

Firegold Short Guide

Firegold by Dia Calhoun

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Contents

[Firegold Short Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Overview..... 3](#)

[About the Author..... 4](#)

[Setting..... 5](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 6](#)

[Literary Qualities..... 7](#)

[Themes and Characters..... 9](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 12](#)

[Ideas for Reports and Papers..... 13](#)

[For Further Reference..... 14](#)

[Related Titles/Adaptations..... 15](#)

[Related Web Sites..... 16](#)

[Copyright Information..... 17](#)

Overview

Among fantasy quest novels for young adults, *Firegold* is outstanding for its original and evocative world building and its insightful treatment of the problems of growing up with a mixed, if unadmitted, cultural heritage.

Its young hero, Jonathon Brae, develops many strange symptoms as he becomes a teenager. When he begins to hear voices in his head, Jonathon fears he is going crazy.

He has blue eyes, and village superstition claims that a "loony blue" will go insane by the time he becomes fourteen. Most of the experiences which worry him arise from his mixed parentage—his mother was half Dalriada, and the Dalriadas are thought by the family's neighbors to be not quite human. The images which come to Jonathon are visions of past events or significant places in the Red Mountains, the Dalriadas' home range. Some of Jonathon's physical symptoms, like the antler signs appearing on his forehead, may also symbolize the bodily changes of adolescence. Besides his own fears, he is soon in danger from narrowminded neighbors frightened by anything or anyone they do not understand.

With his father and his uncle Wilford, Jonathon sets out on a journey which eventually takes him, alone, into Dalriada territory to live among one of the tribes. He is just old enough to undergo the Ridgewalk, their test and rite of passage into adulthood. During his ordeal on Kalivi mountain, he struggles to go through a cave full of bones and filled with wonders, where he discovers truths about his ancestors and his identity. Upon emerging, the royal horse Rhohar chooses him as his human. Although not everything is solved, or even made clear to Jonathon during his Ridgewalk, he has gained enough skills and knowledge to return home as an adult, unafraid. His classic hero's journey is completed when he brings his father the legendary *Firegold* apple's seeds, which will restore the Braes' depleted orchards.

Firegold is an absorbing young adult fantasy novel, which explores on several different levels the traumas of discovering identity.

About the Author

Dia Calhoun was born to James and Eva Calhoun in Seattle, Washington, in 1959. As a child she studied classical ballet for twelve years, from the age of five to seventeen. She also knew as a child that she wanted to write, and remembers writing a poem on "Our Classroom Flag" in the fifth grade. In her late-teens she had to decide between continuing with her dancing or going to college. She chose college and enrolled in Mills College, graduating in 1980 as a member of Phi Beta Kappa with a double major in English and book arts.

After college Calhoun worked as a freelance artist, doing lettering and logo design, for a number of years. One of her designs became the logo for Alaska Airlines, and she did the lettering for many book jackets.

When she started writing seriously, she tried to write an hour per day. The time she could spend on writing increased as she became established in her freelance artwork. Her first published novel, *Firegold*, took five years to write. Now she writes in a studio overlooking Puget Sound. In her leisure time she likes to fly-fish, hike in the Cascade Mountains, and do a form of Japanese painting called *sutni*.

Setting

Firegold's events take place in a fantasy world which bears more than a little resemblance to the Pacific Northwest. There is a range of high mountains, surrounded by rugged foothills. The Dalriadas, nomadic tribes whose lifestyle is built around horsemanship and hunting, inhabit this harsh land. On the other side of the Red Mountains are the Beyondlands. Little is revealed in the novel about the Beyondlands; they seem as far away to Jonathon's people as Ultima Thule. Winding down from the Dalriada lands is the Mirandin, which is a swift-running river in the South Valley where Jonathon lives. The Valley dwellers are farmers; the river provides water to an otherwise arid land. Stonewater Vales' families specialize in orchards. Living in a small community, most are suspicious of anything new or different. Jonathon's father's far-ranging hunting is a matter for gossip, as is his mother's origin in the North Valley.

As the gap between the two cultures is integral to Jonathon's story, and the secrets of the mountains only slightly less so, setting is an important part of this novel.

