

The Eyes of the Amaryllis Short Guide

The Eyes of the Amaryllis by Natalie Babbitt

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Overview

In *The Eyes of the Amaryllis*, young Jenny Reade has been sent to an isolated Cape Cod home to care for her grandmother Geneva, who has broken her ankle. Jenny doesn't know her grandmother well and has never before seen the ocean. Years earlier, Jenny's grandfather, a sailor, drowned when his ship sank off the coast in a storm.

Jenny's father, who was never able to come to terms with his own father's death, moved inland as soon as he was old enough. Now, a married man, he has never allowed Jenny to visit her grandmother or the family's ancestral oceanside cottage.

Jenny quickly realizes, however, that a broken ankle is the least of her grandmother's problems. Soon after her arrival, the old woman insists that Jenny accompany her on mysterious, evening scavenger hunts along the wind-swept beaches. Although Geneva's husband has been dead some thirty years, the woman searches, after every turning of the tide, for some gift from him and watches for some fragment of his former life to wash ashore.

At first Jenny fears that her grandmother is mad, until she begins to discover evidence that something extraordinary is indeed going on. While combing the shore, she and her grandmother meet Seward, who may or may not be a ghost sent to protect the sea's interest. Then, a few days later, Jenny finds the figurehead from the *Amaryllis*, her grandfather's lost ship. Her grandmother regards the figurehead as a gift from her long lost husband, a proof of his continuing love. Soon, however, it becomes clear that the sea wants the figurehead back, and that, if it isn't returned, the sea is perfectly willing to come and get it.

About the Author

Natalie Zane Moore was born on July 28, 1932, in Dayton, Ohio. Her ancestors on both sides came to North America in the 1600s and two of them— Isaac Zane, called the White Eagle of the Wyandottes, and Zebulon Pike, the discoverer of Pike's Peak—were pioneers and explorers of some renown. Others among her ancestors founded towns throughout West Virginia and Ohio.

Babbitt's father, Ralph Moore, worked as a labor relations specialist, but, due to the Great Depression and to his wife Genevieve's ambitions for the family, he switched jobs frequently throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The author has emphasized how these moves from one Ohio city to another influenced her personality and her later writing. She tends to write stories about young people who, for one reason or another, are lost or separated from home.

In 1954, soon after graduating from Smith College with a degree in art, Natalie Moore married Samuel Babbitt, who became a successful university administrator, holding positions at Yale, Vanderbilt, Kirkland College (where he was president), and Brown. She settled into the routine of a university administrator's wife, hostessing parties and raising three children. Babbitt soon became frustrated and bored with this life, however. In 1964 after reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, she began to pursue a long dormant desire to be an artist. In 1966 she and her husband published *The Forty-Ninth Magician*, a book written by him and featuring her illustrations. Babbitt followed this success with two more wellreceived picture books, *Dick Foote and the Shark* (1967) and *Phoebe's Revolt* (1968), for which she provided both text and illustrations. She then published her first children's novel, *The Search for Delicious* (1969), which was selected by the *New York Times* as the best novel of the year for nine- to twelve-year-olds.

Babbitt has said that she does not consider herself a professional writer, by which she means that she does not write primarily for the money. This relative financial independence has allowed her to craft, slowly and carefully, a series of fine works for older children and young adults. *Kneeknock Rise* (1970) was a Newbery Honor Book. *The Devil's Storybook* (1974) was nominated for the National Book Award. *Tuck Everlasting* (1975) won the Christopher Award; and her life's work in children's literature earned her the George G. Stone Award in 1978. In 1982 Babbitt's personal favorite among all her works, *Herbert Rowbarge*, appeared, and in 1987 she published *The Devil's Other Storybook*, a sequel to her earlier, award-nominated collection.

Babbitt and her husband currently divide their time between homes in Providence, Rhode Island, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Most of her books remain in print.

