Gypsy Davey Short Guide

Gypsy Davey by Chris Lynch

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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".

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Notable for its grim realism, this character study of a mentally handicapped boy and his dysfunctional family is a rarity in young adult fiction—a book that offers nearly no hope for its characters. The novel charts Davey's development from his neglected childhood to the age of twelve in a non-naturing family and is distinguished by its detail-filled writing, believably depicted characters, and unusual structure in which an omniscient, detached perspective is interpolated with chapters featuring Davey's unsophisticated first-person voice.

About the Author

A prolific author of unflinchingly realistic young adult novels, Chris Lynch was born July 2, 1962, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, Edward, was a bus driver and died when Lynch was five; Dorothy Lynch supported her seven children working as a receptionist. Growing up in the Jamaica Plain district of Boston, Lynch found his experiences in a Catholic grade school gratifying but disliked the all-boys Catholic high school he later attended. Rebelling against a system that emphasized organized sports over the arts, he dropped out in his junior year.

Lynch began attending Boston University as a political science major, but a course in news writing shifted his focus and he transferred to Suffolk University to study journalism. Although he knew he wanted to write, he did not admit—even to himself—that he was drawn to fiction writing. After graduating in 1983, he spend several years doing a variety of jobs, ranging from driving a moving van to house-painting. He also worked as a proofreader of financial reports.

Still unwilling to declare an interest in creative writing, Lynch began considering a career in editing or publishing. He entered the master's program in writing and publishing at Emerson University in 1989.

After attempting to write adult fiction with little success, he took a workshop in writing for children and found his voice as a writer.

The course was led by Jack Gantos, author of the "Rotten Ralph" books and a memoGypsy Davey 203 rable series of autobiographical novels that includes Heads or Tails and Jack's Black Book.

Assigned to write five pages about a childhood incident, Lynch drew upon past experiences with his brother Marty and began a story that would later become Shadow Boxer, his first book. This gritty novel about boxing and brotherhood was highly praised by critics; the American Library Association cited it as a Best Book for Young Adults and a Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. Since then, the married father of a son and daughter has taught writing at Emerson University and Vermont College while racking up a string of positive reviews and year-end awards for his constantly growing list of books. They include two series, the hard-hitting Blue-Eyed Son Trilogy (Mick, Blood Relations, Dog Eat Dog), which examines the troubled relationship between a pair of Irish American brothers, and, for younger readers, The He-Man Women Haters Club.

Chris Lynch has a particular talent for exploring the lives of the underprivileged, the disenfranchised, and those who do not fit society's norms. Sometimes he does this with humor, as in the hilarious story of Elvin's experiences at summer camp in Slot Machine, while other books, including Whitechurch, feature devastating, even tragic, plots and characterizations. This bittersweet novel, his third, remains one of his most distinctive works. It was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults and a

Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. Gypsy Davey fulfills the promise of Shadow Boxer and enhances Chris Lynch's reputation as one of the most formidable talents in the young adult field.

Setting

Gypsy Davey is set in an unnamed northern city—possibly Boston, the setting for many of Chris Lynch's books, though it is not named or described as such here. We do know that the urban and contemporary setting is a lower-class, transient community. This is evident from the early scene in which Davey and his older sister Joanne ride the bus and Joanne points out the various houses where their family has lived over the past several years. Later, after Joanne marries and has a baby of her own, she follows a similar pattern—getting evicted from house after house but never moving far from the neighborhood.

Description is spare in this novel. The reader is told very little about the appearance of Davey's home, and impressions are made by inference: the TV that plays all day long, the continual dinners of macaroni and cheese, the cans of beer hidden in the refrigerator vegetable bin, a bottle of sangria corked with a wadded-up napkin. When he is a preschooler, Davey has a number of playthings that Joanne has purchased for him at thrift shops and yard sales—games and GI Joe dolls and toy cars. Years later, in his stream-of-consciousness narrative style, he claims to have received "stuff great stuff stuff you wouldn't believe stuff like cameras and radios Walkmans and Watchmans" from his father, but whether this is all true is unclear; when he moves into a different bedroom at home, all he takes with him are his clothes, his bedding, and a poster of ET for his wall.