The world of Firegold is unusual in fantasy fiction. Most modern fantasy fiction draws on Celtic lore or medieval history for its mythic and cultural motifs. Firegold's two societies "feel" North American. Notwithstanding their red hair and blue eyes, the Dalriadas' culture is full of cultural traits reminiscent of Native American tribal life: the campfires, the importance of animal spirits and of hunting, and the vision quests. The Valley people's culture is much like that of small town white Americans, from pioneer days through the mid-twentieth century. Such events as their Harvest Supper, a covered-dish affair for the whole community, and the social dancing, reflect this similarity. Also worth noting are the brief glimpses shown of government in the Valley. There are no lords or kings; instead a High Council meets at Middleford and votes on laws and other matters.

Calhoun has created a unique world in this book, with well-imagined visual and symbolic elements and stunning landscapes.

Her proposed third novel is set in the same world some four hundred years before Firegold and tells the story of one of Jonathon's ancestors.



Social Sensitivity

The mutual distrust between Valley dwellers and Dalriadas thrives on ignorance and fear. It is easy to see the parallels with cultural and ethnic conflicts in our own world. For example, some early white settlers considered the Native Americans not human and justified bad treatment of them with this belief. Tensions between ethnic groups grow when people stay strictly in their own communities, basing their ideas about other groups on rumor and imagination. Likewise, more knowledge and interaction usually leads to understanding. As Americans have become more mobile, old prejudices between ethnic and religious groups have ebbed when people realize the things they have in common as citizens and human beings.

At the same time, there are real lifestyle and economic differences between Valley folk and the Dalriadas. Valley dwellers are farmers, and the Dalriadas cannot understand why people would spend their lives that way when so many plants and trees offer food free for the taking. The Dalriadas are nomads who rely on barter between individuals to meet their needs for different goods and services. Valley people have money and law, and presumably market arrangements by which Stonewater Vale's fruits are sold elsewhere. They also have writing and schools for their children. Dalriada youth learn from imitating their elders and from the sometimes harsh tests of hunting and the Ridgewalk. As with every such clash of cultures, it will probably take more than one generation to work out better ways of coexistence.

Yet the fact that close ties are possible is evident. Jonathon's grandmother married a Dalriada man instead of Wilford, who seems to have loved her too. Their mixed marriage would make an interesting story, especially since neither was able to live in the other's culture. The revelation about Raymont Brae and his parentage shows this match was not unique. As for Jonathon, until he finds a way to integrate the two parts, his mixed heritage causes him much grief. He has moments when he hates all things Dalriada. Some young people in our society with multicultural backgrounds go through a similar process. His venture into the Red Mountains to meet the Dalriadas is frightening, but it is something he has to do, to find more about who he is.

The strains and suspicions between Jonathon and his father seem harsh at times, but they are realistic. During stormy periods in their growing up, many young people wonder if their real father or mother might be someone else. Brian, as well as worrying about all Jonathon's problems, is also grieving for the loss of his wife. Facing hostility from the townsfolk and his son, Brian Brae does his best to be a good father. In the end, there is no doubt about his love and caring, or of the fact that he is Jonathon's real father.

Literary Qualities

Firegold is both an adolescent identity quest novel and a coming-of-age novel.

Although not all writers on literature distinguish between the two, the former type deals primarily with the young protagonist's search for self: "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong in the world?" This is probably the most common story theme in fantasy novels; certainly it is in those with a teenaged or young adult protagonist. The coming-of-age novel is more typical of "realistic" fiction with a contemporary or recent setting. While the main character of such a novel may do a fair amount of selfquestioning, the emphasis is on the way events bring him or her to an understanding of, or at least the ability to cope with, the adult world in all its complexity and tragedy.

Jonathon's story is built upon the identity quest structure. But the world he traverses in his quest is not a place where good and evil are sharply defined. Characters and symbols do not sort themselves out neatly. Some former friends turn on the Braes. Kiron is an enemy and rival, but also a reluctant friend. Jonathon discovers ambiguous motives in his parents, as well as in himself. He goes through the trauma of witnessing his mother's murder when he is helpless to stop it. All these events induct him into adulthood as surely as does the Ridgewalk.

The novel starts out by raising a number of mysteries. Why does the red stone glow and burn so strangely, and what is its connection to the Red Mountains? Why do first Jonathon's father, then his mother, go away on "hunting" trips, and why are they so afraid to take him along? Who is the hooded man who frightens him out of sleep? Is Brian his real father? All these questions and more are answered by the end of the novel. Meanwhile, the author builds suspense with them, making readers as mystified, and almost as anguished, as Jonathon himself. The book's close-in third person point of view helps create this effect. The reader knows no more than Jonathan does about what these puzzles mean, and feels his disorientation and panic along with him.

