Figgs & Phantoms Short Guide

Figgs & Phantoms by Ellen Raskin

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Overview

Raskin began her career as a designer and illustrator, and she portrays reality both in pictures and in words. Many critics would say that Figgs & Phantoms is the best of her humorous and clever "puzzle novels." Raskin uses "black humor" in her novels, a kind of humor based upon the sad side of human nature and human reality. There is a long tradition of black humor in young adult literature, where it has surfaced in such famous works as Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Because black humor presents an uncompromising and irreverent view of life, however, critics have sometimes deemed it harmful to young people.

Raskin's success in the 1970s, both with picture books and with novels, brought a toughness, a wit, and a sophistication that significantly broadened the scope of children's literature.

Although Raskin's heroines have their share of troubles, the people they meet and the things they do are remarkable and often hilarious. Each character must secure her own happiness—and often the happiness of other people—by her own efforts. Each must solve a puzzle-mystery by discovering how to see things in her life properly. Readers can count on a happy ending, but it will be a happy ending that does not compromise the honest vision that the heroine has developed.

About the Author

Ellen Raskin was born on March 13, 1928, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Although she lived most of her adult life in New York City, Raskin's hometown and home state were very important to her.

Raskin drew extensively on her childhood and her family as the subject matter of her novels, although the fantastic and unusual nature of the novels disguises this from the reader. Although it is clear that some of her early memories —frequent moves, anti-Semitism, Depression Era poverty—were not happy ones, she was close to her home state in later years, as a "Notable Wisconsin Author" and frequent visitor to the Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin, her alma mater.

Trained in fine art, Raskin left Wisconsin for New York City, hoping to find a career in illustrating and to provide for herself and her young daughter. She took a job doing paste-up work in a commercial art studio, and over time established herself as a free-lance illustrator and winner of dozens of prizes and awards for her work. She was eventually responsible for over one thousand book covers and over thirty sets of illustrations for other authors' books.

Some of Raskin's finest work appears in volumes of poetry for the young adult market, such as Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, selected by Dwight MacDonald (1965), and D. H. Lawrence: Poems Selected for Young People, by William Cole (1967). She also edited and illustrated a 1970 edition of Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market (1862) and a 1966 edition of William Blake's Songs of Innocence (1789). Raskin also composed musical settings for the Blake work.

Raskin's productiveness is a tribute to her passion and hard work; although many people admired her energy and her generous contributions to the field of children's literature, few knew that she suffered from a debilitating connective tissue disorder that eventually led to her death.

In 1966, Atheneum published Nothing Ever Happens on My Block, the first of twelve picture books both written and illustrated by Raskin. The 1971 publication of The Mysterious Disappearance of Leon (I Mean Noel), a full-length puzzlemystery, marked yet another direction for her career. Once known solely as an illustrator, Raskin garnered increasing praise for her writing talents, and eventually earned the 1979 Newbery Medal as the author of The Westing Game.

Raskin died on August 8, 1984, in New York City.

Setting

Mona Newton is the depressed teenage member of a family of ex-vaudeville performers, now settled in the small town of Pineapple. Unusually intelligent and financially shrewd, Mona is sensitive to what she believes is the townspeople's critical opinion of her family's bumbling incompetence and flamboyant self-promotion. Mona rejects her father, Newt Newton, an unsuccessful used-car dealer, and her tap-dancing, pageant-arranging mother, Sister Figg Newton, and is comfortable only with the town librarian and, especially, her Uncle Florence Italy Figg, a rare book dealer.

Mona bullies her Uncle Flo into carrying out an innocent deception on the town bookseller, Ebenezer Bargain. On the first day of the month, Ebenezer puts his new books on his shelves and moves a few more volumes up to the very top shelf—higher than Mona and her tiny uncle can reach. These are the special books he intends to save as investments for his retirement. Since Ebenezer is ninety-three years old and unlikely to retire, and since Uncle Flo's customers might like these books, Mona has convinced her uncle to help her move a few interesting volumes down to a lower shelf where he can bargain for them with Ebenezer.

To do this, Mona and Uncle Flo enter Ebenezer's bookshop dressed as the Figg-Newton Giant. Mona, balancing on her uncle's shoulders and wearing a long costume, describes the books to her diminutive uncle and, at his direction, stealthily moves down a few volumes.

But she does not know that Uncle Flo and Ebenezer are best friends and that Ebenezer is aware of this tricky maneuver.

