

The Guardian of Isis Short Guide

The Guardian of Isis by Monica Hughes

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Overview

The Guardian of Isis is an initiation story in which the central character, Jody N'Kumo, must prove himself through a series of adventures in which intelligence, logical deduction, and mature judgment are as important as physical courage. Although he belongs to the third generation of settlers, Jody usually is treated like a disobedient child, frequently being rebuked for questioning, and even disregarding, the community's rules. He particularly violates the ban on inventing devices to make work easier. Jody knows that his independent nature makes him unpopular, and he realizes he is especially disliked by Mark London, the virtual dictator of the settlement and a brother of Jody's deceased grandmother, Carrie. Jody's only support comes from the grandfather for whom he is named; however, disillusionment and physical disabilities have caused Jody's grandfather to withdraw from active participation in governing the community, even though he remains a member of the council.

Initially Jody thinks he is hated because his rebelliousness embarrasses London, but eventually he discovers that London actually hates the elder Jody. The grandson is singled out for persecution because he looks and acts too much like his grandfather, the only person in the settlement who knows the truth about London and the only member of the governing council willing to stand up to him. As part of his vendetta, London arranges to have Jody selected as one of the four bearers of the sacred offering to the Guardian; Jody knows that the path to the Room of the Offering is extremely dangerous, and he realizes London hopes he will fall and be killed.

Shortly thereafter, when Jody's routine scrutiny of the Cascades leads to his discovery of a "gift" from the Guardian, London appears to reward him in the traditional way by assigning him the next vigil in Sacred Cave; however, as London assumed he would, Jody violates the traditions of the Sacred Cave when he determines that a previous "gift" is actually a new tube for the cave's light system. Jody then deduces that all the "gifts" are intended to serve some useful purpose.

Overheard telling his friend Tannis about his discovery, Jody is summoned before the Council. Since he has already warned the Council about the rising water levels in the valley, the Council reluctantly agrees when London sends him on mission to seek the Guardian and find out how to save the settlement; all of them realize the assignment is a virtual death sentence since the Old Woman (also known as the Ugly One) is sure to seize him.

Tension builds as Jody struggles through a long, difficult, uphill journey to the home of the Guardian, the Lady Olwen, and the beast Hobbit. There Jody's education continues as he learns how London has distorted the truth.

Although he literally accomplishes his mission and saves the settlement, Jody realizes that claiming credit for this feat would jeopardize his real mission: to reinvent technology and gradually educate his people. Thus a more mature and less confrontational Jody

returns to the settlement, knowing that someday he will succeed Mark London and that he will be a totally different kind of leader.



About the Author

Monica Ince Hughes, the daughter of Phyllis (Fry) and Edward Lindsay Ince, was born in Liverpool, England, on November 3, 1925. Before she was a year old, her father became head of the Mathematics Department at the University of Cairo, so the family moved to Egypt. When Monica and her sister reached school age, the Inces returned to London, and the girls were enrolled in the Notting Hill and Ealing High School, a private girls' school whose students were taken on frequent field trips to the British Museum, where Monica became fascinated by the development of language and the resulting power of storytellers over their audience.

Equally enthralling to the young girl were the books and stellar observations she shared with her father, an avid amateur astronomer. Her mother's accounts of the 1910 appearance of Halley's Comet increased Monica's interest in astronomy and helped to develop her narrative skill, but discovery of Jules Verne's novels focused her interest on science fiction. Her reading of adventure novels and the classics also influenced her writing.

Monica Hughes did not at first consider a career as a writer. After further schooling at the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus (Harrogate, Yorkshire) and a year at Edinburgh University, Hughes served in the Women's Royal Navy Service during World War II. She held a variety of other jobs, including dress designer in London (1948-1949) and in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (1950), bank clerk in Umtali, Zimbabwe (1951), and laboratory technician for the National Research Council in Ottawa, Canada (1952-1957). While Hughes acknowledges that many of her personal experiences find their way indirectly into her fiction, certainly her frequent discussions with her associates at the National Research Council must have increased her knowledge about outer space and ultimately helped direct her toward the writing of science fiction. In 1957, Monica married Glen Hughes, and soon they settled in Edmonton, Alberta. When the youngest of her four children entered school, Hughes began writing an adult novel which, almost on a whim, she soon abandoned to write young adult fiction.