Another pattern Calhoun uses is the hero's journey. This model, which some writers claim underlies all storytelling, is most closely aligned with fantasy fiction. In many ways Firegold provides almost textbook examples of the journey's stages, as outlined in Christopher Vogler's *The Hero's Journey*. When Jonathon ignores the mountain's song and visions in his head, it is his "Refusal of the Call." Sephonie, his grandmother, whom he first meets at her home near Highgate (the entry point to Dalriada territory), is a mentor figure. His Supreme Ordeal takes place in an actual Inmost Cave, deep inside Kalivi Mountain.

The book departs from the usual hero's journey pattern in the length of time it takes Jonathon to accept the challenge. Half the book passes before he sets out to find the Dalriadas. The events in this half are necessary to the story for other reasons, even if they do seem a very prolonged "Refusal of the Call." Also, no ally or mentor can tell him much about his final trial, as the Ridgewalk's path is different for each fourteen year old who takes it.



Finally, Firegold is rich in metaphors.

Most of the metaphors are also objects of mystery. Some of these objects have a symbolic value to the Dalriadas, which may or may not coincide with their meaning to Jonathon. The Red Mountains themselves, the horse Rhohar, and the old bow that Jonathon is not strong enough to use are just a few of the many things which carry multiple meanings in the story.



Themes and Characters

Firegold is the story of a young man discovering who he is and where he belongs. Jonathon Brae's journey is more complex than the usual adolescent identity quest in novels because he has so much more to discover and to sort out.

He is a "half-breed," not fully accepted by the Valley people among whom he has grown up because his mother was halfDalriada. The Dalriadas are mountain people who ride splendid horses, possess modest psychic powers and, according to Valley belief, grow horns on their heads. Because of this belief and the fact that there has been almost no direct contact between the two groups for generations, Valley dwellers also believe the Dalriadas are not completely human.

Jonathon's Dalriada heritage shows in his blue eyes, an almost unknown trait among Valley folk. One of their laws even requires parents to expose any blue-eyed offspring in infancy. Jonathon's father says he obtained a waiver so he did not have to follow this law. Jonathon has some reason to believe that his father once set out to expose him as a baby, which intensifies the normal father-son conflicts that surface in the teenage years. Even his mother had brown eyes like the people around him. He suspects that Brian Brae is not his real father.

More suspicions torment him as he begins to have hallucinations, both visual and auditory. The Red Mountains, one hundred fifty miles away in Dalriada territory, seem to be calling him. Fascinated and terrified when he sees a lovely Dalriada girl by the river, he flees from her, stumbles, and finds a red stone with a horse shape carved on it.

The stone heats up and the figure glows at significant times, intensifying the visions and disorienting him. Sometimes he wakes to find a hooded man looming over his bed.

Worst of all, he sees that antler-shaped marks are growing on his forehead. Altogether, Jonathon is a very confused and frightened young man. He behaves well most of the time, but he is buffeted by more inner turmoil than most adults could cope with.

It becomes obvious that sooner or later he will have to go to the Dalriadas' lands to unravel these mysteries and fears. Thus in addition to his individual quest for self, there is the related theme of reconciling his two identities, Valley and Dalriada. The two groups disdain and fear one another, although among the Valley people the fear seems uppermost, and with the Dalriadas it is more a matter of contempt and pity for the "dirt dwellers" with their settled lives of toil. Part of Jonathon's task even involves trying to bring the two peoples together, although he does not realize this consciously.

At the novel's end, there are tentative signs that his journey has at least begun the process. He brings back the legendary Firegold apple which his father has long sought, and resolves to rebuild the family orchards with its golden seeds. Knowing that the two peoples were once one—a fact he has discovered on his quest—he is well-equipped to help with any renewed contact.



Even though the logic of Jonathon's situation seems to dictate his journey to the Red Mountains, he fights it. The first half of the book follows his situation in the Valley.

There, his rising apprehension and his neighbors' distrust of him grow apace. Not until a lynch mob nearly kills him does he leave the village. Even then, his father's intention is to take him to Middlefield and obtain another stay from the High Council. This section adds another thematic note which is rare in fantasy fiction but realistic. Most people of any age do not set off into the unknown unless propelled by both inner and outer forces. His valley neighbors' sudden violence illustrates how easily fear and ignorance of other racial or cultural groups can turn ugly. His father's failure to get a Council waiver leaves Jonathon with little choice but to go on to the mountains.