Mona's relationship with her uncle has several of these thematically significant gaps. Uncle Flo wishes that Mona would not reject her confused, but kind, parents and that she would learn to love reading as much as he does. Mona loves to look at books and is astute at identifying and dealing them, but she does not read them. Yet, Mona wants to be everything to her uncle and is unconsciously worried that his illness is a fatal one. She is jealous of anyone else who is a part of his life and is particularly suspicious of Phoebe, a woman no one has ever seen, with whom Uncle Flo says that he shares an occasional evening.

When Uncle Flo's death leaves Mona sad and alone, she resolves to follow him to "Capri," the Figg family heaven. Since "each must find his own Capri" and her uncle was a book lover, Mona's mystery is to decide which literary Capri—perhaps in one of the Bargain books—Uncle Flo found and then to find it herself.

Social Sensitivity

Figgs & Phantoms contains material which may be of interest and concern to those wishing to look at treatments of racism or handicaps in literature. An incident involving Miss Quigley deals with the issue of race, while the treatment of Uncle Flo's stature addresses the subject of handicaps.

The Miss Quigley incident is important both to the plot and to the theme. Mona, searching for Conrad first editions at the library, corrects Miss Quigley's assumption that Children of the Sea is the same as Mirror of the Sea (1906), by pointing out that its original title is Nigger of the Narcissus (1897). She gets only part of the title out, notices that Miss Quigley is frozen in shock, and breaks off and runs out of the library. Miss Quigley does not realize that Mona is giving the title of a novel, and Mona had not realized until she saw Miss Quigley's expression that she was black and thought she was being insulted. Mona's devastation precipitates her journey to Uncle Flo's Capri. When Fido Figg races in with the book Miss Quigley has found for her, Mona has fallen into a coma and left Pineapple. The two friends do not have a chance to discuss the incident until Miss Quigley visits the recovering Mona on the day of the parade and jokes goodnaturedly about it.

The issue of any kind of differentness is a topic to which Raskin gave considerable thought. As a victim of antiSemitism in her childhood, she was sensitive to social minorities and discrimination. She also had great sympathy with those who were physically "different."

Figgs&Phantoms touches on the topic of those unusual in physical appearance when Mona discovers the book Wonderful Characters in her uncle's collection, and then finds the characters, themselves, on his dream island. Uncle Flo, whose size had led to his being billed as "Tap-dancing Baby Flo" when he was fifteen years old, is keenly aware of the plight of those who are physically different. The presence of this kind of tragedy in life emphasizes the dark side of Raskin's vision. A compassionate man, Uncle Flo remembers to bring all these gentle and quiet people who were victims of other people's perceptions along with him to a better life. Uncle Flo should certainly heighten awareness in readers of this social and perceptual problem.

Literary Qualities

It is a peculiarity of Raskin "puzzlemysteries" that the heroine must solve an intellectual puzzle to gain an emotional reward., For readers who grasp this, Raskin's books attain a special place in their literary imagination. Raskin has often remarked on the autobiographical element in the novel. She portrayed many of her relatives and embodied herself as Mona, honestly depicting her own perceptions and emotions.

For this reason, Figgs & Phantoms integrates brain and heart more fully than the other novels, and is arguably her best novel.

Among writers for children, Raskin is one of the most uncompromising realists. She is nearly alone in offering hilarity, imagination, and beauty as ways of dealing with the unavoidable tragedies of life. Few writers for young adults imply, as Raskin does over and over, that the only way to deal with a family situation which ignores your dreams and feelings is to make your own happiness, as well as to try to perceive the strengths of the offending family members. However, she cautions, you should share your dreams only with those who will understand and appreciate them. Raskin's novels offer these insights, which many adults learn only with months of counseling.

Raskin greatly admired the fiction of Henry James and Joseph Conrad. In Figgs & Phantoms the influence of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim is particularly evident. Raskin does not believe in characters that change; nor does she believe that children think that people change.

So her technique for developing a character is much like that used in the Conrad novel. Readers first see only a limited aspect of a character. Successive revelations in the narrative complicate that clear but incomplete view.

