

# **A Girl of the Limberlost Short Guide**

## **A Girl of the Limberlost by Gene Stratton Porter**

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# Characters

Elnora Comstock repeatedly compares herself with Freckles; just as he represents Porter's masculine ideal, she achieves the appropriate balance of independence and domesticity. Porter's approval is indicated by the dedication of *A Girl of the Limberlost* to her daughter, Jeannette Helen Porter.

Like the Swamp Angel in *Freckles* (1904), Elnora is not the conventional young Victorian lady. Growing up at the edge of the Limberlost Swamp has made her independent, although initially she cares more about formal education than about the knowledge to be gained from nature. Her lack of contact with Onabasha society has made her unaware of artificial social restraints, just as her mother's rejection has made her unaware of her own attractiveness. Like Freckles, Elnora possesses intelligence, and her innate nobility of character wins the respect of neighbors, schoolmates, townspeople, and even an outlaw who hides in the swamp. Elnora learns the value of a useful life; her work teaches her patience, perseverance, and self-control, while her surroundings and the insects she collects help to develop her aesthetic sense.

Elnora's mother, Kate Comstock, is slightly more complex than the other minor characters. As her resentment of Elnora gradually changes to maternal pride, Kate displays courage, ingenuity, and a lively sense of humor. The rest must be considered stock characters, however. Philip Ammon is the virtuous, handsome, and wealthy suitor whom Elnora deserves. Philip's fiancée, Edith Carr, is the spoiled and selfish rich girl, reformed through recognition of Elnora's superiority.

Wesley and Margaret Sinton are the kindhearted neighbors whose love of children leads them to befriend Elnora and adopt Billy Billings, a street urchin who develops into a lovable little boy.

## Social Concerns

In *A Girl of the Limberlost*, as in *Freckles*, a major concern is nature, especially the Limberlost Swamp. Useful outdoor work restores Philip Ammon's physical and psychological health, sharpens his social perceptions, and generally enhances his manliness. From the swamp Elnora Comstock gains an education superior to that any college can provide, and her responsibility is to persuade others of nature's importance so that the Limberlost, its creatures, and other elements of nature will be respected and preserved.

A secondary concern is self-improvement. One important tool is knowledge, but not necessarily formal education. Elnora believes high school and college will provide an escape from a dreary life, but ambition, perseverance, and hard work are really responsible for the improvements in her circumstances. Thus, Elnora embodies the work ethic, allowing Porter to comment upon the uselessness of some wealthy people, especially those women whose principal concerns are clothes and parties. Recognizing Elnora's superiority of character, the selfish and temperamental Edith Carr vows to dedicate herself to a similar life of useful work for others.

Overall, social position is distinctly less important in *A Girl of the Limberlost* than in *Freckles*. While Kate Comstock eventually discovers that she is far from poor, Elnora's virtues derive not from hereditary aristocracy, but from her determination and her work in the swamp and at school.

## Techniques

Porter again demonstrates her ability to describe nature clearly and accurately, but there is less anthropomorphism than in *Freckles*. The major emphasis in this novel is the interrelationships of the characters. The flaw of sentimentality remains, again largely the result of Porter's didactic purpose and her use of the stock situations of romantic novels, problem plays, and domestic dramas. The stereotyped characters function primarily to express the themes or to advance the plot. Once more Porter manipulates characters and plot, using coincidence excessively; nevertheless, the plot is complex and interesting, despite the overt didacticism.

# Themes

In *A Girl of the Limberlost*, even more explicitly than in *Freckles*, nature is seen as a direct manifestation of God's power, and appreciation of nature as a form of worship. Like nature, love is seen as a softening and ennobling influence. Edith Carr is changed by the devotion of Hart Henderson, and her reformation is evidenced when she notifies Philip of Elnora's whereabouts and delivers the *Eacles imperialis* moth to Elnora.

Also important is the code of proper behavior. Despite the harshness of Elnora's life, she helps the Billings children. Regardless of the difficulties she encounters, she never wavers in her commitment to her duty: She continues to show respect for her mother, even though she receives almost no affection in return; and when she is told she can cancel her teaching contract and attend college, she chooses instead to honor the contract. Elnora repeatedly demonstrates both physical and moral courage; she goes alone into the Limberlost in search of the moths to finance her education, and she returns to high school after her humiliation the day before. While Elnora possesses many qualities desirable in both men and women, she also illustrates a good woman's moral superiority to even the best of men.