Jonathon is a complicated but likeable and sympathetic main character. Most of the other characters are well developed too, and bring additional themes into the story.

Brian Brae, Jonathon's father, is himself somewhat of an anomaly in Stonewater Vale. He hunts in the Red Mountains' foothills, which most Valley residents are afraid to approach. He uses new methods to make his orchards more productive raising suspicions in the conservative farming community. His own ancestry is shadowed by doubts, symbolized by his ancestor's portrait which hangs in the Braes' stairwell.

Brian, too, is pulled in at least two directions several times in the novel. He loves his wife and refuses to try to stop her wandering ways, even though he fears these might include romances with other men.

He loves his son, but realizes Jonathon's continued presence in the town brings danger to himself and other family members.

Many years ago, he did set off to expose his young son in the wilderness. He could not go through with it, and ever since has felt guilty about the attempt. Brian proves that even adults are not free from inner doubts and ambiguous feelings. Part of responsible maturity is doing the best one can while living with uncertainties.

Additional themes arise in Jonathon's interaction with his father. Brian's solution to most problems is to take the lawful and logical way. For example, when the bully Timothy Dakken ruins trees that Jonathon is nurturing, Brian calls in the debt Timothy's father owes him, so that the Braes now own the Dakkens' orchard. He thinks a new waiver from the High Council will keep Jonathon safe. Although this civilized approach is admirable, sometimes it is insufficient. It cannot quiet the chaos in Jonathon's head, and it is no match for the explosive hatred that has emerged in the village. Meanwhile, Jonathon both loves and needs his father, and at times resents and suspects him.

The ambivalence in relationships is a theme found in his dealings with many other characters as well. Kiron, who is assigned by the Dalriada elder Tlell to be Jonathon's "Atenar," or Hart brother, makes clear his contempt for the "dirt dweller."

Jonathon is afraid to go hunting with him, but Kiron ends up saving his life. Later, Jonathon discovers that it was Kiron's arrow which killed his mother in a raid. An



enraged Jonathon almost kills his Hart brother, only to stop at the last moment, determined not to imitate Kiron's deed.

Later, Kiron surprises him by offering to help guard him on his journey home.

Athira, the young woman Jonathon saw at the river, turns out to be a queen of the Dalriada tribes. Although the role seems to be more ceremonial than governing, her position dazzles Jonathon, even as she flirts with him. She leads him to believe she will marry him once he completes the Ridgewalk.

When he approaches her afterwards, however, she demurs, using the excuse that he should not have the royal horse Rhohar.

Jonathon is baffled, because the fact that Rhohar chose him should make him an even more suitable mate for Athira. Whether Athira turns him down because she really wants to marry Kiron, as Jonathon believes, or she is teasing him with another test, remains unclear.

Many other characters show a similar complexity. All play a part in Jonathon's journey and most are memorable for themselves as well. In its cast of characters, as well as the variety of themes that inform the story, Firegold goes well beyond the limits of most young adult fantasy quests.



Topics for Discussion

1. What are some reasons Jonathon thinks he's going crazy after he finds the red stone?
2. Why does Timothy harass Jonathon so much? Does Rosamund have anything to do with it? Why does it get worse after Brian calls in the loan on the Dakkens' land?
3. Why does Jonathon's mother not want him to go into the Red Mountains until he is fourteen? What does she know about them that his father does not?
4. Why do you think Brian brought Rhohar from the mountains for Jonathon?
5. Why does Jonathon's father give up on his plan to get another waiver from the High Council? What do you think his backup plan is?
6. His grandmother tells Jonathon that any woman married to Brian Brae would need to get away from him sometimes. Why? Do you think Jonathon was feeling the same way about his father?
7. The Dalriadas' way of life seems free and adventurous, compared with the sober, settled ways of the Valley people. Do you suppose other Valley young people have wanted, or even tried, to join them in the mountains? Why or why not?
8. Are the Dalriadas' lives actually as free and exciting as they appear during Jonathon's sojourn? What are some of the drawbacks to their nomadic lifestyle?
9. Do you think the visions Jonathon has are "true?" If so, in what ways?
10. What are the culture traits that separate the Dalriadas from the Valley people? Do you think there is anything they can learn from each other?
11. Which is the most significant object Jonathon acquires in the course of the story: the red rock, his grandfather's bow, or the horse Rhohar? What is unique about each one?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although the mysteries that baffle Jonathon are solved by the end of Firegold, quite a few things are still left for readers to wonder about. How is Jonathon going to help reconcile the Valley people and the Dalriadas? Will Rhohar find a new line of fine horses in the Valley? Will Jonathon marry Rosamund, or Athira, or someone else? Pick one of these questions, or another matter that is left open, and write about what you think will happen and why.

