Footsteps Short Guide

Footsteps by Leon Garfield

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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

Within the context of a fast-moving adventure story, Footsteps treats ageold questions of friendship, loyalty, honesty, and trust. Amidst a variety of unusual characters and settings, the novel introduces a likable young hero, William Jones, whose strengths and weaknesses make him a well-rounded, believable character. Humorous touches, suspenseful situations, and surprising plot twists abound.

Although the locales and situations in which William finds himself are far removed from the life of the modern-day American reader, the knowledge he gains about people through his experiences is universal and timeless. The book shows, without preaching or moralizing, that one should greet new acquaintances with healthy skepticism, especially those who seem too eager to help a stranger. While the novel illustrates that people should not be taken at face value, it also says that true friends can be found and are worthy of loyalty.

This book gives an entertaining look into the world of eighteenth-century England from a young person's point of view. Garfield's knowledge of the time period is obviously extensive, and he presents historical details in a way that adds to the excitement of the story.

About the Author

Leon Garfield was born on July 14, 1921, in Brighton, England. After attending grammar school in Brighton, he briefly studied art and then served for five years in the Army Medical Corps. He worked for twenty years in a London hospital as a biochemical technician while establishing himself as a writer.

He lives in London.

Garfield taught himself to write fiction by imitating authors such as Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Andersen, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Although usually categorized as a writer for juveniles, he prefers to call his books "family novels," accessible to the intelligent twelve-yearold and still enjoyable for the adult.

After writing various stories aimed at the adult reader, Garfield achieved his first real success with Jack Holborn, originally submitted as an adult novel but published in shortened form as a juvenile book. Inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's Master of Ballantrae, Garfield's novel is likewise set in the eighteenth century. Garfield found he had an affinity for this historical period.

He has subsequently published dozens of novels, mostly adventure tales for young adults and usually set in London or southern England during the eighteenth century. He has also published short stories, a play, a nonfiction book about eighteenth-century England, and several retellings of classic tales and myths. Garfield also completed The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Charles Dickens's unfinished novel, successfully matching the Victorian writer's style and spirit.

Garfield's books have received several awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal of the British Library Association for The God Beneath the Sea, a retelling of Greek myths on which he collaborated with Edward Blishen.

Three of his books have been runnersup for the Carnegie Medal: Smith, Black Jack, and The Drummer Boy.

Setting

The story begins in the village of Woodbury, near Hertford, England, during the mid-eighteenth century. The respectable Jones family is headed by David—handsome, charming, and admired for his integrity. But his son William begins to realize that his comfortable, secure home hides a secret when he hears the sound of his father's dragging footsteps during the night, signifying an unwell body and a troubled spirit. In a dying confession to his son, the father confides that he is haunted by guilt because years ago he cheated his business partner.

After his father's death, William journeys to London to seek the former business partner, entertaining a vague notion of making things right with him.

The big city, he finds, includes not only impressive sights such as St. Paul's Cathedral and London Bridge, but also the grinding poverty of slums, a confusing maze of laws and lawyers, and a world of shifting adult values.

Social Sensitivity

The central character in Footsteps is in physical jeopardy through much of the novel; both he and the reader feel real terror. But it is a terror of threatened or implied violence, without graphic depictions of assaults or cruelty. The suggested violence is clearly necessary to the plot and takes place "off stage."

The several women who appear in the novel play less important roles than the men, but women are not denigrated.

And at the end of Footsteps, William's mother shows commendable courage by tossing Uncle Turner out of the house and establishing herself as head of the family.

Footsteps presents traditional values, such as the idea that each person has individual worth, no matter what his or her station in life. Garfield emphasizes the infectious quality of goodness and the importance of finding a true moral code to which one adheres steadfastly.

The novel's encouragement of skepticism about new acquaintances seems particularly relevant in modern society.

