

# Fallen Angel Short Guide

## Fallen Angel by Jane Yolen

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## Overview

"I saw the most amazing falling star last night," Courtney said. "It was the brightest ever." Three modern youngsters, all headstrong and opinionated, search for a falling star and are confronted by the supernatural. Scientific-minded, they at first try to rationalize what they see, but they eventually use their scientific view of the world to help a fallen angel that needs wings in order to return to Heaven. "Fallen Angel" concerns a serious subject but is told with a good sense of humor and a light touch, and it has a terrific conclusion.

## About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her first-grade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned *Fallen Angel 105* to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

## Setting

Courtney, Judson, and Maddy live in the country with their parents. Their mother is a writer (who, Yolen confides, says to the children what she used to say when they interrupted her work), and their father is a college professor. They have pretty much only themselves for company, but they have trees and a pond to explore. It is in the mud by the pond that they see the unexpected.

Courtney and Judson are looking for a fallen star, but Maddy hopes for an alien. What they see is remarkable, almost incomprehensible: "The angel lay curled in the mud by the pond, his white gown still pristine but his glorious hair for once in tangles. His wings looked like leafless fronds. There was a smudge of mud along one cheekbone. He breathed heavily through his aquiline nose."

After the children escort the angel into their home, most of the action takes place in their rooms, where they try to construct wings, using what knowledge they have of kites and flying. Their efforts become a group project, one in which the often bickering youngsters are drawn together, united in curiosity and their desire to save an angel from fading away.



## Social Sensitivity

Angels themselves are a controversial subject in the present age. As "Fallen Angel" points out, the existence of angels was once taken as matter-of-fact—youngsters did not debate whether they were aliens, whether there was a heaven, or that angels might not exist. Judson, trying to represent a scientific point of view, declares loudly that there is no such thing as an angel and that there is no Heaven, although he has to yield to the evidence before him and the angel's declaration that it is indeed an angel. Those readers who choose not to believe in angels may find the compelling presentation of one in "Fallen Angel" to be discomfiting. On the other hand, it is science that helps to save the angel: The youngsters draw on their knowledge of fabrics, wood, and coat hangers to fashion the wings that will enable the angel to fly. The blend of the supernatural in the form of the angel and the common-sense practicality of the children has considerable charm, and this, in the end, may win over those who object to the belief in the existence of supernatural beings.



## Literary Qualities

"Fallen Angel" has a light style, one in which humor relieves the gravity of events.

Most of the humor depends on the children overanalyzing problems—something their parents have encouraged: "Are you—like—an angel?" Courtney asked at last. The angel looked very puzzled. "L\*i\*k\*e\*?" Then, receiving no response from the children, he added in speech rather than song. "Very like."

"He means he is," said Maddy, her thumb nowhere near her mouth now.

"He means"—Judson was adamant— "sort of."

"How can he be sort of when he is very like?" Courtney said.

"S\*T\*O\*P\*!" the angel sang out. Children of this era, it seemed, were enough to try even an angel's patience.

Yolen also creates a consistent atmosphere of suspense and the miraculous through sharply observed descriptions such as Courtney "could see through him [the angel], as if he were a bad photograph taken with too much light." Vivid also are offbeat images such as "The skull of the Grateful Dead wing patch winked at them, grinning beatifically." In this phrase, part of the shirt used to make one of the angel's new wings shows in a delightful, brief phrase how the new wing has come alive as a part of the angel.



## Themes and Characters

Yolen cautions against taking the family of "Fallen Angel" as representative of her own, pointing out that the children of the story are two girls and one boy, whereas her own family has two boys and one girl.

On the other hand, she notes that Maddy is the name of her granddaughter and that the mother of the story repeats some of what she would say to her own children when they interrupted her work. ("The children all thought Mommy was slightly deaf only when it suited her.") Also notable is that the mother is a writer and the father is a college professor, as is the case for Yolen and her husband.

How does one portray an angel that is representative of goodness, eternal yet innocent? Writers for millennia have found it much easier to portray absolute evil than absolute good, so God and his angels have often been portrayed as remote from human feelings and austere. Yolen faces the problem of creating a sympathetic angel while retaining its state of grace and remoteness from evil in "Fallen Angel." Her solution is to first depict the supernatural being with its supernatural powers while giving it a crucial weakness that is in keeping with its extraordinary abilities: "Angels are ordinarily immune to the terrible cold of space, but featherless, he was freezing."

The angel endures the bitter cold of airless space and then the heat of plunging through the earth's atmosphere. Certainly it is supernatural, and the reason it has been wounded is supernatural, too, having flown too close to the light.