Hughes's fiction has earned her many awards: Canada Council Children's Literature Prize (1981, 1982); Vicky Metcalf Award (for body of work—1981 and for short story—1983); Alberta Culture Juvenile Novel Award (1981); Bay's Beaver Award (1981); IBBY Certificate of Honour (1982); Special Libraries Association Young Adult Award (1983); runner-up for Guardian Award (1983); Young Adult Canadian Book Award (1983); Alberta R. Ross Annett Award from the Writers Guild of Alberta (1983, 1984, 1986); Hans Christian Andersen Award nomination (1984); Silver Feather Award (Germany, 1985); and Alberta Achievement Award, Excellence Category (1986). In addition, the American Library Association has named two of her novels as best books for young adults (*The Keeper of the Isis Light*—1981 and *Hunter in the Dark*—1983), and *The Keeper of the Isis Light* was included in the honor list of the International Board on Books for Young People (1982).

Although she acknowledges that she still misses the sea, Hughes continues to live in Edmonton, Alberta, and to write young adult novels which she classifies as science fiction. In her spare time, she weaves, gardens, takes long walks.

Setting

The *Guardian of Isis* is set in Earth year A.D. 2136—a time approximately four generations after refugees from Earth settled on the planet Isis, the fourth planet of the F-type star Ra in the constellation Indus—in real space, five parsecs from Earth. The settlers are quarantined; beginning soon after their arrival, a message has been beamed into space, warning all ships not to disturb this "original Earth population in Primitive Agricultural Phase." The novel opens in the spring, on "Thanksgiving Day," which commemorates the day of the settlers' arrival in their spaceship, Pegasus Two.



Social Sensitivity

In this novel, Hughes addresses various concerns, but the most important of these is the way individual people, and society as a whole, treat people who in some way differ from the norm.

Mark London's attitude toward Olwen is perhaps the most obvious example.

Olwen says he loved the mask she wore; when she removed that mask, he found her actual appearance repulsive because it was unlike anything he considered human. Considering only her physical appearance, he rejected her.

Even worse, despising himself for having been attracted to her, he continues to hate her for being attractive. Undoubtedly, had Olwen looked like the settlers, Mark's pride and superficiality would not have been revealed so quickly.

Mark London's attitude toward Jody reflects a similar rejection of one who is physically different, but it also raises the question of the autocratic ruler versus the nonconformist. London has convinced the Council of Seven and most of the other settlers to accept his version of reality; even Jody's grandfather has ceased to actively oppose London's dictatorial rules and senseless taboos. Jody is the Thoreauesque independent thinker who will not blindly follow the colony's traditions; and his observations, reasoning, and actions save the colony from destruction.

Several other social concerns are raised, although not fully developed.

The most significant of these is the role of technology in society. The lives of the Isis settlers are made considerably more difficult by their almost total rejection of technology. For instance, because no one is allowed to learn about the light and the radio, the colony has lost all contact with Olwen and Guardian, and thus also with the outside world. Olwen's suggestion that this attitude is a response to the terrible conditions they left behind on Earth introduces the ecology theme—the humans' abuse of their home planet.

The role of women, likewise, remains merely an underlying issue, although early in the novel Jody wonders about their apparent loss of status since the Beginning Time. No women sit in the governing council; in fact, no longer are women even allowed to eat with the men. Their chief functions are cooking, serving, and child-rearing. In contrast, the strength and wisdom of Olwen—and her mother before her—suggest that women once were considered valuable members of society.

Literary Qualities

Hughes is known for the meticulous research which precedes the writing of each of her novels. As a result, the settings and situations are believable extensions of those which now exist on Earth. The plot holds the reader's interest, using suspense rather than graphic violence. Hughes's major characters are entirely credible. For example, despite his many admirable qualities, Jody possesses his share of flaws. He is observant and smart, but he knows how clever he is and he wants others to know it too. He is practical, but he feels scorn toward those who acquiesce more readily and learn more slowly.

He is brave and self-reliant, but he is also frightened by the dangerous mission he must undertake. This makes Jody a believably human character with whom readers can identify.

Because the novel is Jody's story, told from Jody's point of view, Olwen and Guardian are less fully developed.

If there is a weakness in their characterization, it is that Hughes tells the reader of Jody's immediate admiration for Olwen but does not show how or why that admiration came to be. Likewise, Mark London's villainous actions seem inadequately motivated; enmity that has lasted for nearly fifty years needs more explanation. Other characters—for instance, Jody's grandfather, the keepers of the sacred cave, and the council members—are perhaps too sketchily drawn; and young Tannis Bodnar initially seems destined to be a significant romantic interest, but Hughes and Jody seem to forget about her once Jody leaves the valley.

