

Fair Maiden Short Guide

Fair Maiden by Lynn Hall

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Overview

Jennifer, the protagonist of the novel, comes of age as she learns about herself while searching for security. A romantic at heart, she sees in the fantasy realm of the Renaissance fair the safety that she lacks in ordinary life, a life from which she yearns to escape.

Not all her decisions are good ones, but she is bright, lively, and a good sport, and she learns well from her experiences.

When John the Lutanist makes his appearance, he seems a fantasy come true; the story of their romance and of how Jennifer grows beyond it makes *Fair Maiden* memorable reading.

About the Author

Lynn Hall was born November 9, 1937, in Lombard, Illinois, to Raymond Edwin Hall and Alice (nee Seeds) Hall. Her father worked for Standard Oil, and her mother taught high school English and Spanish. She was still a child when her family moved near Des Moines, Iowa. Hall had a happy family life growing up, but she remembers being solitary by choice as a child—she simply preferred being alone—although she soon became very fond of animals, especially horses. Hall was fourteen when she bought a horse with money she earned herself. She rode everyday, acquiring 4600 Fair Maiden a first-hand knowledge of horses that would later provide backgrounds for several of her books.

After graduating from high school, Hall held a wide variety of jobs in Colorado, Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The years from 1955 to 1966 were rootless and unsatisfying. She moved from one unfulfilling job to another and had an unsuccessful marriage to Dean W. Green. Married on May 1, 1960, they were divorced in September 1961.

Chance and her love of animals prompted Hall to start writing. She remembers being inspired to write by seeing a badly written and inaccurate book about horses in a book store; she believed she could do better. Hall, at this time, raised chinchillas for a living. She now sold the herd to raise money to pay for her living expenses while writing her first book, *The Shy Ones*, about a dog. Horse stories soon followed, and, by the end of 1968, Hall had established herself as a full-time writer.

In the early 1970s, Hall moved to the country and lived in a farmhouse; in the late 1970s, she built a stone cottage she calls "Touchstone" where she now lives with cocker spaniels, horses, and other animals. Her love of country life and animals continues to inform her writings.

The American Library Association selected *Sticks and Stones* in 1972 as a "best book" for young adults. The same organization also cited as best books *The Leaving* in 1980 and *Uphill All the Way* in 1984. *The Leaving* received the 1981 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award.

Setting

Most of the action takes place at the Minnetonka Renaissance Fair in Minnesota. The month is September and rain showers occasionally interrupt the fair's activities, although there is little hint of winter. The fair itself consists of booths selling handmade merchandise, places to eat, animal exhibits, and a jousting field. The fantasy-spell of the fair is heightened by having people play the parts of Renaissance characters. Jennifer has the role of a fair maiden who is supposed to freely wander the grounds and help people who need directions or information about the fair.

Fair Maiden 4601 If the romantic ideal of Renaissance life is depicted by the fair, cold reality lies just outside. The traveling acts such as a husband-and-wife comedy team live in trailers just out of sight of the fairgrounds. The area is crowded and noisy with blaring music. Somewhat farther away is the meadow where visitors to the fair park their cars, and beyond that is a nearby airport where planes can be heard taking off. Jennifer's personal reality extends a bit farther to a school where she finds little satisfaction and a home that she shares with her mother. The home does not figure much in the narrative but it is important because it shows why Jennifer is dreadfully insecure and obsessed about safety. The problem is not just a mother who awakens her in the middle of the night after coming home from a date and often belittles her job at the fair, it is the fearsome and ever-present prospect of Michael returning—Michael who has held a knife to Jennifer's throat, threatening to slit it. It is also there that Michael brutally maims Jackie and tries to strangle Jennifer, making it clear that her desperate yearning for safety has a very real basis.



Social Sensitivity

Hall writes with insightful clarity about relationships, romance, and sexual passion, and she always shows an empathetic understanding for the confusions and frustrations of her characters. Whether it is Denny in *Flying Changes* (1991; see separate entry, Vol. 6) trying to win the heart of an unreliable rodeo cowboy or Jennifer trying to become safe by winning the love of a minstrel, their sexual relations are presented with honesty and sensitivity. Often, as with Denny and Jennifer, a sexual relationship brings with it a certain amount of disillusionment and a growing awareness of the realities behind romance.