For Davey—and for all the members of his family—home represents something that one escapes from. With his mother he visits a tawdry, low-class bar where the bartender feeds him honey-roasted peanuts while his mother dances. With his father he attends a tacky carnival. Joanne takes him on excursions to the library—one of the few positive places depicted in the novel—where a librarian reads to them, then the siblings visit an old cobbler's shop. As they get older, Davey accompanies Joanne when she visits her friends—a violent gang of teenagers who beat each other up and smoke marijuana—and goes with her to a trashy late-night restaurant to eat junk food.

Davey's sojourns through the streets of his city also help establish the setting. Riding his bike, Davey sometimes seeks the isolation of a nearby quarry, stops to watch the small children at the park, and is occasionally threatened by older kids or a group of drug dealers. And even when he is chased away, he returns, "because I was forever riding and there are just not enough places in this world to ride if you ride forever."

Social Sensitivity

The bleak world of Davey and his family is presented harshly in this novel. Although the presentation of various bad behaviors of the characters is often matter-of-fact, the negative consequences of their behavior are almost always evident, and clearly the reader is meant to have a judgmental response.

Though readers will derive some understanding of why certain characters behave as they do—adult responsibilities were foisted upon Joanne, for instance, long before she was capable of handling them—it is difficult to be fully sympathetic with the people in this story. It is possible to break cycles of substance use, child abuse, and parental neglect; examples abound in history as well as in the contemporary media, so it is frustrating—though realistic—to read about the kind of family that makes no attempt to break these cycles.

Davey's mental handicap is well portrayed. Although his problem is never named, it is clear from his first-person voice and his behavior that he functions at an age level below his own. After a brief allusion to Davey attending kindergarten, there is no reference to him attending school at all.

It is horrifying to think that his family has not looked into any of the educational services or social service options that are available for special needs children.

The dominant social issue in the book is child abuse and neglect. Joanne is beaten by their mother, who leaves her children at home for long periods of time so that Joanne becomes Davey's "mother by default." The cycle is repeated when Joanne has her own baby; in fact, Dennis is treated in a far worse fashion. He is called foul names, his diapers are never changed, and he is fed doughnuts instead of nourishing food. The matter-of208 Gypsy Davey factness with which this is all presented somehow makes it even harder for the reader to bear.

Other social issues touched upon are substance abuse and lead poisoning. The very first sentence of the book shows twelveyear-old Davey drinking a glass of wine while he takes care of baby Dennis. His underage drinking runs throughout the book, and there is also a scene in which he becomes high on marijuana. Later he makes friends with a drug dealer and (perhaps unknowingly) assists in delivering drugs to the dealer's customers. Joanne is shown smoking marijuana and drinking while she is breast-feeding her baby. When Davey questions her judgment for doing this, she tells him to "shut up." These scenes are also depicted prosaically, though clearly the reader is not expected to have an approving response. The issue of lead poisoning centers on the baby Dennis, who chews paint from the sides of his crib and off the windowsills. He requires weekly blood tests and medication. There is also a hint that Davey's problems may have something to do with childhood lead ingestion, since the crib used to belong to him when he was a baby.