Overall, *The Guardian of Isis* is well written. Although Hughes has been criticized for too little use of dialogue, the characters' language is neither stilted nor slangy. Olwen's way of speaking, Guardian's way of speaking, and Jody's way of speaking are all different, and each seems appropriate to the character. Moreover, Hughes manages to convey significant themes without overt didacticism; the reader is likely to think seriously about the novel long after the last page has been read.



Themes and Characters

The Guardian of Isis is the story of a young boy whose courage, determination, and self-reliance enable him to overcome formidable obstacles and begin to become a man. From the beginning, Jody senses the importance of self-discipline; in training himself to scale the Cascades, he is exercising a kind of self-discipline. He must learn to exercise that same kind of self-control in his words and actions. He must learn the duty he owes his fellow colonists, to accept responsibility for their welfare as well as his own. He must learn when to value the wisdom of his elders and when to insist upon obtaining the knowledge necessary to adapt to new situations. In addition, he must learn to be patient with the ignorance and slow progress of his society. Jody considers his return to the surface—after he has planted the dynamite—a rebirth, but in fact the entire adventure is essentially this boy's rebirth into maturity.

A secondary theme is Jody's role as a misfit isolated by his insistence upon truth instead of myth and rationality instead of conformity. Jody's independence brings him into conflict with the colony's laws. Circumstances and his own reactions force him to make a series of decisions, most of which test the limits of his physical courage, and all of which help to define his character.

Another significant theme, although one less overtly developed, is the corrupting effects of pride, ambition, and bitterness. Mark London's bitter hatred causes him to continue living in the past, a mistake which Olwen has not made. He rejected her because his pride would not allow him to love a woman whose physical appearance does not conform to the colonists' standards. He lied about her treatment of him because the story he told made him seem heroic to the other settlers.

His enduring bitterness toward her is the culmination of a series of deceits which began with Guardian's well-intentioned insistence that Olwen mask her actual appearance. This cycle of falsehood is not broken until Jody learns the truth about Olwen and so can begin to restore her reputation.

A striking contrast to London's hatred of Olwen is Guardian's devotion to her. Although initially he was merely a robot programmed to raise the five-year-old child, Guardian has fully accepted this responsibility, and he has been humanized by his concern for Olwen's welfare. In this respect he differs markedly from Jody's grandfather, who has used illness and rejection as excuses to withdraw from the struggle to show his fellow citizens the truth.

The novel's protagonist, Jody N'Kumo, is the youngest Third (third generation of the settlers) and a grandson of the youngest First, with whom he shares not only a name, but personality traits and physical appearance as well.

He is of east African ancestry. Because Hughes relates the entire experience from Jody's point of view, the emphasis is upon his personality rather than his appearance. Jody seems to be always in trouble, probably because he does not automatically accept



the traditions of the settlement. Instead he thinks for himself, and he readily says what he thinks. An observant and logical person, he frequently questions the community's rules, and he openly expresses his disagreement with them.

He particularly violates the ban on inventing devices to make work more efficient, and he intends to defy the taboo against leaving the valley where the settlement is located. Jody knows that his independent nature makes him unpopular, and he realizes he is especially disliked by Mark London, the virtual dictator of the settlement and a brother of Jody's deceased grandmother, Carrie.

On the other hand, because the other settlers treat him almost as an outsider, Jody has developed a remarkable degree of self-reliance and persistence.

Since he wants to explore the taboo parts of the planet, he is conditioning his body by climbing a little farther up the Cascades each day. That training enable him to survive his mission to the interior of Isis.

Olwen Pendennis, the Keeper of the Isis Light on Lighthouse Mesa, now lives in the Bamboo Valley, deep in the interior highlands of the planet, but originally she and Guardian lived in Cascade Valley, the only part of the planet where humans can survive without life-support equipment. Having never experienced human contact prior to the arrival of Pegasus Two, Olwen was unprepared to deal with the settlers, and especially with a young man only a year older than she. Even though Guardian insisted that in the settlers' presence she always wear an opaque mask and a spacesuit covering her entire body, Olwen did not anticipate their rejection of her.

Olwen's physical appearance is more reptilian than human; Guardian has altered her body to enable her to survive in Isis's hostile atmosphere. Her broad, unlined face with its wide nostrils and thick lips is very much like Jody's, but she blinks like a reptile, her nails are curved like claws, her "deep and iridescent bronzy-green" skin is scaly, and her forehead is "strangely shaped and bumpy." In contrast her long, thick, wavy silver hair is beautiful. Even more beautiful are her "brilliantly deeply blue" eyes which to Jody seem to be "more beautiful, intelligent, more alive than the eyes of any person or creature he had ever seen." Her eyes reveal Olwen's human origins.