According to Mona, Uncle Truman is a menace to modern business because of his misspelled signs and her mother is a perpetual cheerleader who thinks up municipal excuses for prancing around in a costume. Although these first impressions contain certain truths about these characters, later actions and perceptions alter our view. Uncle Truman actually tries to die to get Mona back from Capri and everyone in town is proud to be in a Pineapple pageant. The total picture is markedly different from Mona's first description, but the characters do not change. Like Conrad's Lord Jim, they have their heroic moments as well as their absurd ones. The cumulative portrait is a more accurate picture of the characters' assembled strengths and weaknesses. Raskin's many references in the novel to Milton, Blake, and, especially, Conrad, remind us of her position as another searcher after the truth about human nature.

Finally, the visual design of Figgs & Phantoms is enjoyable in itself. Raskin thought that her novels should be read slowly, and so divided them into easily digestible bits. Each chapter has four subsections divided by stars in the text.

The Pineapple community's comments on the Figg family (in Mona's version) are italicized. Newspaper columns are boxed and set in newspaper type. Uncle Truman's signs are presented in flourishes and curlicues over entire pages. Stanzas of verse from Gilbert and Sullivan are frequent. Most chapters begin with a portrait of Mona's face inside a pineapple or fig, with the portrait indicating her state of mind.

Themes and Characters

Like all Raskin novels, Figgs & Phantoms is filled with interesting, humorous characters. For example, Mona's cousin Fido Figg, star pitcher of the baseball team, was adopted by dog-loving Figgs to replace an old bull terrier and raised on Ken-L-Ration. Uncle Truman, exHuman Pretzel and now a misspelling sign-painter, makes beautiful, fancy posters all of which contain errors.

Uncle Remus conducts a worldwide travel service which frequently takes people to nonexistent or dangerous places.

The best developed characters are Mona; her tap-dancing, perpetually cheerleading mother Sister Figg; Uncle Flo; and the would-be pirate Miguel de Caprichos. As the source of Mona's first perception about human relations, Miss Quigley, the librarian, is also important.

Sister Figg is the humorous heart of the novel. Only she has the audacity to invent a historic holiday for which no public records exist and then teach every man, woman, and child a tapdancing routine for the celebratory parade. Her front room is a mecca for tots impersonating pineapple ices and double-stepping firemen. Her nonstop tapping (which her husband Newt occasionally tries to interpret as Morse code) both irritates Mona and is her salvation. Everywhere Mona wanders on Uncle Flo's Capri, her mother's faithful tapping follows.

Miss Quigley, the public librarian of Pineapple, is Mona's only friend besides her uncle. Although Mona is not a reader, she sees Miss Quigley as both a resource for her book research, and a person of refinement and intelligence who fits her idea of a congenial companion. When Mona unintentionally hurts Miss Quigley's feelings, she realizes for the first time that she has the power to harm others—something her self-centeredness has previously kept her from realizing. This realization is a key to Mona's final development.

Uncle Flo is as nice a person as Mona thinks he is. His friends testify to his gentleness, intelligence, and kindness.

Although he is happy with his friends, relatives, business, and books, Uncle Flo is unhappy about his "differentness" that has kept him from love as well as piano-playing. At a height of four-feet six-inches with short fingers and a short body, he has not been able to grasp either women or pianos. Mona empathizes with Uncle Flo's melancholy, but she is initially unable to accept the attractive and romantic fantasy world that he has invented for compensation.

"We live as we dream, alone"—a quotation from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, which summarizes one aspect of the novel—is her painful recognition that no one can know everything about another human being.

Miguel de Caprichos, the would-be pirate who composed the dream into which Uncle Flo escapes, is an irritable mentor who gives Mona insight into her own affairs, a plan to pursue in life, and the motivation to change. Miguel makes Mona see that, in a world in which painful things occur and painful conditions exist, creating a world with more happy and memorable moments is not a weakness, but essential and practical behavior. He also advises her to train her awareness and her imagination. Without the ability to see her own world and to imagine, she will have nothing to contribute to his dream island.

When Mona awakens to a second chance at life in Pineapple, her desire to be more aware of her surroundings leads her to become a kinder person.

She now realizes how badly she has been treating her family. She reexamines her view of the town's relation to them and sees that her family is popular and unusually talented. In a world of pain and sorrow, tap-dancing is a particularly potent weapon. And she will start to read. To deserve Uncle Flo's Capri, Mona will have to live a self-examined life of her own.

Topics for Discussion

1. Mrs. Alma Lumpholtz is the most frequently encountered Pineapple resident. She might be a good example of Pineapple public opinion. How does Mrs. Lumpholtz feel about Mona's family?