Setting

Babbitt has stated that her portrait of the ocean in *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* owes much to her first, childhood view of Lake Erie, and to her love of the Atlantic coast. Similar to *Dick Foote and the Shark* (1967), this story is set on Cape Cod of an earlier era, perhaps the early nineteenth century. The book superbly evokes the storm-ridden, treacherous Cape Cod shoreline with its miles of driftwood-strewn, sandy beaches and its lonely, white-painted board houses.

Surrounded by the wildness and isolation of the coast, it is possible to believe that the spirits of drowned sailors still haunt the shoreline. These ghostly figures might still sail their decaying, eerily-glowing ships across the bottom of the Atlantic at midnight.

Social Sensitivity

At the center of *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* is the difficulty of achieving understanding between the generations.

Rarely in a book for an adolescent audience has the difficult relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter, or, for that matter, between an adult son and his elderly mother, been so well sketched. Geneva Reade's inability to deal with the loss of her husband, shows itself in her obsessive need to remain by the ocean, the site of his death. Her son's inability to come to terms with that death shows itself in an obsessive fear of the ocean and an avoidance of it. Mother and son still love each other deeply, but they can neither communicate their love, nor deal with each other's pain. Only through Jenny, who can feel the pain yet distance herself from it, can some resolution be reached. Children often find themselves drawn into the long-standing problems and quarrels of their elders, situations only vaguely understood and which seem either baffling or insane. Jenny's gradual involvement in her grandmother's situation teaches her much about the adult perspective that comes from long life and its attendant memories.

Literary Qualities

As in *Tuck Everlasting* (1975), Babbitt's narrative in *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* seeks to establish a historical distance, a sense that the work takes place in another era that is connected to ours, but also remains vaguely fabulous. She begins her book with a quotation from the *Song of Solomon* and follows that with an almost Elizabethan prologue in which Seward, the ghost, speaking in an elevated style, addresses "all you people lying lazy on the beach," presumably today's Cape Cod vacationers, who do not understand the true "meaning of the sea." Seward describes in romantic terms the loss of the ship named *Amaryllis* and the tragic events surrounding it. The language of the novel itself is more restrained, but still somewhat old-fashioned. The strange events seem reminiscent of an old tale, calling to mind any number of Shakespeare's plays from *The Tempest* to *A Winter's Tale*.

Themes and Characters

Many children find their grandparents a mystery. The elderly seem to inhabit a strange, slow-moving world of fussy antique furniture, old photographs, and memories. Often, from the viewpoint of children, the elderly seem obsessed with death, both their own impending mortality and that of the loved ones who have gone before them. When young Jenny Reade comes to spend a few months on Cape Cod with her widowed grandmother, it is perhaps natural that she takes her for a mad woman.

Geneva's husband, after all, has been dead a long time, yet the old woman still searches the shore for clues to his disappearance, and seems to expect his momentary return.

Jenny's own life has not been entirely happy. There has been unspecified trouble in the family, a result, perhaps, of her grandmother and father's inability to accept the elder Reade's death.

Through their contact with the supernatural, however, the Reade women— grandmother and granddaughter— learn a valuable lesson about love and about letting go of the past. An important part of growing up is the realization that pain and sorrow are as much a part of life as joy. Only after coming to terms with this fact can Jenny and Geneva rid themselves of their ghosts and find new meaning for their lives.

Babbitt's portrayal of Geneva Reade makes her seem an authentic descendant of the puritans—Governor Bradford, Elder Brewster, and the Plymouth Bay colonists. She is a grim, but loving woman, at once a dour realist and an unquestioning mystic. Babbitt's descriptions of Geneva's relationship with her son and with the young granddaughter, whom she hardly knows, are both believable and touching. In *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* pain and anger run deep. These emotions are not easily placated or discarded. Even love is inadequate to the task, unless it can be harnessed to an awareness of the necessity for change.

Babbitt's theme is intensely relevant to today's young people. While allowing her readers to see the events in her story as clearly related to their own lives, Babbitt succeeds in giving these events a sense of universality. Jenny Reade, although equally individualized, is, in a sense, every young girl, coming to terms with events that occurred long before her birth. The past still shapes her life, and she learns what it is like to be one link in the chain of generations.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why did Babbitt choose to set *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* in the past? Would the novel have worked as effectively if it were set on Cape Cod today?

