The Fledgling Short Guide

The Fledgling by Jane Langton

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Overview

The Fledgling is a fantasy novel about a Canada goose that teaches Georgie, a little girl, to fly. Her family and several other adults try to prevent Georgie from taking flying lessons. Their idiosyncracies (one plants a garden of plastic roses, one thinks the goose is a giant duck) and their bumbling attempts to stop Georgie make the book alternately funny and sad. The action moves specifically and rapidly, with frequent shifts of attention between characters.

Young readers will see aspects of their own lives reflected in the characters' problems and pleasures of growing up.

Georgie, Eddy, and Eleanor experience sibling rivalry, adults not listening to their opinions and wishes, pressures to conform, and homework. Georgie, the youngest, also experiences being able to see, hear, smell, and move better than adults, as well as being able to transform the world into what it might be, not what it is, through imagination, empathy with nature, and play.

Because they are older than Georgie, Eleanor and Eddy have lost some of these abilities, and Georgie apparently begins to lose some of her imaginative powers through the course of the book, although this loss is ambiguous.

Langton raises the question of whether the loss of unity and the ability to empathize with and play with nature is inevitable as people grow older. Do children like Georgie intuitively understand the ideas of Henry David Thoreau better than adults, like Uncle Freddy, who teaches transcendental ideas?

When Mr. Preek shoots the Goose Prince, Georgie finds the gander's present and is able to see the world in it, while Dorothea Broom conforms more fully to adult society than Georgie.

Langton explores whether Dorothea is duller, or less alive, because of conformity.

By questioning the nature of childhood and the inevitability and necessity of ever completely growing up, Langton introduces a host of related issues in ecology, ethics, education, and American intellectual history. The issues might be phrased as questions. How can adults live in nature and with it? Is hunting justified? Is formal schooling, in which books and homework are emphasized, the best system for learning? How are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, and other major thinkers of the past relevant now? By raising these questions, Langton encourages adult readers to see their own lives in the book, and reminds them that they, too, may have planted plastic flower gardens or killed unnecessarily.

The book is well written—its prose is clear, its plot unique. It raises significant questions for readers of all ages, and it raises these questions concretely and interestingly, through the characters' lives. Langton convincingly depicts a world parallel to the real

world, except that geese talk and a huge old gander befriends a little girl and teaches her to fly before she is too old to learn. The book shows what the world might be like if several of Thoreau's ideas were carried to logical conclusions.

About the Author

Jane Langton was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on December 30, 1922. She studied astronomy at Wellesley College from 1940 to 1942, then transferred to the University of Michigan, where she earned her bachelor's degree in astronomy in 1944. In 1943 she married William Langton, a physicist, with whom she had three sons. She continued her studies as a graduate student in art history at the University of Michigan, and earned her master's degree from Radcliffe College in 1948. She completed additional graduate work at the Boston Museum School of Art in 1958 and 1959. She lives with her family in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a town close to Concord.

Although her themes are universal, Langton is a regional writer to the extent that she often sets her novels in Concord. In much of her work she explores how the Revolutionary War and Transcendental periods live on in the latetwentieth-century Concord she knows so well.

Setting

Georgie encounters the Goose Prince in Concord, Massachusetts, and nearby Walden Pond during the latter part of the twentieth century. For the most part Langton's Concord is an ordinary New England small town, a suburb of Boston where people have created a community and where everyone knows each other.

When Mr. Preek "rescues" Georgie from the Goose Prince, he recognizes her as "Fred Hall's little stepdaughter"; when he buys a shotgun, he is disappointed that the man working in the hardware store does not recognize his name.

Georgie does not fit into the rigid routines of this orderly community. She is too young, too independent, too imaginative, and too much the natural child. Uncle Freddy says "she is too young to know the limits of human possibility. For Georgie, anything is possible!" Although he is the founder and president of the Concord College of Transcendental Knowledge, Uncle Freddy does not see that Georgie often lives the ideas of Thoreau, Emerson, and other American transcendentalists who lived near Concord during the midnineteenth century.

The American transcendentalists were a loosely organized group of thinkers who rejected eighteenth-century philosophy's emphasis on empiricism, or reliance on sensory experience, by advocating the supremacy of mind over matter and by emphasizing intuition as a guide to truth. The members met at Emerson's home, the Old Manse, in Concord beginning in 1836; the movement reached its height during the 1840s. Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned from the ministry in 1832 because he objected to historic Christianity's emphasis on fixed beliefs. For Emerson, God was a living, fluid, forceful spirit, not a dogma. He thought each individual could know God by experiencing the transcendental law, the moral law in which all nature converges with the divine.

