hides her dream of a permanent home under her cot in the wagon, just as Nose hides the coffee can that holds the money and the means to Lucky's dream under his cot.

Pulling the Dukes' wagon are Christmas, a white mule, and Easter, a black mule. Together they symbolize the Christian moral that all mankind, regardless of color, should work and live together in peace. In reality, the story has a white man, Nose, exploiting a black man, the fighter Baptist. Although the two men work together, it is Lucky who brings love to them both.

Peck uses colloquialisms of cracker Florida, recalling the dialect in Lois Lenski's regional novel *Strawberry Girl*.

Lenski's language flowed more smoothly, and the difference may be because a narrator told her story where Peck's story is told in the first person by Lucky.

The author's tacking the suffix "some" onto words, such as "realsome, darksome, loudsome, proudsome," and "oddsome," gets tiresome quickly. Peck also uses nouns as verbs. "To fist a man" means to fight him, "efforting to blow" means attempting to blow. Although the meanings are relatively clear, the expressions stop the reader, not a sign of a smooth-flowing book.

Bad grammar is the standard for this novel, and although it may reflect the educational background of the characters, its use in dialogue only would have been sufficient for that purpose.

As it is, it detracts from the story.



Themes and Characters

Lucky, a precocious young girl of uncertain age, but somewhere between ten and twelve, tells the story. She is a foundling, left in the Dukes' wagon as an infant. The old man who discovered her named her Lucky, because it was his lucky day when she entered his life. Lucky is wise beyond her years as she works at her jobs of entertainer (she plays a harmonica), ticket seller, and timekeeper for the boxing matches.

Saving enough money to buy some land, a place of their own, so the three Dukes can stop living on the road, is her dream.

Nose, the over-seventy-year-old man who found Lucky in the back of the wagon, has been a fight promoter for many years. He drinks whiskey when the money supply allows and tries to raise Lucky as a lady. He is honest, and his homespun philosophy is based on the differences between right and wrong.

Baptist, a big strapping black man of about forty years, is a born fighter, not in temperament, for he is a gentle giant, but in his ability to dance around the ring, read a boxer's methods, and know what punches to throw. He cannot speak or hear, but Lucky knows that somehow he understands her. It is through pictures, gestures and feelings that they communicate.

The Dukes' struggle for survival, although sometimes harsh, is not without its shining moments, and the trio are happy together. They see nature for what it is and enjoy it. They understand human nature and abide by it.

Peck's theme of inner dignity, not reserved for only the rich, but also found in the poor, is carried throughout the book. The Dukes share love and respect for each other in their everyday lives and find happiness in being together, even if they are scraping for money so they can eat.

The Dukes are decent people. Their pride, based on honesty and love, provides their personal worth, and their self-esteem doesn't rest on material goods or acceptance among peers. Peck illuminates the integrity and respectableness of the Dukes by describing the opposite—Yardy Banner cheating in the fight by clenching a roll of pennies in his fist and the two obese women rolling in a mud fight like animals.



Topics for Discussion

1. Names are important to Lucky because she doesn't have a last name.

How did she, Nose, and Baptist get their names?

2. Peck uses Florida cracker colloquialisms throughout the book. Do they detract or add to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the story?

3. Lucky and Nose use a simplistic system for recording the fighters Baptist has faced. What were each of the symbols used in her portfolio?

4. Why does Nose give Lucky the penny?

5. Describe the incident with the sheriff that leads to Baptist's death.

How does the physical description of the sheriff add to the emotion of the scene?

6. Lucky refers to church in several ways. Using examples from the book, give Lucky's view on religion.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Dukes make a living in an interesting way that enlivens a town. Explain the procedure, from costumes to the boxing ring, the Dukes follow each time they arrive in a new place.
2. Do Nose and Baptist share Lucky's dream? Give examples from the book to support your answers.
3. How do you think Baptist feels about the fights? How does the reader know this? What is meant by Baptist swallowing his own pain when he hits someone?
4. Lucky needs a new dress, but refuses to buy one. Why? What tactic does Nose employ to entice her to pick out a dress? Does it work?
5. Honesty and understanding human nature are Nose's strong points.
Give examples from the book to illustrate both attributes.
6. What is the significance of the title of this book?
7. Lucky refers to Baptist's handicap: "it was certain better to be able to read faces and hearts, instead of mere words." What does she mean by this?

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Related Titles

During his early writing career, Peck set his books in his native Vermont.

Now that he lives in Florida, that state has become the setting for several of his novels, including *Dukes*. *The Seminole Seed* (1983) is set in contemporary Florida. *Spanish Hoof* (1985), *The Horse Hunters* (1988), and *Hallapoosa* (1988) are set in Florida during the depression years.



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