Literary Qualities

Leon Garfield's novels have been compared, both in content and style, to those by several other important British writers, including Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, and especially Victorian novelist Charles Dickens. The gang of boy thieves in Footsteps, for instance, recalls Fagan's gang in Oliver Twist, and William's naivete suggests the gullibility of young David Copperfield.

The impediments of the British legal system, satirized so devastatingly in Dickens's Bleak House, also surface in Footsteps, as the inhabitants of Foxes Court raise obstacles for William. The law clerk Jenkins sends him a complicated letter and later disclaims it, saying that it is unsigned and therefore "ain't a legal document." Jenkins's distrust of others is explained succinctly: "Lawyers and their clerks tell so many lies that they always think everybody else is lying."

The plight of London's poor, a frequent theme of Dickens's novels, is also important in Footsteps. In a life of desperation and misery, alienated individuals cope as best they can. Mrs. Branch takes in laundry to support her children while she conducts a hopeless search for her husband, who has deserted the family; but she remains generous enough to share her soup with William. Shot-inthe-Head brings his friend William to share his dwelling, a makeshift castle built of old clothing, amidst the smokestacks and chimney pots above the city.

The lad has decorated his home with bright objects he has stolen; although some of these decorations are worth a good deal of money, Shot-in-the-Head measures their worth only in terms of beauty.

Garfield's writing style and narrative skill also reflect Dickens's influence. Although in Footsteps the writing is occasionally uneven, Garfield displays Dickens's mastery of the English language. When William runs from London Bridge and is driven like a hunted animal through streets and dark alleys by Diamond's gang, the reader feels William's fear, urgency, and weariness.

Garfield's strong narrative style and ability to choose just the right detail to paint a visual image or evoke an emotion give a real sense of involvement in the story.

Garfield uses figurative language brilliantly, as in the description of Mr. K'Nee's gloomy abode: "... that close, secretive room with its hovering shadow, like a large black hat, pulled down over Mr. Needleman's and Mr. K'Nee's eyes."

When William first confronts Shot-inthe-Head, he is met with a look that combines fear and hatred, "as if a scream had looked at me."

The novel also reflects Garfield's ear for language; people of all levels of society are clearly differentiated by their speech. When William first reaches London, he asks directions of a helpful ostler, but does not understand a word of the man's instructions:

"You wanna go dahn that way, sec'nd on yer left, then 'long Bishopsgit, right turn and 'long past Bedlam 'orspittle...." Later, by the time William encounters Shot-in-theHead, he knows enough about speech patterns of the London lower classes to understand the boy.

The novel works on several levels. Even very young readers enjoy the suspenseful adventure story, while more sophisticated readers appreciate the parallels to other coming-of-age stories and to Dickensian novels. The title Footsteps is both literal and figurative. Literally, it refers to the late-night pacing by William's father that first reveals his troubled state of mind, and also to the footsteps of enemies that follow William in his frightened rush through the city streets. Figuratively, it suggests William's journey toward maturity, his family's expectation that he will try to be a respected man like his father, and the haunting quality of the father's guilt that pursues William until he makes peace with Alfred Diamond.

Garfield's literary talent is also evident in his ability to accurately evoke a historical setting without letting his research get in the way. His powerful descriptions also help to involve and intrigue the reader, as do his creation of interesting, memorable characters and his development of a fast-paced, tight plot enlivened with wry humor. The humor is often ironic, with the central character himself not aware of the irony: "I hunched up my shoulders and tried to look as if my fine clothes were not my own, but that I'd just murdered William Jones for them, and was therefore a perfectly ordinary boy...." All these elements lend a complexity to Footsteps that offers added pleasure with each reading.

Themes and Characters

Footsteps presents a collection of memorable characters, many of whom turn out to be something other than what they at first seem. The naive and trusting main character, twelve-yearold William Jones, has led a sheltered life in a wealthy home. Other important characters include Mr. Seed, a dwarf whose hostile behavior toward people of normal size masks a warm nature; Mr. Robinson, a handsome young man with a friendly demeanor hiding a heart full of hatred; and Shot-in-the-Head, a young thief whose ragamuffin way of life conceals a love of beauty and a true code of honor.