A secondary theme is a mother's responsibilities. Kate Comstock is condemned by her neighbors, and implicitly by Porter, because she does not encourage Elnora's ambitions, prepare her for the social and financial problems she will encounter, or provide money for tuition, textbooks, and an adequate wardrobe. Edith Carr's mother is even more negligent, however, because she fails in the proper molding of her daughter's character; thus, Edith is spoiled, temperamental, and frivolous.

Kate Comstock also illustrates the futility of grief and revenge. For twenty years her obsession with her husband's death stifles any affection for Elnora, but eventually Kate realizes the significance of this second, self-inflicted, loss when she learns of his unfaithfulness.

# Adaptations

Displeased with Paramount Pictures' movie of Freckles, Porter formed her own production company, which released movie adaptations of Michael O'Halloran, A Girl of the Limberlost, Laddie, The Keeper of the Bees, The Magic Garden, The Harvester, and one of the three versions of Freckles. In all, more than twenty films have been based upon Porter's novels.

## Literary Precedents

In characters and plot, *A Girl of the Limberlost* is akin to stage melodrama, and the themes of parental responsibility and proper education of children occur in contemporary domestic dramas and problem plays. The novel's combination of detailed descriptions of nature with didactic purpose and moralistic tone is reminiscent of James Lane Allen's *A Kentucky Cardinal* (1968) and the philosophy of courageous optimism is similar to that of novels by Eleanor H. Porter, Kate Douglas Wiggin, and Alice Hegan Rice.





## Related Titles

In the dedication of *The Harvester* (1911) Porter wrote, "This portion of the life of a man of to-day is offered in the hope that in cleanliness, poetic temperament, and mental force, a likeness will be seen to Henry David Thoreau." Thus she identified the novel's primary social concerns: purity of life and appreciation of nature. David Langston's character is the product of his mother's moral teachings and his life in the woods; so his message to the medical convention concerns both his new medicine and the role of immorality in causing disease.

Because it helps to develop morality, nature should be cherished. Although David will destroy a plant to save a human life, he attempts to preserve endangered species, and he harvests wild plants sparingly. He is essentially a conservationist; but, more than Thoreau, he resembles Porter's friend, Theodore Roosevelt.

A major theme of *The Harvester* is the healing power of nature. For Ruth Jameson a concoction of herbs gathered in the woods brings restoration of physical health, and another herbal potion is similarly effective for her grandmother. The natural setting also provides peace and psychological restoration after unpleasant experiences in the city.

A romantic novel, *The Harvester* also emphasizes the regenerative power of love; Ruth's life is literally saved by David's devotion. His search for her prevents her death from physical exhaustion, his medicine breaks her fever, and his determination inspires her to struggle for survival. Likewise, his kindness restores her emotional wellbeing.

All the characters are disappointingly flat. David Langston resembles Thoreau only superficially: he chooses to live in the woods and gather medicinal herbs instead of living in the city and earning a reputation as a healer; therefore his neighbors consider him lazy, crude, and perhaps a bit crazy. The novel's emphasis, however, is upon David's courtship of Ruth, and generally he is Porter's conventional, worthy gentleman suitor. Ruth Jameson, the least independent of the Porter heroines, exists primarily as a victim for David to rescue and an ideal for him to adore. The minor characters are also stereotyped: Granny Moreland is David's kindly neighbor and surrogate mother, Dr. Carey his loyal and helpful friend, Dr. Harmon the idealistic young healer, and Alexander Herron the crotchety old man who searches for his errant daughter and welcomes his granddaughter.

*The Harvester's* romantic plot tends to overshadow its extensive nature description, which the author justifies by having David instruct Ruth about various useful and harmful plants. Ruth's physical and financial problems are treated melodramatically and sentimentally. The plot moves more slowly than those of other *Limberlost* novels; much of the action revolves around David's search for the Dream Girl, his preparation of his home, and his wait for her return. Although less complex, the plot frequently turns upon coincidence, such as David's sending Mrs. Jameson's photograph to the same detective agency Mr. Herron had hired to find his daughter.



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