When do you first know this?

2. Names in Figgs & Phantoms are often funny. For whom are the Figgs named?

3. Fido and Mona are both young people in the Figg family, but they do not react to their family in the same way.

How does Fido like being a Figg? What kind of home life has Fido had as a Figg?

Does Fido's reaction influence the way you think about Mona's? Why are they different?

4. Why is the top of Ebenezer Bargain's head a clue to Mona's mystery? How does Mona (who is short) know about the top of Ebenezer's head when Uncle Flo does not?

5. Why does Uncle Flo not enjoy being Dancing Baby Flo as much as Sister Figg enjoys it for him?

6. How do you get things that you want on Caprichos? Why is Mona's horse not a success? What is wrong with her sofa?

What kind of sofa would the pirate want her to create, instead?

7. Why is Uncle Flo four-feet six-inches high on Caprichos?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mona tells Fido a comforting lie instead of the truth when he asks about Uncle Flo at the end of the book. This is a literary echo of the end of Heart of Darkness, a story by Conrad that Uncle Flo says is one of his favorites. In that book, the narrator lies to Kurtz's betrothed because he finds it impossible to ruin the wonderful vision she has of Kurtz, who became a monster before he died. But Uncle Flo's Capri is not a horrible secret. Why does Mona lie to Fido?

2. To what extent is "We live as we dream, alone" a true statement about Figgs & Phantoms?

3. The change in Mona after she comes back from Caprichos is due to her desire to be allowed to come back. The pirate didn't say anything about being kinder to her mother, but his advice does make Mona kinder. What is the connection between his advice and her kindness?

4. Mona, during most of the novel, is not happy being a Figg, but she shares a good many qualities with her family.

How is Mona like the rest of the Figgs?

What makes her different?

5. It made a difference to the pirate, to Uncle Flo, and to Mona to read books in the original editions. Raskin, herself, as an illustrator, book designer, and book collector loved fine books, too. Try to get a jacketed edition, a library washablecover edition, and a paperback (or more than one) of a popular work and see whether differences in the cover, paper,.

colors in illustration, printing, and so on affect the way you or other readers approach the book. If you would like to use books with illustrations, classic children's books, such as Huckleberry Finn or The Wizard of Oz, are available in many formats.

For Further Reference

Flanagan, Dennis. "The Raskin Conglomerate." Horn Book 55 (August 1979): 392-395. A witty essay on Ellen Raskin's versatility and life by her husband, long-time editor of Scientific American, on the occasion of the Newbery Award for The Westing Game.

Hieatt, Constance B. "The Mystery of Figgs & Phantoms." Children's Literature 13 (1985): 128-138. The first thorough explication of the novel with valuable insights about Raskin's illustrations, use of typefaces, and literary allusions.

Raskin, Ellen. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." Horn Book 55 (August 1979): 385-391. A speech which gives an overview of Raskin's career and influences.

"Characters and Other Clues."

Horn Book 54 (December 1978): 620625. Raskin's novels and characters are often indirectly based on her childhood and family. Here she explains the sources of characters in Figgs & Phantoms.

Wisconsin Educational Television Network. The Creative Process of Ellen Raskin. This is a thirty-minute video tha t can be ordered from the Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin.

Related Titles

Ellen Raskin's four novels for young adults do not contain the same characters, but they are all puzzle-mysteries.

The Mysterious Disappearance of Leon.(I Mean Noel) concerns the search by Mrs. Carillon and her friends for her husband, Leon (sometimes Noel) Carillon, to whom she was married at the age of five.

Mrs. Carillon uses the letters that Leon sent her once a year from boarding school as clues to his probable interests and likely locations—which is why she conducts the search by eating in Chinese restaurants and watching cowboy movies.

The Tattooed Potato & Other Clues, like Figgs & Phantoms, is based on one of Raskin's personal interests. Figgs is written around an interest in book collecting and book loving; The Tattooed Potato is about painting. The setting is her own house in Greenwich Village, which, in the novel, is occupied by a painter who is pretending to be a detective, two gangsters, a monster in the basement, and Dickory, a first-year art student with a murder in her past.

The Westing Game, which won the Newbery Award in 1979, is a mystery about a rich man's will and the game he created to find a winner among sixteen carefully chosen heirs. Raskin's interest in the stock market and chess contribute to this novel, which contains a world of other diversions.

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