Olwen possesses the technology which the settlers have likewise rejected, possibly because of the terrible conditions they left behind on Earth.

Once full of anger and impatience, Olwen has learned forgiveness and patience. Repeatedly she has tried to help the colonists and to warn them of dangers, but each time the colonists have failed to hear or to understand her message, instead regarding her as a witchlike enemy. While London's lies were the primary source of this fear and hostility, Olwen is too wise and too generous to place the entire blame upon him; she insists she too was partly to blame because she misled him by concealing her true appearance. Forgiving the settlers' rejection, she remains eager to help the colony.

Initially Guardian was Dacop 43, merely a data collector and processor, but Olwen's dying mother reprogrammed him to care for her five-yearold daughter. Like the



computer in Hughes's *The Tomorrow City*, Guardian has made logical changes in Olwen's appearance; however, lacking human emotions, Guardian cannot anticipate the settlers' reaction to her. Given his general appearance—"immensely tall, limned with silver-gold light" and his crystalline eyes—it is not surprising that the settlers worship him as much as they fear Olwen. During his long association with Olwen and observation of the colony, Guardian has learned much about human nature. It is he who tells Jody the truth about the early days of the colony and explains why only Jody can plant the dynamite to save the settlers. Guardian also eases Jody's fear by showing the young man that this adventure is essentially a rite of passage: had the N'Kumo people remained in East Africa on the planet Earth, by the time he was twelve Jody would have been a lion-killer and so would have faced death and conquered fear.

Guardian, as Hughes's spokesman, emphasizes the theme that life is a series of infinite choices, provided that the individual's mind is free. He reassuringly prophesies that eventually leadership of the colony will pass to the person with the "boldest, clearest vision." Thus, he insists that Jody's role in saving the settlers must not be known to any of them; this secrecy will reduce the chance that Jody will fall prey to London's pride and sense of personal superiority. Moreover, as Guardian wisely observes, the facts that Jody can reveal, that he has been to the top of Isis, spoken to the Shining One, and faced That Old Woman, these should be enough, because the re-education of the settlers must be a gradual process.

A physically impressive old man with shoulder-length white hair and a glistening beard, Mark London has gained political control of the colony, primarily because of the myth which has developed from accounts of his youthful adventures. Once, near the Beginning Time, London left the valley and climbed to the forbidden mesa known as Lighthouse Mesa. There he encountered The Ugly One (now called That Old Woman) with her equally fierce and evil beast, but his life was saved by the Guardian of Isis, also known as the Shining One. As Jody eventually discovers, London has never told the entire story of his relationship with Olwen, whom he has caused the colonists to equate with evil and death.

Pride and resentment have hardened London, causing him to hate both Olwen and the elder Jody, who as a young boy followed London to the mesa, met Olwen, and was the one actually rescued by Guardian. Moreover, London's inability to accept people different from himself extends also to those of other races; certainly he seems to resent his sister's marriage to the elder Jody.



Topics for Discussion

1. Even though Jody's family ties would seem likely to make him very much a part of his community, he is essentially a rebel and misfit. What advantage does his position as an outsider give him in seeing and evaluating his community's taboos?
2. Does Jody bring some of his problems upon himself? Short of completely abandoning his principles, how could he have avoided some of the conflicts he encounters?
3. Why is Jody able to survive his ascent into Isis's interior high country?

Which of these factors also will eventually make him a good leader for the colonists?

4. Why is Jody the only character capable of saving the settlement? Aside from the physical limitations of the other characters, does Hughes have a thematic reason for creating a problem only Jody can solve?
5. Why does Hughes create a central character who is twelve years old?

How would the novel be different if he were older or younger?

6. Although some of the original Isis colonists are still alive, most of the community's adults are second and third generation inhabitants. In the time that the settlers have lived on Isis, they have developed a set of cultural myths and taboos, largely abandoning the culture they have left behind. What does their experience tell the reader about the way such myths and taboos develop? Is their experience in any way parallel to that of settlers who established the U.S. and Canadian societies?

7. Much early science fiction involved a Utopian future in which space settlers established an ideal society on a remote planet, even though the physical environment there might be difficult. Hughes's settlers, instead, reject almost all technology and so revert to a primitive culture in which humanistic values are also lost. Does Hughes more accurately portray human nature, or does she primarily reflect the pessimism of a generation that experienced two world wars?

