

# Fire and Hemlock Short Guide

## Fire and Hemlock by Diana Wynne Jones

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## Overview

Fire and Hemlock retells the story of two Scottish ballads, "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tarn Lin." Both focus on a young, handsome man fancied by a powerful queen of a magical elf kingdom. The queen takes the man to her kingdom for a number of years, but he later discovers that the price of his journey is dear. Indeed, his life may be forfeit. The queen of Elfland averts Thomas the Rhymer's death by returning him to his own world and by giving him the gift of soothsaying; yet in several versions of the tale, it is clear that Thomas must later return to Elfland at the queen's summons. Tam Lin is also taken to Elfland by the queen, and only the young woman Janet is able to rescue him from certain death.

In Fire and Hemlock, Jones combines elements from both ballads as she tells of the adventures and romance of Thomas Lynn and the young protagonist, Polly, who both must struggle against the evil designs of the beautiful and seemingly omnipotent woman, Laurel Perry Lynn.



## About the Author

Diana Wynne Jones was born in London, England, in 1934, the daughter of educators. She has written that her relationship with her parents was a troubled one: They were dedicated to their careers, and Diana and her two sisters received little support or encouragement from them.

Growing up during World War II was also difficult for Jones, who was intermittently sent out of London to avoid the bombings, but who nonetheless developed a keen sense of the dangers of war. Jones wrote, "When the siren sounded at night, we went to the ground floor where we sat and listened to the blunt bang and sharp yammer of gunfire and bombs whistle as they fell, or watched searchlights rhythmically ruling lines in the sky." She recalls that amid all that, her grandmother provided a welcome relief from the worries of the war and from her alienating home life. "Granny was truly marvelous, five feet of Yorkshire common sense, love, and superstition."

Jones realized at the age of eight that she wanted to be a writer. Although she "suffered from perpetual book starvation," she read as many books as she could find, and by the time she was fourteen she had written two books of her own. In 1956 she received her bachelor's degree from St. Anne's College at Oxford, where she had attended lectures by authors C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Later that year she married John Burrow, with whom she had three sons.

It was after the birth of her sons that Jones returned to writing. She has noted that her children were instrumental in encouraging her to write. As she read stories with them, she came to know what children liked and was then able to focus her creative energies on books that she thought would capture her children's imaginations. In 1973, her first book, *Wilkin 's Tooth*, was published; the following year it was published in the United States as *Witch's Business*.

Jones blends both realism and fantasy in many of her novels, most of which have been for children. She often incorporates mythological or fairy tale images to support her presentation of fantasy. In *Fire and Hemlock*, for example, she draws her story from two wellknown Scottish ballads. At the same time, her characters are believable and must often confront family problems.

Indeed, Jones says she often uses people she has known as models for her characters. One could, for example, see some parallels between Jones's description of her own childhood and the depiction of Granny in *Fire and Hemlock*.

Jones has written more than twenty novels for children and has received critical attention for her work. In 1978, she received the Guardian Award for Children's Books for *Charmed Life*; that novel and *Dogsbody* were also nominated for the Carnegie Medal. At the present time, Jones continues to be a prolific writer—she has said, "I get unhappy if I don't write." She lives in England with her husband, who is a professor of English at Bristol University.

# Setting

Jones sets her story in modern-day England, but she combines her realistic depictions of contemporary life with elements of the fantastic. For example, Laurel Perry Lynn's home, Hunsdon House, appears to be an ordinary mansion, but it is there that her fantastic battles for power are carried out. When Polly enters the house, the scene becomes dreamlike, and she must determine what is really happening.

In *Fire and Hemlock*, the "real" world has a way of blurring with a fantastic world, as when Tom and Polly journey to the town of Stow-on-Water and learn there that the stories and characters they had made up have become real. Later, setting becomes a powerful force when Tom and Polly are shadowed by a "creature of rubbish" formed from bits of newspaper and garbage left on the street. The oftensurreal descriptions of setting not only place a fantastic story within a real scene but also demonstrate the power of imagination.

Setting is often used to develop mood and characterization. Whereas somber Hunsdon House exemplifies the power and coldness of Laurel, Polly finds security at the homes of Tom and her grandmother. Tom's apartment is the "most utterly comfortable place [Polly] had ever been in," and she also finds "a kind of holy calm at Granny's house, smelling of biscuits." The stability of these settings not only offers Polly a sense of security but also serves as a direct contrast to the threatening and unstable atmosphere at Hunsdon House.