Michael and his tormented psychology dramatize the difficult question of how society determines who is dangerous to others. He has hurt people in the past and may well hurt people in the future. It seems utter folly to release him when he has not proven himself able to properly behave in an uncontrolled environment. Talk about hormones and progress in therapy sounds sensible, but such assertions in *Fair Maiden* are merely psychobabble, without merit. This stance seems certain to annoy psychologists and psychiatrists who work with young people, even though it is a common theme in literature. There are students across America who must recognize that Michael is as viciously violent as people they know or have known in their schools and neighborhoods. These students, like Jennifer, may well be afraid to speak up for fear of violence being visited upon them, and because they believe adult authorities would discount what they had to say. This aspect of *Fair Maiden* may serve to stimulate conversation in the classroom; how society deals with violent people is important to all age groups.

Literary Qualities

Early autumn. The air was damp and cool against her face. White morning fog swirled around her, its separate particles as visible as tiny snowflakes. Above the ground, where the fog grew sheer in the pale sunlight, rose the walls of a medieval city with corner towers and three arched gates.

This opening to Hall's *Fair Maiden* is typical of skill in painting scenes, and in this one she portrays a romantic image of a place where a young woman may well find the man of her dreams. Then the scene is interrupted: Sounds came to her through the fog, the slamming of a car door, a scolding voice, and overhead the roar of a jet lifting from the airport.

In these few phrases Hall establishes the contrast between romantic fantasy and modern reality that underlines the whole of her narrative.

Hall is also skilled at characterization, and in *Fair Maiden* sets herself a stiff challenge: to create characters who are each two people, with each character showing traits of the two people all the time. Jennifer is also Guinevere, fair maiden and lady love to John the Lutanist, who is also John Turnbull a not-particularly-bright itinerant musician. This duality is essential to the plot because both Jennifer and John must fall in love with the romantic image of the other; without this the consequences of the sexual act lose their meaning. It is through the physicality of their relationship that Jennifer learns that romantic images offer no protection from life's realities, and her idealized image of John must change in order for her to gain new understanding.



Themes and Characters

"Adults are people who understand the connection between their decisions and the consequences of 'em," declares Robert Colum. Much of the novel is devoted to the lesson that actions have consequences. Jennifer, the main character, is about seventeen years old, and it is she who learns Robert's lesson. At the novel's beginning the narrator notes, "Her virginity was genuine and she intended to keep it that way, for now." Yet in a short period she becomes eager to lose her virginity.

She meets John the Lutanist, a man perhaps in his thirties, who is handsome, romantic, and a minstrel. In reality he is John Turnbull, a man who wanders around the United States performing at fairs. He returns to the Minnetonka Renaissance Fair every fall where he invariably finds a young woman to give his heart to; Jennifer is one of those young women. To his credit, John does not seduce her; in fact, Jennifer may be the only one he has slept with. He uses the young women for inspiration, for playing romantic tunes that will draw and hold an audience, and for creating the romantic feelings that enable him to write love songs. The prospect of sleeping with Jennifer worries him: "They scare hell out of me, these young girls," he says to himself. He knows that he would settle down and make a romantic relationship permanent, and he tries to communicate this to Jennifer, but Jennifer is in an unreal world when with him.

"You look as if you were born in the fifteenth century," someone remarks to Jennifer; this quality makes her especially attractive to John, whose own romantic nature draws him to women who look like they are part of the historic fantasy of the Renaissance fair. Jennifer becomes Guinevere, a fantasy-fair maiden who follows John's music. Jennifer, for her part, is entirely caught up in the romance of the moment because "the fair woke fantasies and emotions in Jennifer that nothing in her life could match except her discovery of the movie Camelot, of which she owned a videotape." This kind of fantasy would make Jennifer seem like a shallow girl, a fool easily taken in by false images, but Hall's protagonists are never so simple, and Jennifer's reasons for loving the fair's fantasy run deep.

"The fair was the only existence Jennifer wanted. She felt safe within the walls of this fake village," notes the narrator. The key to understanding why Jennifer behaves as she does is in the word safe. The fierce desire for safety underlies her longings and actions; the fair seems like a world apart, where she can be secure from a real life filled with fear and stress. She hopes her romance with John the Lutanist will offer permanent escape from her difficult life by allowing her to go with him as he moves on from fair to fair. She is far from unique in her desire to flee reality. Most people who attend Renaissance fairs seek a fantasy-outing away from the vexatious trials of everyday life. Hall, with a deft touch, allows Jennifer's impulses to flow naturally out of the almost-universal desire to briefly escape into fantasy. Jennifer just takes this fervent wish for secure freedom in fantasy from a brief visit to permanent residence.