When Courtney, Judson, and Maddy find it, it is almost perfect, except for its ruined wings and a smudge of mud. Yolen builds her presentation of the angel with phrases such as "The angel had opened one eye. It was sky blue and perfect." Almost everything about the angel is perfect, and it has intimidating powers of perception beyond what humans normally have: What the angel saw with that one eye was this: a twelve-year-old girl with hair the color of a mouse's back, who had the day before sneaked a drag on a cigarette and hated it, but lied to her friends saying she liked it a lot, and worried more about that lie than the one puff; a ten-year-old boy, his hair cut in a rattail, who had called his older sister a forbidden name the night before to his friends and was feeling awful about it because actually he secretly admired her; a girl age seven, in braids, who had taken her sister's favorite comb but had only the slightest guilt associated with it since she was planning to give it back, so the angel could not tell the size or shape of the comb. All this the angel saw in a blink of his perfect eye.

Not only does this passage carry the burden of describing the children, it reveals the angel's ability to see within a person, to know what a person is feeling and thinking about. Further, the angel's voice can evoke remorse for wrongdoing; at a word from the angel, Judson immediately regrets a harsh word spoken to his sister.

In spite of his great powers, the angel finds himself at the mercy of the three youngsters. Times have changed since it last visited earth. It tends to sing when it talks,





but the children have trouble understanding what the angel is saying, although the singing has a mighty emotional punch.

The angel "closed his perfect eye and heard inside the language that they [the children] had been speaking"; it finds that English words "lacked the beauty of Latin, the power of Hebrew, the familiarity of Aramaic or Greek. But they were all these children knew, so they would have to do."

The incessant debating by the children, something encouraged by their parents as a form of free inquiry, is a source of frustration for the angel: "The angel was beginning to suspect that Earth had changed in the millennia since he had last visited.

In those days belief had been a constant, and children had not argued or spoken out of turn, and he had had wings that worked and did not hurt." Confused by both the English language and by the behavior of the children, the potentially austere angel becomes sympathetic; whatever the unknowableness of its angelic nature, it can be understood on an emotional level.

Even when it points out that "I am insubstantial," the supernatural otherness of being insubstantial is tempered by the vulnerability it brings to the character.

The angel's nature is also tempered by its childlike qualities. It is mercurial, quick to respond without thinking: "Suddenly the angel hated all change." It also finds itself beholden to the good nature of others, helpless on earth without guidance, and "The angel occasionally sniffled, more like a child than a grown-up." It even has, for its own supernatural reasons, a common fear: "The dark is coming and I am afraid, not being used to darkness." It is even joyfully grateful when it discovers that its new wings work, but lest the angel seem too earthly, Yolen drops reminders of its essentially mystical nature. For instance, "neither of them [the parents] could see the angel"—it is invisible to those who will not see it. It remarks that "I have always worn this gown"—its unsoilable gown is a part of the angel, inseparable from it. When trying to make the angel comfortable with the coming of darkness, Judson says that going to sleep will help the angel, "because once you're asleep, it doesn't matter... The light I mean," his remark elicits this response: "The light," the angel said in a voice as hard as adamant, "always matters."

Lest we forget, the angel is of Heaven and God, and however childlike, it perceives earth in the issues of light and darkness that define Heaven.

Of the children, the eldest, Courtney, is the leader, although all three children use their imaginations to help save the angel from fading away, and it is Maddy who cleverly suggests that hangers might substitute for wooden dowels. They remain steadfastly headstrong youngsters throughout "Fallen Angel," debating what they should do. On the other hand, the angel brings them an important gift: By working together to save the angel, the youngsters learn that they can work together to solve problems, and they learn that they can unite to help someone in need and even have the smarts to figure out how to help someone vastly different from anything they have experienced before.



Thus the children mature in significant ways during the short period the angel is with them.

They even behave unselfishly, setting aside some of the bitter emotional baggage the angel first saw in them. When the angel offers a reward, Courtney declares, "We didn't do it for the reward." The angel knows this but is determined to give the youngsters something. Maddy asks for "a new Barbie," Judson wants "a Pentium.

And Windows 95." Yet, what they receive is one of the angel's mysteries: The gifts requested are "'Not within my powers,' said the angel. 'But I can give you each contentment.'" The angel leaves, singing "'H\*a\*p\*p\*i\*n\*e\*s\*s\*!" True to themselves, the youngsters have their own point of view on the events: "Happiness," said Courtney with a strange sigh. "I don't feel particularly happy right now. In fact I feel sort of sad. The angel is gone and I miss him."

