

The Ghost-Maker Short Guide

The Ghost-Maker by Kathleen Kilgore

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Overview

The Ghost-Maker is rich in significant human themes, including growing up, the problems of children with divorced parents, truth and lying, conformity and rebellion, loyalty and betrayal.

These ideas are also developed in a tense, suspenseful narrative, focused on the teenager, Lee, who finds himself alone and lonely in the alien world of a community of retired senior citizens. The adjustment problems of Lee, a child of divorced parents, are set in the context of a mysterious world of spiritual charlatans, people who prey on the credulity of others and who make their careers out of deliberate but ingenious fraud. In this novel the author takes the realistic plight of a teenaged victim of parental separation and combines it with a sometimes hair-raising narrative of fraudulent "ghost makers," individuals who practice a clever con-game by pretending to produce palpable images of the departed. The characterization is strong, and the overall realism of the adolescent's family problems set in the context of sophisticated carnival style fraud. The realism is enhanced by the lively dialogue, with its colloquialisms, its convincing conversational tone, and its correlation with character.

About the Author

Born in 1946 in Washington, D.C., Kathleen Kilgore spent part of her childhood in nearby Chevy Chase, Maryland, and part of it in Geneva, Switzerland, where she served as translator for her father, a delegate to the General Agreements on Tariff and Trade. She later moved to Boston, married, and became involved in politics.

In 1986 she took charge of Children's Centers, Inc., a social service agency.

An active writer, she has published articles and stories in several magazines and newspapers, including Yankee, Phoenix, New Englander, and the Boston Herald-American. In addition to her novels for young adults, she has been working on a novel about Vietnamese-Americans, as a result of adopting a fourteen-year old refugee from Vietnam in 1981.

Setting

The novel is set in a small town in Florida, near Orlando, based on a real town visited by the author who learned that the residents made their living as psychics. The town had been founded a century ago by a group of spiritualists. In a larger sense, the setting is simply Florida, a landscape very different from Lee's home in Maryland. The details are vivid, including the drone of crickets and tree frogs, the rustling of palmetto trees, and the smell of sweet olives. Within this exotic (to Lee) Florida setting is the retirement community that his grandmother lives in, Palmetto Point. Not only alien but downright hostile, the sheltered environment is oppressive for the youngster, already feeling depressed over being expelled from school for a prank. More exotic yet and decidedly more menacing is the setting of the seances held by the fake psychics. Described in considerable detail, the seances are convincing to their audiences, but Lee learns the tricks of the trade. For a time his life vacillates between the stifling environment of the retirement community and the exciting milieu of the carnivalesque performers who create the seeming materialization of spirits.



Social Sensitivity

Kilgore treats several social issues with great sensitivity. The protagonist, Lee, is the child of parents getting a divorce. Although it disrupts his life, in the sense that he has to move in with his grandmother temporarily, it is not presented as in any way a crucial blow to his adolescent stage of development. Throughout the novel he frequently recalls both parents, never with either malice or indifference, and at the end, he is again with his father, for how long we are not told, nor does it seem to matter. At once sad and matter-of-fact about the situation, Lee is able and determined to move ahead with his own life. Since both parents keep in touch with him, the reader receives no distractingly partial point of view.

The author also sensitively deals with the subject of old age through the character of Lee's grandmother. Her own decision to move into a life-care community is entirely practical, and she is never represented as in any way pathetic or self-pitying. Aged eightytwo, she is still very independent. She drives her own car, keeps her own house, and prepares meals for Lee and herself. Her conversation is always clear, and she discusses a number of her own interests. Her vulnerability to the ghost-makers is no different from that of many other individuals in attendance at the seances, and is in no way a manifestation of mere age. She has simply lost someone dear to her and is grateful for the opportunity to communicate with him from the other world.

The subject of religion is dealt with sensitively as well. The grandmother explains to Lee that although she is still a Christian, she no longer attends the Episcopal Church but instead has joined a Spiritualist congregation. She points out that there were spiritualist sittings in the White House when Lincoln was president, and that many famous people, including Arthur Conan Doyle, shared these beliefs. She firmly rejects Lee's reference to the religion as a "cult." The people who attend the meetings when the spirits appear are depicted as genuine Christians. They turn out to be vastly misled, but they are not treated as idiosyncratic or irrational individuals. Kilgore carefully avoids suggesting that communication with the spirits of the departed is not possible. Her story is about fake psychics, but the concept of the psychic medium is never slandered.