Henry David Thoreau's ideas roughly parallel Emerson's, although Langton emphasizes Thoreau's life and ideas in The Fledgling. Like Uncle Freddy, Thoreau conducted a private school in Concord for a short while with his brother John. Like Georgie, Thoreau was interested in living with nature, in experiencing its unity, and in seeing the general in the particular, the universe in the specific. Walden Pond became an epitome of the universe for Thoreau, as the Goose Prince's gift does for Georgie.

The two main topics Thoreau explores in his world are a feeling for the unity of man and nature and an active concern for social issues. Langton explores these same topics in The Fledgling.

Social Sensitivity

No reasonable person should be offended by The Fledgling. People have argued that the book is against hunting, but they fail to see Mr. Preek as a buffoon with a gun but with no respect for wildlife or understanding of nature.

Langton does not take a stand on hunting as a social issue; instead, she advocates respect for nature. People also have objected to the book because they claim it will encourage children who want to fly to jump out of high windows, as Georgie is able to do. The logical answer to this objection is that many books for young people could suggest "dangerous ideas."

Literary Qualities

The Fledgling is a commentary on the American transcendentalists, a fantasy, and an animal story. By mixing these traditions with suspense and comedy, Langton has produced a highly original novel.

A fantasy presents a believable, logical world different from the world of everyday experience. In Langton's fantasy world, Georgie is able to fly and to talk with animals; otherwise, the world is a realistic one with certain aspects of it exaggerated for comic effect. Flying and communicating with animals recur frequently in mythology and in contemporary works. Randall Jarrell uses flight as a metaphor for freedom in Fly by Night (1976), and A. A. Milne uses talking to animals as a metaphor for unity with nature in Winnie-the-Pooh (1926).

Georgie is initiated into this freedom and unity in The Fledgling by the Goose Prince's teaching her to fly and leaving her the rubber ball. She also is initiated into the adult world of conformity and fragmentation by Mr. Preek's shooting the Goose Prince.

Georgie dares to be herself in the novel.

Rather than letting the tidy society in which she lives define her, Georgie defines herself through her decisions and actions as the novel progresses. By growing into the self she wants to become, she joins the company of many other young heroes and heroines in fantasy who are forced to define who they are. Lloyd Alexander's Taran begins his quest as a callow pig-keeper (The Book of Three, 1964), and Susan Cooper's Will reluctantly assumes the responsibilities of an Old One to fight the forces of the Dark (The Dark is Rising, 1973). But they both assume the responsibilities of their quests, as does Georgie when she takes the shot intended for the Goose Prince.

The theme of coming of age being inextricably connected with heroism and self-reliance is prevalent in epic fantasy and is evident here, although it is less fully developed than in the major works in high fantasy published since the Second World War. Langton does not write epic fantasy based on material from myth, legend, epic, romance, and hero tale that writers such as C. S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, and Ursula Le Guin have produced. Instead, Langton writes more in the tradition of E. B. White in Charlotte's Web (1952), P. L. Travers in Mary Poppins (1934), and Roald Dahl in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964). She works in the tradition of light domestic fantasy, and her work is characterized by wit, elaborate originality, and comedy. In addition to being a fantasy, The Fledgling is also an animal story that shows the growing relationship and affection between a young character and an animal.

Themes and Characters

Langton prefaces The Fledgling with a quotation from Thoreau that describes Georgie, who has grown up with nature, aloof from the society of men. Georgie, the youngest character in The Fledgling, is the person most able to live in nature, talk with the Goose Prince, learn to fly, and see the world in the rubber ball he gives her as a present. The older characters have grown apart from nature. Miss Prawn plants plastic flowers, and Mr. Preek mistakes the Goose Prince for a giant duck and later decides to shoot the bird.

Georgie, on the other hand, is part of nature; she is part of the divine unity of the universe Thoreau emphasized.

Uncle Freddy sees this unity, and he mentions that she is friends with the birds, the squirrels, the flowers, and the trees, although he is puzzled by Georgie's being a child of nature. More than the other children in the novel, Georgie resists the pressures to conform, grow up, and renounce this heritage. Mr. Preek shoots the Goose Prince and Georgie cannot fly anymore, but he is not able to kill her feeling for nature. When Georgie finds the Goose Prince's present and is able to see the world in this ordinary rubber ball, she recaptures her imaginative powers. The novel ends ambiguously, though. Is the empathy momentary, or has Georgie recaptured her unity with nature?