After the death of his father, William is left with two older sisters and a mother who loves him but who succumbs to the malevolent influence of her brother, Uncle Turner. The uncle's dislike and distrust of the boy make William's life desperately unhappy. Soon, William again hears his father's footsteps, as if his ghost remains troubled. William sets out for London in search of Alfred Diamond, the former business partner, to make amends so that both he and his father's ghost may be at peace.

In the city, William encounters many people, some of whom callously refuse to help him, some of whom offer aid but do not follow through, and some of whom do help for various reasons.

Lawyer K'Nee refuses to assist William in finding Diamond, believing the latter has suffered enough from the Jones family. But K'Nee does give William the good advice that he should not trust people too much and should always keep "something in reserve." K'Nee's law clerk, Jenkins, and his porter, Mr. Seed, agree to help William, but Jenkins proves to be in partnership with Mr. Robinson, who tries to kill William. Mr. Robinson is in fact John Diamond, Alfred's son, a criminal with a hatred for all the Joneses because of the cheating incident years before. Seed charges William money for guiding him around the city and for providing him a place to stay, but he becomes genuinely interested in helping the boy. John Diamond leads a gang of boy thieves whom he sends to harm William. But one of them, Shot-in-the-Head, later proves to be a real friend, endangering his own life to save William's.

William is a child at the beginning of the novel, ready to believe anything an adult tells him. At first, he accepts without question the advice that several characters give him about people and behavior. As he gains experience, however, he realizes he must exercise his own judgment. At the book's end, William has learned that many people are eager to take advantage of a young man's gullibility. But he rejects the cynicism of Uncle Turner and K'Nee, who believe that people will not act honorably unless forced to do so by the law.

He accepts instead the belief—expressed by Mr. Seed and his own mother—that there is good in everyone.

This belief is vindicated when Shot-inthe-Head returns William's lost purse for no reason other than gratitude.

Footsteps is a coming-of-age story in which a boy becomes a man within the span of a few days, learning that not everyone is honest or genuine; that people who appear unattractive or unworthy may actually be the ones most worth knowing; that those who have the least wealth may be the most generous in sharing what they have; and that, in order to gain a friend, one must be a friend. Garfield's treatment of these familiar ideas is fresh and engaging.

Coming-of-age is an important theme in literature, found in works ranging from Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye.

William's travels in the book symbolize his moral quest, in which he moves from an unquestioning acceptance of the moral code preached to him by various older people to a secure ability to distinguish between good and evil. As he learns to make this distinction and acquires a determination to stand up for his own principles, he becomes a truly moral person.

A secondary theme of the book is the contrast between the innocence of life in the countryside or in a small town and the wickedness of life in the big city.

Although William experiences hatred and selfishness from Uncle Turner even within his small village, it is not until he reaches London that he encounters real evil. The violence of "Robinson" and his young thieves, the betrayal by Jenkins, and the readiness of many people to take advantage of a child's trust, all make London a threatening place—one that is frequently equated with Hell in Garfield's vivid description. But William also learns that some of the city's residents are good, even though the hardships of city life often force people to hide the good within themselves. When William returns to village life, it is with a deeper understanding and appreciation of people, whose generosity he had earlier taken for granted.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does William continue to hear footsteps after his father's death?

2. In chapter 1, William says, "I've often noticed that the best in me is brought out by a strong dislike, and has nothing to do with virtue at all." Does he really understand himself? Give examples.

3. When David Jones gives his watch to his son, he comments that it has cost a great deal of money. At what point does the reader understand the meaning of this statement?

4. Before his final conversation with him, William says that there is nothing false about his father. How does it affect him to learn that his father has cheated?

Does he realize the significance of his father's cheating immediately or gradually?