The author subtly leaves the question of spirits open. In this story of fake ghost-makers, Lee actually sees a ghost fleetingly on two occasions. Once was in the past, when he thought he saw his grandfather at the airport terminal; he started to wave at him but suddenly remembered that he was too ill to be there at that time. It was only later that he learned that his grandfather was actually dead by that time.

Similarly, at the end of the novel, Lee thinks he sees the silhouette of May, again raises his hand to wave goodbye, then recalls that she is supposedly in intensive care. This, too, is at the airport, and noting Lee's pale look, his father asks him if he has seen a ghost.



The careful reader will recall May's promise to Lee, assuring him that if the dead do really return in spirit, she will appear to him. Is she really dead? Is it her spirit that Lee sees? The reader is free to speculate.

Literary Qualities

While *The Ghost-Maker* is an extremely suspenseful tale, it is by no means merely an exciting story. The author uses several literary techniques which enhance the reading experience on many levels. First, as is clear from the explicit and detailed seance scenes, the author has done considerable research into the elaborate techniques used by actual psychics. Both their own prior research into their clients' personal lives and their sophisticated technology used in the sessions are fascinatingly described. The author's rich style also does justice to the subjects at hand. Those ghostly scenes are readily visualized because of the precise language. The author's style succeeds not merely in these evocative scenes but also throughout the novel. She has an eye for the specific detail, whether describing a boat dock, a fishing scene, a character's clothing, or Florida plantlife. Similarly, the dialogue is both realistic and matched with the personality of the speaker.

Another technique the author uses with startling effectiveness is Lee's sudden memory of a nightmare, which interrupts the narrative because the narration itself is from his own point of view, abruptly shifting the narrative's tone. The device adds depth to his characterization. Although the story is not related in the first person, it represents Lee's point of view throughout most of the events. There is a balance between objective and subjective narration.



Themes and Characters

The central character is Lee, a teenaged boy whose parents have recently decided on a divorce and have sent their son off to Florida to live with his grandmother. Lee is an essentially likable and sympathetic boy although by no means idealized. He was expelled from school for throwing a cherry bomb in the toilet in the principal's office. He is, however, extremely considerate of his grandmother and quite determined to be an adult about his new living arrangement. Unfortunately for him, the retirement community is not designed for the younger generation, so that he finds himself not only bored but actually shunned and even feared. When he quite by chance meets an older woman who is a retired psychic, he is intrigued by the opportunity she offers him for something interesting to do. When the enterprise is revealed as fraudulent, he faces a number of difficult and very adult decisions. The thematic core of the novel is thus the coming-of-age of an adolescent.

Closely interwoven with Lee's maturation are several other major themes.

One concerns the problems and conflicts of the elderly. Lee's grandmother, an appealing and convincingly realistic character, has also had to make tough decisions. Eighty-two years old, she has surrendered her home and moved into the retirement community both for her own protection and to save her family possible expense. A complex character, she is not at all sentimentalized. Because her own son committed suicide years ago, she is a natural victim of the phony psychics who purport to communicate with the spirits of the dead. On the whole, however, she is a very independent woman. She drives a 3242 The Ghost-Maker car, keeps house and prepares meals, and is not at all perturbed at the prospect of having her teen-aged grandson around the house.

A very different example of age is May (Mabel Morgan), whose business card identifies her as a psychic counselor who gives private readings, but she tells Lee that she is actually retired. When she first meets the boy, she seems friendly and invites him to her house, but when at a later point in the novel he challenges her to reveal the fraud, she pulls a gun on him and orders him out. The dichotomy in her nature persists, as she calls him "Honey" and teaches him her trade, while at the same time she is tough minded and rough spoken in her determination to make him a colleague in her lucrative practice. The contrast between the two older women is revealed in her remark about her age: "I sure ain't gonna last like your grandma. I'm not complaining, mind you. I've had a better time than she's had. And if I don't go quick, I got my thirty-eight." May's fate at the end of the novel is ambiguous, as we last see her weakened by running and having chest pains. Before leaving, Lee learns that she is in intensive care, but Grandma is still fine at the end.