"An alien," Judson said. "Not an angel.

An angel wouldn't have promised us a reward and then backed off."

"Aliens don't have wings," said Maddy.

As incomprehensible as a reward of contentment might be, its effect on the youngsters is profound. The reward has been good lives well lived, and even skeptic Judson, at the age of eighty-seven, replies to an interviewer's question "To what do you credit your enormous success and the success of your sisters?": "To an angel."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why cannot the angel's gown be removed? What does this say about the nature of the angel?
2. Why is the angel childlike?
3. Why do Courtney, Judson, and Maddy confuse the angel? What were the angel's expectations for their behavior?
4. If the angel has supernatural powers, why is it unable to save itself after it crashes to earth?
5. Is the ending of "Fallen Angel" satisfying? Was the angel's reward better than what the children originally hoped for?
6. Yolen says of "Fallen Angel": "Sometimes stories have to sit around, settling down in their bones. The same goes for the writer." What does she mean by this?
7. Why would Courtney, Judson, and Maddy expect to see an alien being rather than an angel?
8. Why cannot the parents see the angel? Why call it an imaginary playmate?
9. "Suddenly the angel hated all change." Why?
10. Will the angel's wings always look like the patchwork built by the children?  
Would this be a good or bad change?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does the angel of "Fallen Angel" compare with the others in Here There Be Angels?
2. Yolen mentions Gustav Davidson's A Dictionary of Angels. Write a report on this book, pointing out sections that might apply to "Fallen Angel."
3. The angel leaves a blazing trail as it falls through the earth's atmosphere.

What is the maximum velocity an object may achieve while falling to earth?

How hot would the angel become while falling? How tough would the angel have to be to survive its fall from outer space to the earth?

Fallen Angel 109 4. Maddy suggests the use of hangers to build the second wing, the dowels of the kite having been used up in making the first. How well would wire coat hangers work for building a kite? Could you build a kite that would fly, using hangers instead of dowels?

5. The idea of people being confronted with an angel that has fallen to earth and needs their help is fruitful with possibilities. Write a story of your own about your own set of characters finding an angel in circumstances other than in the mud by a pond. An angel might fall in a city, or a suburb, or desert, or an island, or many other places, and the people who find it might have different concerns than do Courtney, Judson, and Maddy.

6. What does the Bible say about angels?

Do any of them resemble the one in "Fallen Angel"?

7. Are angels, which some religions believe in, appropriate subject matter for fiction, or should writers avoid them because they represent an aspect of religious belief?



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"Jane (Hyatt) Yolen." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Volume 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463-69.

A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview of Yolen.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

West, Michelle. *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* 92, 5 (May 1997): 128. Admires *Here There Be Angels*—"the book is aimed at a younger readers market, but it really is an all-age collection."

Wilton, Shirley. *School Library Journal* 42, 11 (November 1996): 119. Enthusiastic recommendation.

110 *Fallen Angel* Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 21-9.

Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings. "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is an example of her continuing interest in the Cinderella figure, particularly the strong, courageous version she finds in the original tales but not in many modernized versions.

———. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

*Locus* 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

———. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

———. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales." *Locus* 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

——. *The Writer* (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, and discusses why she enjoys writing.

——. *Writing Books for Children*. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.



## Related Titles

Yolen has written several stories and poems about angels, a number of which appear in *Here There Be Angels*. As in "Fallen Angel," her angels are often childlike, especially in their emotions, with this childlike quality representing their innocence or their state of grace. On the other hand, Yolen's angels are not uniform in shape, size, or tone. For instance, the angel of "Angelica," even in doing a seemingly good act, is terrifying in the depth of her evil; she brought the serpent to Eden and she saves the life of Adolf Hitler so that he may continue her destructive work. The angel of "Fallen Angel" is almost pure good, in spite of its waywardness, and like a child, has tested its limits, mostly for change for the sake of change. This simplicity of nature contrasts with more complex angels such as that of "Lady Merion's Angel" (please see separate entry), which although in the form of a small child, is a test of Merion's character; further, among the golden angels Merion encounters are dark and menacing ones, quizzing her with questions that seem dangerously deceptive. Merion herself contrasts with Courtney, Judson, and Maddy by not being at all surprised by seeing an angel.

She takes its existence as matter-of-fact and is even irritated by its intrusion into her carefully tended garden. Overall, Yolen's angels are as varied as her unicorns (for instance, in *Here There Be Unicorns*), and their appearances tend to be as revealing of the inner natures of the human characters as is the angel in "Fallen Angel."



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