## Social Sensitivity

In *Fire and Hemlock*, Jones deals with issues of independence, courage, love, and family life. Polly must develop her independence, and she readily asserts that she is "an assistant, not a damsel in distress." She breaks through gender stereotypes that would have made her fearful of confronting Laurel or thwarting the plans of Mr. Leroy. She also breaks through the isolation of her family life to accept the love of her grandmother and insist on her right to be friends with Tom.

The portrayal of her family life is disturbing. Both parents ultimately abandon Polly and devote themselves to new partners after their marriage breaks up. Her mother is a bitter, lonely woman who blames others for her problems; because of her paranoia and often unfounded resentment, she alienates any people who try to love her.

Granny's love offers Polly a respite, but it does not mitigate the depiction of the mother's bitterness. The result of such negativity is also shown here, for Polly's mother ends up a lonely and isolated woman who has created many of her own problems.



## Literary Qualities

Much of *Fire and Hemlock* is told in flashback, as Polly attempts to recover her lost memories of Tom Lynn and their times together. Polly's uncertainty of her past mirrors the instability of time and place in the novel. There are moments in which the fantastic and real worlds seem to collide for Polly, so that she is almost living in two different times at the same moment. By using the flashback technique, Jones enables Polly to remember and define her past, bit by bit. It is only as Polly remembers what has happened—only as she stabilizes time by putting the pieces of her past together—that the threat of Laurel and Mr. Leroy becomes clearer to her.

Jones bases key elements of her story, particularly plot and character, on the ballads "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tam Lin." The Scottish legends have been dated as originating as early as the fifteenth century, and although there are several variations, the main storyline—a man taken by the beautiful queen of Elfland or Fairyland to her kingdom—remains the same. In both ballads, the Queen must eventually pay a tribute to Hell and the man's life will be forfeit. The queen saves Thomas the Rhymer from death by returning him to his world and giving him the gift of prophecy. Jones allows her Tom Lynn greater but more dangerous powers than his ballad counterpart—he does not merely prophesy, he creates reality when the stories he makes up come true. As Polly explains, "the gift had been given with a twist. Anything he made up would prove to be true, and then come back and hit him."

Jones takes Polly's character and images from the climactic scene in "Tam Lin," but she changes the character in very important ways, particularly in her development of the long friendship between Polly and Tom Lynn. Nonetheless, in the ballad the queen refuses to relinquish Tam Lin, and Jones retains the key notion of the young girl who must battle the magical queen. Throughout much of the novel, Polly is unaware of these ballads or of her role in saving Tom. It is only when she finds a copy of the ballads and sees the similarities of situation and character (Tam is the Scottish form of Tom) that she realizes she must play the role of Janet and confront Laurel to rescue her true love.



## Themes and Characters

As the novel opens, nineteen-yearold Polly looks at a photograph entitled "Fire and Hemlock," which causes her to remember that many years ago she had known someone named Thomas Lynn. From the outset, Polly is both frustrated and confused by her difficulty in remembering what happened or who Tom is. By thinking back to when she was only ten years old, Polly is slowly able to reconstruct her memories and discover what happened.

When Polly first met Tom, she was a timid girl with a fear of adventure.

However, she felt it was "fated" that the two would become friends, and together they make up stories, with Tom in the role of hero and Polly as assistant hero. Initially, both Polly and Tom fit their heroic roles only in their imaginations, but they eventually find that their courage to be true heroes will come from their desire to protect one another. For instance, when Tom, who is a quiet cellist for the British Philharmonic, catches and calms a runaway horse, he admits to Polly, "I was too scared to move until I realized you'd get trampled if I didn't." Polly later comes to realize that being a hero is something "inside you" and that "being a hero means ignoring how silly you feel" and doing what you know is right, regardless of how others may try to intimidate you.

As the novel unfolds, Polly gradually discovers that Tom's ex-wife, Laurel, has clouded her memory, so that she has forgotten Tom. Polly also realizes that Laurel has a strange power over Tom. And Laurel's "henchmen," Morton Leroy and his son Seb, follow Polly and try to prevent her from visiting Tom. The worlds of reality and fantasy combine, for it is unclear whether Mr. Leroy is simply an intimidating person or if he has some unearthly power. Although Tom sends Polly books about adventures and fantasy worlds as clues, Polly herself must discover who these people are, why Tom Lynn is in trouble, and how she can save him. It is only after she reads "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tam Lin" that she realizes Tom resembles the heroes of those ballads and, like his namesakes, is under the supernatural power of a beautiful but dangerous woman. As in the ballad "Tam Lin," Tom will die in service to Laurel, as have many others before him, if Polly does not free him. Polly must become a true hero, no longer just telling stories or waiting for someone else to save her. Polly must face Laurel herself, admit her love for Tom Lynn, and even be willing to lose him to free him from Laurel's spell.