2. What did Jonathon's father mean by the North Valley being wild? How much of it do you think is due to Dalriada influences? How much to terrain and weather? Write about how life in the North Valley might differ from that in Stonewater Vale.

3. Jonathon's mixed ethnic heritage brings him trouble, both because of its bodily effects and because of other people's attitudes. Some young people in our own world may also feel alienated or be the targets of prejudice because of similar identity problems. Others find that having more than one culture to identify with enriches their lives. Pick Firegold 159 someone you have read about (either a real person or a fictional character) or someone you know, and show how they successfully cope with such a background.

4. The Ridgewalk is a rite of passage.

Surviving it marks the boy's or girl's transformation into an adult. Does your culture have an adulthood ritual?

Research and write about one or more such rites of passage, or invent and write about one which you think would work well.

5. The Ridgewalk is also a vision quest.

North American Indians, usually young men, would go on a vision quest to find the direction of their future life. Read about one of their vision quests, and show the parallels with Jonathon's experience.

6. What do the various things Jonathon sees in the cave mean? Write about or draw what he sees, and if possible, how he feels when he is in the cave.

7. Many fantasy novels start with a young person feeling increasingly unhappy, frightened, or out of sync with his or her home surroundings. Read one of these books. Compare the protagonist's situation and what he or she does about it with Jonathon's story.

For Further Reference

Ansley, Tracy T. Review of Firegold. Book Report (September-October 1999): 58. This review emphasizes the novel's appeal to young adults and commends the author's realistic world-building.

Duncan, Melanie C. Review of Firegold.

School Library Journal (June 1999): 126.

This short review reflects some of the same tone of drama and mystery found in the novel. Attributes the big change in Jonathon's life to his father bringing home the Dalriada horse.

Koelling, Holly. Review of Firegold. Booklist (May 15, 1999): 1690. This favorable review praises the novel's symmetry and points out the matched conflicts between the Braes and their neighbors and between the two cultures. Calls the illustrations "static and unnecessary" and questions the rapid changes in Jonathon's relationship with his father.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Dia Calhoun's fantasy novel *Aria of the Sea* (2000) is also about a young person's search for identity. Cerinthe, its heroine, struggles to become a dancer, only to find her true calling as a healer. Cerinthe, like Jonathon in *Firegold*, loses her mother. For both of them it is a pivotal event on the journey to selfhood.

Many fantasy stories tie the youthful identity quest to a journey, and the protagonist's subsequent initiation into a new culture or subculture. Mercedes Lackey's novels are noted for such themes. *Arrows of the Queen* (1987), *Magic's Pawn* (1989), and *By the Sword* (1991) are among the most popular. However, unlike Jonathon, Lackey's protagonists usually stay in their adopted surroundings and build a new life there.

Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* (1982) is a noted fantasy quest novel in which the young heroine goes unwillingly to a land of desert and mountains, only to find herself more at home there than in the life she left.

Among the most famous identity quests in fantasy film is Luke Skywalker's in the original "Star Wars" trilogy. A few other writers have used traditional American sources for their fantasy worlds. Orson Scott Card's "Tales of Alvin Maker" series, with its mountain West elements, and Suzette Haden Elgin's Ozark-based trilogy about "Responsible of Brightwater" are perhaps the best known to science fiction/fantasy readers. Many of Ray Bradbury's works also reflect roots in idyllic small town America, although they are not always labeled fantasy.



Related Web Sites

"Dia Calhoun." Winslow Press <http://www.winslowpress.com/firegold/dia.cfm>.

March 16, 2002. This site gives some information about Calhoun's writing schedule and interests, and contains a photo album showing the author and the studio where she writes.

"The Farm." Kunst dame <http://www.kunstdame.com/farm>. March 16, 2002.

This is the Web site for the Farm, an apple and pear commercial orchard in central Washington State owned by Calhoun's in-laws. She calls it the loveliest place on earth, and she based the setting for many scenes in Firegold on it. Site includes a short review of the novel, along with a Farm tour and a Spring Journal.



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