It is in the development of this aspect of Jennifer's character that her brother Michael is important. Michael represents her anxious home life.



Jennifer believes her life to be "regulated and structured," but the reader sees it as emotionally unsettled under a surface of apparent regularity. She notes that "Mom's getting younger and sillier all the time." Jackie's second husband Chris was a kind and loving man who could not endure the presence of Michael. He fled her home because of Michael's menacing proximity, and Jackie has since flitted from boyfriend to boyfriend. Emphasizing how much Jackie has become infatuated with her youthful silliness is her middle-of-the-night visit to Jennifer's bedroom when she wakes the girl up to hear vacuous remarks about her date. Jackie's behavior is motivated in part by loneliness. Her effort to get back together with Chris suggests that she also would like to escape to something better and more secure than what she has. Yet, for her, as well as Jennifer, there is the frightening figure of Michael, soon to turn twenty-one and likely to be released by the incompetent staff at the institution where he has been held for a few years. He had put knives to the throats of both Jackie and Jennifer at different times while threatening to kill them, and he had also crushed one of Kelly Green's breasts like a nut, leaving open the possibility of more profound sexual assaults. When Jennifer and Jackie visit him, Jennifer looks into Michael's eyes and sees that the "rage was still there." That he will be released on his twenty-first birthday is great motivation for Jennifer to try to escape anywhere she can to avoid the brother who very likely might try to kill her.

That he nearly does murder her and her mother reinforces the validity of her fears and her very reasonable desire to be far from someone who wants to murder her.

Thus Jennifer's behavior is well motivated. She also has some understanding of herself: "I don't know one thing about him, but I'm in love with him," she thinks about John. This suggests that she is aware of the irrationality of her attraction to John, but she is able to cover her real motivations with rationalizations: "How could four years of college and a boring job compare with flowing gowns and lute music and John?" she says to herself.

Her goal has been to earn good grades in high school, gain entrance to Northwestern University, earn a college degree, and thereby secure a good job.

These worthy goals melt like ice on a summer day against the prospect that Michael will surely torment and possibly murder her upon his release. The dream of escape with John into a fantasy world also overwhelms her more sensible goals, as it might for others if they were in her position.

After she and John kiss, Jennifer's thoughts focus on a permanent romance. Thoughts such as "Would he take her back to his silver trailer and bed her there?" tend to dominate her hopes. When they sleep together, she awakens in the middle of the night and thinks "Now I am safe. Now I am his." This thought quickly turns to uncertainty. The physical act has made the fantasy-figure John the Lutanist turn into the real-life John Turnbull. "You love somebody and all you want is to be with them and make love to them, and then as soon as it happens, it's like it's all over," Jennifer discovers; she finds that John Turnbull does not attract her the way John the wandering minstrel did. She realizes that "what I fell in love with was my own idea of him." Even so, such is her real life she still hopes that John will take her away with him.



Robert Colum, who seems to be the wisest character in the novel, tells Jennifer, "Our expectations are often our downfall, girl." John is bound to let her down. "I love you to the best of my ability, given my nature," John tells her. His own love life is one of idealized romantic figures, and he believes himself incapable of being romantically involved with any woman for long. In Jennifer's case, "John didn't want the reality of her in his life"; he wants the fantasy figure.

Thus both characters have fallen in love with the romance and not the reality. John tries to explain this by suggesting that it may be universal: "It's part of nature's design for the survival of the species don't you think?" He does not seem to comprehend the possibility of love existing outside of romantic falsities. He excuses his own behavior by asserting that "Nature rules our lives even as twentieth-century humans." It is no wonder that Jennifer begins to notice that "John was less intelligent than she was, in spite of his wider experience in the world." Jennifer grows through the knowledge gained by her experience with John. She realizes that unprotected sex with him could bring the difficult consequences of pregnancy or disease.

Men seem to have been running out on Jennifer since her early childhood.

Her father deserted his family when she was still very young. Chris, who seemed to be the ideal father, could not cope with a murderous stepson and divorced her mother. Jennifer was a little in love with Chris who made her feel safe; his leaving is echoed by John's attitude. Neither one could handle the reality of their relationships; although one tends to forgive Chris, who might be dead if he had not fled Jennifer's home. Jennifer's choosing a romance with an unreliable man mirrors her relationships to her two fathers, and she often thinks of John not as a lover but as a father figure—the father who would love her and never leave. "John reminds me of [Chris]," she thinks. This is an attitude she needs to grow out of if she is to find happiness and the security she desperately craves. It is, therefore, a hopeful sign at novel's end that Jennifer spends time with Robert—a college student, a musician, and man with a good sense of fun in life—who values her more than John is willing to, and whose steady, responsible attitude offers Jennifer the prospect that she will be esteemed for her true and real self in a relationship of shared good times.