2. The book opens with a quotation from the Song of Solomon, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." How do you react to this line? What does it tell you about the story?

3. What is the purpose of the "Prologue?" Who exactly is Seward warning and what is he warning against?

4. Who is the protagonist or main character of *The Eyes of the Amaryllis*? Is this Geneva Reade's story or Jenny's story?

5. Why does Geneva Reade want to keep the figurehead from the *Amaryllis*?

Why does the sea apparently want it back? What symbolic significance do you attach to Jenny's father's appearing to save the grandmother immediately after she throws the figurehead into the sea.

6. Babbitt could easily have written *The Eyes of the Amaryllis*, or a novel very similar to it, without bringing in the supernatural. How would this have changed the book? What does the supernatural element add?

7. Jenny's real first name is Geneva, just like her grandmother's. Beyond this, do you see any similarities between their personalities?

8. Discuss the role of Isabel Cooper in the novel. What is her connection with Seward? Why does Geneva still get so angry at her?

9. Many readers report that their favorite image from *The Eyes of Amaryllis* is the one of a sunken ship sailing across the bottom of the ocean, her lamps lit, men working on the deck, the glowing eyes of the figurehead leading them on.

Surprisingly, Natalie Babbitt has stated that she does not like this image and is sorry she put it in the book. Why do you think this is? Why might the author's opinion differ from that of many of her readers.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss Nicholas Irving/Seward's two roles in *The Eyes of the Amaryllis*, both as the tragic carver of the figurehead and as a ghost. Why does he have two different names?

2. Analyze the reactions of both Geneva Reade and her son to the death of Captain Reade. How do these reactions differ? Are they in any sense the same reaction showing itself in two different ways? It can be argued that mother and son have been frozen in time, unable to come to terms with Captain Reade's death. Do one or both come to terms with it at the end of the book?

3. Analyze Jenny's role in the novel. In large measure she acts as an observer, providing insight into the grandmother's situation. But is she more than that?

Does she in fact actively accomplish anything or cause any of the events that occur in the novel? How does her involvement effect the story's outcome?

4. Read *Tuck Everlasting*. Both books concern young girls at the edge of puberty, who must for the first time confront the adult world in all its complexity.

Compare the two books. What similarities do you see?

5. Read *Goody Hall*. Both books concern the loss of a loved husband and the wife's inability to overcome her sorrow and get on with her life. Compare this theme in the two books. Why do the two women have so much trouble coming to terms with their loss? How do they eventually come to terms with it?

Related Titles and Adaptations *The Eyes of the Amaryllis* was made into a film in 1982 by director Frederick King Keller. Ruth Ford played Geneva Reade and Martha Byrne played Jenny.

Despite some gorgeous Nantucket island scenery and fairly successful special effects, the color film, running ninety-four minutes, received generally mediocre reviews. It is currently available on video cassette.

For Further Reference

Babbitt, Natalie. "The Great American Novel for Children—and Why Not."

Horn Book Magazine 50 (April 1974): 175-176. Babbitt's thoughts on contemporary fiction for children and adolescents. By describing what she does not like about books in this essay, Babbitt provides insight into what she is trying to do in her fiction.

———. "The Roots of Fantasy." Bulletin 12 (Spring 1986): 2-4. A love of fantasy, Babbitt suggests, is deeply rooted in the human psyche.

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Babbitt discusses plot motivation and the powerlessness of most children.

Levy, Michael. Natalie Babbitt. Boston: Twayne, 1991. This is the first fulllength study of Babbitt's fiction.

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Moss, Anita. "Natalie Babbitt." In American Writers for Children Since 1960:Fiction, edited by Glenn E. Estes.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Moss is a fine critic who has written a number of articles on Babbitt's work. This is the most extensive general survey of that work currently in print.



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