5. After arriving in London, William receives advice from several characters.

Who do you think gives him the best advice?

6. What are William's greatest strengths? What are his greatest weaknesses?

7. What does Mr. Robinson's song "The Miller of Dee" reveal about his character?

8. In England, Footsteps was published as John Diamond. Which do you think is the better title? Why?

9. Set in eighteenth-century London, Footsteps portrays a hero who is very naive about urban life. Do you think that a wealthy twelve-year-old American from a small town would be more or less naive about life in the city today? How does the poverty of eighteenth-century London compare to poverty in modern cities in America or other places in the world?

10. Shot-in-the-Head values the decorations that he steals for his home for their beauty rather than for their monetary worth. Does this attitude make his stealing any more or less acceptable?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some critics have pointed out the similarity of style between Garfield's novels and those of Charles Dickens, Henry Fielding, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Read a novel by one of these other writers and see how many similarities you can find in language, characters, and situations.

2. Many of the character and place names in Footsteps are symbolic, or at least suggestive, of what they represent.

For example, John Diamond, also called Jack, plays more than one role in the story, as the jack of diamonds is wild and can take any part in some card games. Think about the other names in the novel, such as Mrs. Branch, and write a paper on symbolic names in Footsteps.

3. Much of the power of Footsteps derives from the evocation of place and character through descriptive language.

Study the descriptions of both people and places, such as Mr. K'Nee, Mr. Seed, Mr. Robinson, Foxes Court, Shot-inthe-Head's rooftop home, or any other, and write a paper about Garfield's descriptive technique.

4. Garfield often describes things, places, and people through figurative language. Select some passages from the novel that use figures of speech and explain why they are effective.

5. Mr. K'Nee says that it is "the nature of boys and fools to dream of hidden treasure." How is this statement illustrated in the story? What does the statement tell you about Mr. K'Nee?

6. Mr. K'Nee claims that people are naturally bad, needing the law to keep them in order, while Mrs. Jones and Mr. Seed claim that everyone has goodness in them. Which position does the novel seem to support? Which position do you think is true in real life? Write an essay using examples from Footsteps or from real life to show the truth of one of the two positions.

7. The two positions described in question 6 have been expressed by two philosophers —Thomas Hobbes, who says man is naturally evil, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who says man is naturally good. Research either of these philosophers and write a paper presenting his main arguments in the context of Footsteps.

8. Look at the different ways in which footsteps are important in the story.

What are they? What is suggested at different points in the story by footsteps?

9. In chapter 21, William talks to one of his old schoolmates. This conversation makes William feel older. Have his experiences in the story made him older? If so, in what ways?

For Further Reference

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Children's Literature in Education 9 (Winter 1978): 159-172. This article examines individual works by Garfield, especially in terms of his major themes, style, and development as a writer.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Recurrent themes in Leon Garfield's novels include the act of searching, and the ambiguity of appearance and reality or of good and evil. Often these themes are interwoven. Adolescent heroes must determine whether the person or situation they confront is genuine or deceptive. In Jack Holborn, the title character is confronted with twin brothers, each of whose identity and genuineness is open to question. In Devil-in-the-Fog, a young hero again faces confusion between two brothers.

Smith involves its young pickpocket hero in a quest to understand a document he has stolen. Both Black Jack and Footsteps involve a search for individual identity and for true, unchanging values in a changing world. The Apprentices, a series of short novels, explores the master-apprentice relationship, with young people finding a variety of guides in their struggles to reach adulthood.

The Sound of Coaches portrays both a literal search for a boy's father and a quest for the kind of future that is right for the lad. In The December Rose, a young chimney sweep is caught up in a world of ambiguity and confusion involving warring politicians and a nation's security; the boy's quest leads him through a series of suspenseful situations before he determines which of many plausible characters is truthful.

Footsteps, under its original title of John Diamond, was made into a British television movie broadcast on BBC-TV in 1981.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996