Topics for Discussion

1. "John didn't want the reality of her in his life." What does this mean?

Why would John not want the reality of Jennifer in his life?

2. Why is Jennifer focused on finding safety?

3. Why is Michael released from confinement? Are the psychologists in charge of him too stupid to be believed?

4. Is the violence in Fair Maiden an appropriate part of the action?

5. Was Chris right to break off his renewed romance with Jackie when he discovered that she had not been honest with him about Michael's release?

6. Why does Jennifer have sex with John? Why is she dissatisfied afterward?

7. Is John a good man? 8. Will Robert provide Jennifer with what she needs? What does she need?

9. Is prison the best place for Michael to be?

4606 Fair Maiden 10. Why does Jennifer think of protection only after she has had sex?

11. Why is the Renaissance fair attractive to Jennifer?

12. Why would John prefer living in a silver trailer, earning money on offerings from his audiences, rather than living in a settled location in a home or an apartment and holding a job with a steady income?

13. How valuable is a fantasy life? Is it ever dangerous?

14. Why does Jennifer seek safety in romantic love?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Renaissance fairs have sprung up all over the United States. Where was the first one held? Is it still an annual event? How are the fairs organized?

What is their purpose?

2. The jousts in Fair Maiden are make-believe. What were real ones like? When were they held? Did victors really win fair maidens?

3. The Minnetonka Renaissance Fair has many animals in its entertainment.

What are the laws in your community governing the use of animals in shows? What is the purpose of the laws? Would the Minnetonka Renaissance Fair violate any of those laws?

4. Robert says, "Adults are people who understand the connection between their decisions and the consequences of 'em." What does he mean by this? How does the novel develop this idea and what are the examples it provides?

5. How is a violent young man like Michael treated in reformatories or asylums in your states? What kind of psychiatric care does he receive? Is there pressure to push him out at age twenty-one (or another age) whether or not he is ready to rejoin everyday society?

6. Do psychologists have any explanations for the unreasoning rage exhibited by people like Michael? Can anything be done about it?

7. Describe a visit you had to a Renaissance fair. Use vivid descriptions like those Hall uses to make your visit come alive for your audience.

8. John is one of many people who live nomadic lives traveling from fair to fair—county fairs and state fairs as well as special fairs like the Renaissance fair. Who are these people? How do they live? How many of them are there?

9. Several build-your-own-world computer programs have been published since the late 1980s. Some let you build cities, and at least one lets you build your own fair. A few of these have designing kits that allow you to create your own buildings and situations. With one of these programs, design your own Renaissance fair. Where will the traveling entertainers like John stay? Where will be the entrances? What attractions will there be? How will you meet the needs of guests—remember Jennifer has to help a man to the infirmary. There will be people eating and drinking—which means you will certainly need restrooms. Display your creation on a computer in the classroom.

For Further Reference

Belden, Elizabeth A., and Judith M. Beckman. *English Journal* 80, 5 (September 1991): 85. Highly recommends *Fair Maiden*.

Commire, Anne. "Hall, Lynn." In *Something about the Author*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987, pp. 97-104. Includes extensive autobiographical account of Hall's background and career.

Hall, Lynn. "Lynn Hall." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983, pp. 145-147. Brief autobiographical article about how Hall became a writer and her interest in animals.

Related Titles

Most of Hall's books feature strong and independent young women; Jennifer is therefore unusual in her desire to hide from her problems or even run away from them. Even so, she has inner reserves of strength that she seems unaware of, and she is making progress toward independence at the novel's end. *Fair Maiden* follows the pattern of most of Hall's novels by featuring a broken family. In the case of *Fair Maiden*, Jennifer's mother Jackie has gone through a couple of husbands, not through much fault of her own—Michael's psychopathic violence would be enough to scare most people away. In the case of *Flying Changes* (1991), the mother has been absent for many years; in the case of *A Killing Freeze* (1988), the mother has long been dead; in the case of *The Solitary* (1986), the mother has murdered the father; in other works, the protagonists must deal with similar dysfunctional families.



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