8. Although Mark London is actually only one member of the Council of Seven, he has become the virtual ruler of the Isis colony because most of the others will not challenge him on any issue. Why do they so easily accept whatever he says? Are they also responsible for the intellectual and moral decline of the colony? Is their behavior true to human nature? When Jody's punishment is being determined by the council, his grandfather attends the meeting for the first time in years. Is the elder Jody also partially responsible for the colony's decline? Even though he is hampered by his physical limitations and his frustrations in dealing with London, has Jody made a serious mistake in withdrawing from the governing of the colony?

9. To a large extent, the myths and taboos of Isis represent distortions of truth and logical rules. What has caused the colonists to worship the Guardian and to consider



Olwen the embodiment of evil and death? Is this the way such myths and taboos usually develop? What old wives' tales and modern urban myths have developed in the same way?

10. Hughes uses Jody's point of view to tell her story. Why did she not use an all-knowing narrative voice? How would the novel have been different if the reader knew more than Jody does?

What problems would Hughes have encountered if she had chosen another character as her narrator? What would be the major differences in theme, incidents, and narrative structure?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. *The Guardian of Isis* is the second novel in a series which also includes *The Keeper of the Isis Light* and *The Isis Pedlar*. Read one or both of the other novels in this series and compare the way a character is portrayed in two of the novels. *The Guardian* appears in all three novels; you could explain how he changes in the approximately ninety years covered by the three books.

2. Monica Hughes has said her interest in science fiction was first aroused when she read the novels of Jules Verne. Read one of Verne's novels, and point out similarities and differences in the characters, plots, or themes. In particular, determine whether Hughes and Verne agree about technology's effects upon a society.

3. Monica Hughes's descriptions of the bleak landscape on remote planets supposedly are drawn from her original impressions of the isolated countryside surrounding her Alberta home.

Using various library references, describe the Canadian province of Alberta. You may also want to consider the changes that have taken place there since the 1950s.

4. Monica Hughes does not tell us what happened when Jody actually returned to the valley. Write a concluding chapter in which Jody reports to Mark London and the Council. Remember, though, that he cannot tell them of his role in saving the settlement.

5. Space exploration became a major U.S. priority during the administration of President John Kennedy. Consult library references, and learn about some of the difficulties and successes in the early days of the U.S. space program.

6. Phyllis Fry Ince told her young daughter Monica many stories about the 1910 appearance of Halley's Comet.

Using history reference sources, try to reconstruct some stories you think Mrs. Ince might have told. Was the American reaction to the comet different from that in England?

7. Perhaps some of the stories in today's newspapers someday will inspire a science fiction writer. Choose one story—for example, the Hubbell telescope, the Mars probe, or the Challenger explosion—and learn all you can about what happened and the way people felt about those events. Write either a factual report or a story which you might tell your children. Remember that Monica Hughes always researches her subject carefully before she writes fiction.

8. Read a novel by another writer of speculative fiction—for example, Isaac Asimov or Ursula Le Guin. Write an essay in which you point out similarities and differences in characters, settings, themes, and plots.



9. Not all of Hughes's novels are set on remote planets. Some deal with historical eras (such as *Gold-Fever Trail*), psychological issues (such as *Hunter in the Dark* and *My Name Is Paula Popowich*), or cultural conflicts (such as *The Ghost Dance Caper*). Choose a Hughes novel that is not classified as science fiction, and compare that novel with *The Guardian of Isis*.

10. As a young girl, Hughes reportedly enjoyed reading the novels of Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. Read Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) or Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) or *David Copperfield* (1850), and compare Jody with the central character in one of these novels.



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Related Titles

The Guardian of Isis is the second novel in Hughes's Isis trilogy. In the first, *The Keeper of the Isis Light* (1980), fifteen-year-old Olwen Pendennis must adjust to arrival of eighty settlers who have fled the destruction of Earth and are seeking refuge at the space lighthouse on the planet Isis. Olwen has had no human contact since the death of her parents when she was five; in Hughes's outer space equivalent of being raised by wolves, Olwen has been raised by Guardian, an advanced scientific robot which her dying mother reprogrammed to nurture and protect her. Guardian has changed her physical appearance, giving her characteristics which will enable her to survive in the harsh atmosphere of Isis. With the arrival of the settlers, Olwen must decide whether their acceptance is worth the risk of an operation to return her to her original human appearance, all the while knowing that without the operation she will surely be rejected by Mark London, the sixteen-year-old settler whom she loves.

Third in the trilogy is *The Isis Pedlar* (1982). In this novel, which was published to mixed reviews, Mike Flynn, a roguish Irish peddler, defies the embargo and comes to Isis in search of valuable firestones. His daughter Moira falls in love with David N'Kumo, the nephew of Jody (who is now an adult). In order to save Flynn from the settlers' wrath, Jody is forced to become the colony's new leader.



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