The theme of fraudulent deception is of major significance. The two main exponents of the phony psychic practices are May, who befriends Lee, and Eric Sandor, who is much more sinister. Since Lee works for May, he is directly implicated, and his shifting attitude toward his own behavior is central to his maturing. The author's treatment of the theme



is in no way simplistic. Just as May herself is at once both likable and frightening, so the psychic fraud is not offered as a totally evil scheme. Although the fraud schemes take advantage of some of the most vulnerable people, like Lee's grandmother, they also fulfill a basic need for these same people. Even though it is not actually the ghost of her son whom she encounters in the fake seance, Grandma is blissful in the thought that she has indeed heard his voice. The psychic fakes make much money (nontaxable since they are a religion, i.e., spiritualism) from their victims, but it is not extortion, merely fraudulent persuasion. On the other hand, the new practitioner in town, Eric Sandor, seems much more ominous in his plans to take over the lucrative "business." Through him we get a decidedly more disturbing image of the whole game of technological ghostmaking.

Through Sandor one more character is introduced, his daughter and helper Thuy, a slight person who impresses Lee as more victim than victimizer, but who turns out to be a tough opponent, armed with a switch blade. Lee tries to extricate her from the fraud, but she remains loyal to her father. The issue of loyalty versus betrayal concerns her as well as other characters in the novel.



Topics for Discussion

1. Does Lee seem to have a close relationship with either of his parents? If so, which one? How do we know?
2. Although Lee clearly cares about his grandmother, he is nonetheless unhappy living with her in the retirement home. What factors make him so unhappy? To what extent is it his own fault?
3. Do you blame Lee for working for and accepting money from a group he knows to be fraudulent? Why does he do it?
4. Lee is grateful for May's friendship, but is there any sincerity in May's professed concern for Lee? How can you tell?
5. How do you as reader find yourself reacting to the character of May?
Do you like her? Hate her? Fear her?
Or do you have mixed feelings? If so, what are they?
6. What ultimately makes Lee feel guilty about his job with the psychics?
7. Why does Thuy remain loyal to her adoptive father, even though she knows he is dishonest?
8. Does the conclusion of the novel seem too abrupt? What is left unexplained?
9. What role does Hank, "hubby number three," play in the novel?
10. How does the (probable) death of May fit into the overall theme? How do you react when you learn about her apparent heart attack?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who are the evil characters in the novel? In what ways are they evil? Do they harm other people?
2. Although the author is dealing with fraudulent people only pretending to contact the world of spirits, she never asserts that such contact is not possible. Is there any evidence in the book that spirits do return after death?
3. What does Lee gain from his experience with May and the others in her operation? Do you think he will behave better in school when he returns home with his father?
4. How often and for what purpose does the author use dreams in her narrative?
5. Critics have noted that the ending of the novel may leave some readers feeling disturbed. Why is this so? Do you find it disturbing? If so, how?
6. What are the differences between May and her new rival, Eric Sandor? Why does he seem ominous?

For Further Reference

Flowers, Ann C. "The Ghost-Maker."

Horn Book 60 (June 1984): 339. This reviewer notes several strong points about the novel. Structurally the threads of other stories that cut across the main narrative and the often abrupt transitions heighten the tension and suspense. She also cites the fascinating details of the seances and the artful writing as features which help make the book "compelling" reading.

Mitchell, Judith N. "The Ghost-Maker."

Voice of Youth Advocates 7 (February 1985): 327. The reviewer praises the multi-dimensional characterization in the novel and also notes the author's use of nuance to achieve mood and atmosphere. She observes that the book never reaches any conclusion about the validity of psychic experience.

Stevenson, Drew. "The Ghost-Maker."

School Library Journal 30 (May 1984): 103. This reviewer is favorably impressed with the novel, which has both strong characterization and vivid description. He also notes its unusual effect on readers, in that it leaves them "feeling more than a little uneasy at the end."

Related Titles

In *The Wolfman of Beacon Hill*, Kilgore again offers a sympathetic portrayal of a troubled teenage boy. In this novel the lonely boy's problems in Boston are paralleled with the sufferings of a wolf who has escaped from the city zoo. The boy and the wolf are depicted in the urban setting with great sensitivity.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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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

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