The other young characters in the novel contrast with Georgie. Dorothea Broom, the other little girl, is chubby and obedient, while Georgie is skinny and independent. Mr. Preek likes Dorothea because she conforms, and he gives her lollipops and a dollar bill to show his approval. Eleanor, who is fourteen, and Eddy, who is twelve, also contrast with Georgie. They are Uncle Freddy's orphaned niece and nephew who now live in the Hall home, but they have lost Georgie's connection with nature. Eddy's contrast is carried to an extreme by Oliver Winslow, his fat overbearing friend who enjoys disrupting Georgie's tea parties by singing songs about "greasy, grimy gopher guts."

Georgie, because of her feeling for nature, finds the song disgusting.

Mr. Preek and Miss Prawn are neighbors who contrast with Georgie. Mr. Preek is an adult version of Oliver Winslow: vulgar, boorish, and self-assured to the point of insensitivity. He is the president of the local bank, the good citizen who "rescues" Georgie from "the giant duck," and the nonhunter who buys a shotgun to shoot the huge bird. Oliver Winslow ruins Georgie's tea parties, but Mr. Preek terminates her friendship with the Goose Prince. Miss Prawn, on the other hand, is the adult version of Dorothea Broom. She is Mr. Preek's secretary and the next-door neighbor to the Halls.

Frederick Hall, Uncle Freddy, is Georgie's stepfather. He and his wife, Aunt Alex, teach about the transcendentalists. They understand Emerson and Thoreau intellectually, but they do not share Georgie's intuitive understanding of the unity of nature that the transcendentalists taught. Aunt Alex, who was Georgie's widowed mother before

marrying Uncle Freddy, knows about Georgie's flying before other members of the family and allows her to continue.

Dollabella is Georgie's doll and her friend. Together they have tea parties, good conversations, and shared confidences. The Goose Prince, an old gander whose mate has died, is Georgie's other friend and mentor.

Langton explores a number of topics in The Fledgling which relate to Georgie's growing up and being initiated into society. Some of these themes are: the differences between inner realities or personal beliefs, such as Georgie's conviction that she can fly or have tea parties with Dollabella, and the external, public realities of life and society; the two ways of knowing nature—learning from it by becoming part of its unity, or ignoring it by killing it; the simultaneous existence of fantasy and reality; the need for characters to accept their own fantasy and childhood before they are able to feel their unity with nature; the losses characters experience when growing up; and the need for ecological awareness.

Topics for Discussion

1. In chapter three, Georgie remembers how she flew, how she "jumped down the stairs in two great floating bounds. Unless it was only a dream."

Have your dreams ever been so vivid that they seem to have really happened?

Have you ever dreamed you were flying?

2. Uncle Freddy likes to quote Thoreau: when the flock of geese flew over the house he "smiled sleepily and murmured aloud, ' A clanking chain. A clanking chain drew through the air.' (It was something Henry had said.)" How do Thoreau's words in this and other quotations enhance the story?

3. When Mr. Preek thought of shooting the Goose Prince, he did not think to himself in words like killing and murder.

He didn't say to himself, "It is all right to kill things." When you think of hunting geese, deer, or any other creatures, do you use words like "killing" or "murder"?

What words do you use?

4. The Concord College of Transcendental Knowledge is not accredited, meaning that it does not conform to the standards established by states for a university to be licensed. As a matter of principle, Uncle Freddy and Thoreau himself would not value accreditation.

Why?

5. Many older characters unnecessarily try to protect Georgie: Mr. Preek kills the Goose Prince; Eleanor and Eddy form the Georgie Protection Society; Miss Prawn grabs her when Georgie tries to drift down from the porch railing; and Uncle Freddy nails the window shut. Are they doing the right things to help Georgie? Would you have been concerned about Georgie if you had been a character in the novel? If so, would you have acted like any of these characters to show this concern, or would you have acted differently? Do older people try to protect young people too much?

6. Miss Prawn's book of reveries contains daily inspirational quotations, and Uncle Freddy finds inspiration in writings by the New England transcendentalists. Georgie, on the other hand, finds inspiration from directly contacting nature. How are these sources of inspiration different? Which do you prefer?

Why?

7. The people in Concord see the geese come back, and they comment to each other "it sounds like fall. When the geese come back, you know it must be fall."

What are the other sounds of fall? Of the other seasons?

8. As the flock of sixty geese fly over Concord, they "gabble to each other in their hoarse strident talk Go DOWN! go DOWN! go WHERE? go THERE? where, WHERE? here, HERE? no, THERE!

there, THERE! come DOWN! down, DOWN! right HERE? yes, HERE! down, DOWN! come DOWN! right DOWN!" How would you describe the conversations of other birds and animals?

9. Georgie pulls up Miss Prawn's plastic roses until they spell "come." Does her inviting the Goose Prince's for his last visit in this way show that she has become more plastic?

10. The Goose Prince is old and alone.

Would his relationship with Georgie be as convincing if he were younger, and had a family?