At the same time Polly faces many of these adventures, she also faces serious problems at home. Her father and mother have divorced, but neither parent shows much interest or concern for her. Indeed, her father is relieved when Polly agrees not to live with him, and her mother is intensely jealous of Polly, even blaming her own failed relationships on her. Polly turns to her grandmother and Tom Lynn for comfort.

When her parents reject her, Granny takes Polly in and provides her with a home and a loving environment. Tom Lynn, too, listens to her, encourages her imagination, and comes to love her.





While Granny provides love and stability to Polly, Tom's role is more problematic. It is clear that he cares for Polly, and he does try to protect her, but because he needs Polly's help in escaping from Laurel, just meeting with her puts Polly in danger. In the end, through her troubles at home and her fantastic adventures, Polly comes to be independent and courageous, finally ready to battle the powerful Laurel to save someone she loves.

The characters of Laurel Perry Lynn and Morton and Seb Leroy are less well drawn than Tom and Polly, but the vagueness of their characterizations is due in part to Jones's purposeful withholding of information about them until the climax. And although Polly is uncertain of their powers and motives, she is always sure that they pose a threat to her and Tom Lynn and that they must somehow be confronted.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Describe Hunsdon House. How does it contribute to setting and mood?

How does the house reflect the personality of its owner, Laurel Perry Lynn?

2. Examine Polly's relationship with her parents. What problems does she face? How realistic are those descriptions and the solutions that Jones provides?

3. Describe how Tom and Polly's friendship develops. Why does Polly like Tom? What does he offer her that her family does not?

4. Explore the role of Nina's character in the opening scenes. How is she a foil for Polly? What characteristics of Nina's does Polly admire? Which is she annoyed by? What does their early friendship show about Polly?

5. Polly decides that she must train to be an "assistant hero" while at school. She exercises rigorously and believes she has to train to fight. What does Polly learn from this training?

What are her values and her definition of hero? How valid are these? Do they change?

6. How does Morton Leroy contribute to the mood of the story? Describe his character and his role in Fire and Hemlock. What threat does he pose to Polly and Tom? Why?

7. The power of imagination is an important theme in this book. How is it developed? What are the possibilities of imagination?

8. Why do books, plays, and music have such an important role in this novel? Choose an example and explore its place in the story.

9. What role does Granny play in both the fantastic and realistic plot lines of this novel? How important a character is she?

10. Is Seb a kind or cruel character?

Do you believe that he comes to care for Polly, or is he just following his father's orders?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Polly finds the ballads "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tarn Lin" in *The Oxford Book of Ballads*. Read those two ballads. What elements from them form the premise of *Fire and Hemlock*? Why did Jones choose to combine the two tales? Which ballad does she use more, and why?
2. Contrast Polly's relationship with Tom to Laurel's or Ivy's relationships with the men they love. As you define those relationships, examine what is different in Polly's and Tom's. Which characteristics are lauded and which are criticized?
3. Polly reads the story "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" and compares it to her own adventures. Read that story and compare its characters and issues with those in *Fire and Hemlock*. What issues are important in each? How well developed are they in *Fire and Hemlock*?
4. Polly's mother tells her, "In this world you get taken to the cleaners for having a soft heart." Is that shown to be true in the novel? Explain by examining a character or issue.
5. Jones combines a fantastic story with a realistic one. What issues does she examine as she presents Polly's "real" life? Do those issues reflect any of the concerns in Polly's fantastic adventures with Tom Lynn? How do the fantastic and realistic aspects of this novel complement each other?



## For Further Reference

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Jones, Diana Wynne. "Diana Wynne Jones." In *Something About the Author*.

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Quiller-Couch, Arthur, ed. *The Oxford Book of Ballads*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955. This is the edition in which Polly finds the ballads "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tarn Lin."

## Related Titles

Mingling fantasy and reality is a frequent characteristic of Jones's writing for children, as exemplified by her novel *Eight Days of Luke* (1975). In that story the fantastic adventure begins with the young protagonist, David, expressing his frustration with his relatives. Just as Polly of *Fire and Hemlock* is ignored by her parents, so too, David finds that his relatives care little for him. His opportunity for adventure comes when Luke arrives from another time, and again the alienated protagonist finds friendship and caring outside the immediate family structure. David helps Luke in a dangerous conflict that lends to the fantastic elements of the story. Just as Polly's adventures are linked to Scottish ballads, the actions of David and Luke are underpinned by Norse mythology.

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