11. Eddy buys a Phosphorescent Moon Rocket X-100, Mr. Preek buys a shotgun, and Oliver Winslow bellows his song about "great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts." On the other hand, Eleanor has studied ballet, Miss Prawn plants a garden of plastic flowers, and Dorothea Broom delivers letters for Miss Prawn. Do these actions represent a pattern of male characters behaving one way in the novel, and female characters behaving in a different way? If so, how does Georgie fit into this pattern? If not, what actions and attitudes do male and female characters share to avoid sexual stereotyping?

12. The Goose Prince teaches Georgie to fly in a way, to do "a kind of elegant slow falling from the very top of the sky."

What else does he teach her? What does she teach him?

13. What vision of the world does Georgie see in the rubber ball the Goose Prince has given her. How does Georgie's seeing the world in the rubber ball fit in with Thoreau's philosophy?

14. Eddy and Georgie go into the closet so Georgie can see how the moon rocket Eddy has bought glows "softly in the velvet dark, an eerie luminous green."

Later in the novel she goes into the closet by herself with her rubber ball to see it glowing like the moon rocket, "but with a radiance very different from the weird green phosphorescence of Eddy's rocket ship." How else is the rubber ball different from the rocket ship? What do these differences show about receiving a toy versus buying a toy?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Madeline Prawn records her "inspirational thoughts" in a notebook, and Thoreau regularly wrote in his journals.

Do the other characters consciously or unconsciously imitate Thoreau's actions? How? Read about Thoreau's ideas and explain whether the characters reflect his teachings truthfully in their own ideas and actions, or if they distort his teachings.

2. Uncle Freddy and Aunt Alex teach "about the wise men who had lived in Concord a hundred years ago, Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and all their poet-friends and fellow thinkers" in The Concord College of Transcendental Knowledge. Why are these people called transcendentalists? What ideas did they have in common? Which of these ideas are expressed in the novel?

3. "No longer was the old goose flying with his mate, guiding another young family of excited half-grown fledglings from the blue northern lake where the goslings had been born. His mate had died long ago." Canada geese ordinarily mate for life. Research the behavior patterns of Canada geese and identify these characteristics in the novel.

4. When he sees the Goose Prince hovering over Georgie's head, Ralph Preek thinks a giant duck is attacking her. He tells this story several times, to the amusement of other characters.

What other scenes in the novel are funny because they involve mistaken identity?

5. Jean George's Julie of the Wolves (1972) tells the story of how Julie, an Eskimo girl, establishes a close relationship with Amaroq, the leader of a wolf pack, just as Georgie establishes a close relationship with the Goose Prince. How are these relationships similar, and how are they different? Did Julie's and Georgie's feelings and attitudes change because of their communication with the wolves and the goose?

6. Does the novel end too depressingly? If so, how would you change the ending?

7. Investigate the hunting laws in your state. In shooting the Goose Prince the first time, would George Preek have broken the law in your state? The second time?

8. Georgie likes to explain things for herself. She "knew what stars were.

They were pinholes in the sky, letting the white fire shine through." What else in the novel does she explain in her own way?

For Further Reference

Booklist (May 15, 1980): 1365, 1366.

This review of The Fledgling is an excellent introduction to the novel.

Richardson, Robert D. Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Richardson focuses on the inner Thoreau in this treatment of his ideas, aspirations, and achievements.

Schneider, Richard J. Henry David Thoreau. Boston: Twayne, 1987. Schneider explains Thoreau's developing attitudes toward nature, philosophy, society, and writing.

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. 1854.

Thoreau develops his ideas of the divine unity of nature, the importance of individualism, the importance of seeing the universe in a particular place most richly in Walden. Jane Langton uses these ideas in The Fledgling.

Related Titles

Eleanor and Eddy appear as the main characters in three novels Langton wrote before The Fledgling: The Diamond in the Window (1962), The Swing in the Summerhouse (1967), and The Astonishing Stereoscope (1971). Like The Fledgling, all are unique and thoughtprovoking fantasies in which Langton explores how history forms the present for individuals and for the community.

The Diamond in the Window tells how Eleanor and Eddy find a secret playroom in the attic of a turreted and gabled old house in Concord and learn that Nora and Eddy, two earlier Hall children, vanished from this room one night. They search for the lost children, then learn they are involved in an adventure that might leave them in another time and space. In The Swing in the Summerhouse, Eleanor and Eddy visit a set of fantastic worlds illustrating the wisdom in their Uncle Freddy's quotations from Thoreau and Emerson. In The Astonishing Stereoscope, Eleanor and Eddy's Uncle Krishna, an Indian Prince, gives them a magic stereoscope, which leads to adventures in the series of viewcard worlds.

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