Literary Qualities

One of the most interesting aspects of this novel is its structure. Episodic chapters written from the omniscient perspective trace Davey's life from the time he is a little boy and are interrupted by occasional chapters written in the first-person voice of twelve-year-old Davey as he describes how he cares for his sister's baby. This intriguing structure serves several purposes. First, it gets the reader inside the mind and heart of the enigmatic protagonist and provides perspectives on both his external behavior and his internal thoughts. It also allows the reader to see the cycle of abuse across generations by comparing the way Lois treated Joanne and Davey to the way Joanne and Davey treat Dennis. The use of two different typefaces helps distinguish between the two narrative strands, but the writing of each is so distinctive that there would probably be little confusion for readers even without the different typefaces. The omniscient scenes are written from a broad perspective, and the writing at times has the clinical style of a case study, as in: "Without consistent adult companionship for slightly more than the duration of Davey's life, Lois was more and more anxious to be shed of the boy for whatever minutes she could carve out of a day." Sometimes, however, the prose is more plainspoken as it matterof-factly relates startling facts about this family; for instance, "Gram... didn't like her daughter." By contrast, Davey's intense first-person voice conveys his naivete in a present-tense stream-of-consciousness narrative replete with run-on sentences, little punctuation, repetition, and nonstandard English, as in this sentence explaining why the authorities may take Joanne's baby away from her: They said that maybe 'cause Jo isn't there at the house all the time and because her old man like she calls him isn't there at all and because the baby Dennis spent too much time with nobody stopping him from standing up in his little cracked painted crib that was mine a long time ago that Ma said Jo stole but if it was mine I say he can have it so never mind Ma and Jo and all their stuff.

Although Davey's narrative may be difficult to read, it occasionally includes words or phrases that seem unlikely for a boy of his presumed abilities. For example, within a few pages he uses the word straddle, talks about playground amusements "mounted on great big springs that coil up out of the ground," and refers to women "sipping diet tonics." These examples (plus many others) suggest that Davey's verbal abilities may be stronger than the reader believes.

Both halves of the narrative occasionally include hyperbole—with mixed results.

Although Davey is probably exaggerating when he talks about riding his bike for twenty-four hours straight, it seems like something he might say. But what to make of the omniscient description of the train of Joanne's wedding gown "trailing a block behind"? The narrative seems more believable when it matter-of-factly describes the eccentric and destructive behavior of the characters in the rest of the wedding scene rather than when it strains for hyperbole in physical descriptions.

Metaphor is used to good effect throughout. Rest and movement are two of the strongest examples. The depictions of the characters frequently lying listlessly about—

Davey in front of the television for hours, Joanne "wasted" on a friend's porch, Lois staring blankly as she lies in bed—exemplify the ennui that fills their lives. Then there are scenes of constant movement. For example, during Davey's outing with his sister he is Gypsy Davey 207 shown running in the library, walking in various shoes in the cobbler's shop, and— in a double image of movement—riding in a bus but walking up and down the aisles of the vehicle. The movement is not necessarily juxtaposed, however, with the scenes involving static apathy. Much of the movement in the novel seems directionless: Davey rides his bike constantly but never reaches a destination; Joanne rents a limousine to ride around the neighborhood, but nobody cares. Several characters in the novel use the phrase "I'm going where the action is," but they never seem to find "the action" or to be fulfilled by the actions they do take.

The novel also includes a fair amount of animal imagery. Early on, Davey is described as being "like an animal needing to run," but more often the imagery of dogs, lions, and alligators is applied to Joanne's gang of friends, giving these characters an animalistic quality. The word heart is associated with Davey on several occasions, an example of positive imagery for this character. Conversely, many haunting references imply that Davey is considered practically nonexistent by his family, including Joanne's statement that she has never seen a photograph of her brother, and Lois's comment that the house will be empty now that Joanne is gone, though Davey is still there.

Sneaky Pete is talking about someone else when he says "poor stupid Gypsy nobody," but the phrase has implications for the protagonist since he is called Gypsy Davey.

A favorite literary technique of many contemporary authors is to refer to popular culture in a fictional setting in order to comment (sometimes ironically) on a scene or character. In this novel, there are allusions to the movie ET and to many songs, including "It Was a Very Good Year," "King of the Road," "Then You Can Tell Me Goodbye," "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," and "Still Crazy After All These Years"—most of which amplify how the readers see the characters or how the characters view themselves.

Themes and Characters

More a character study than a fully realized novel, Gypsy Davey centers on an enigmatic mentally handicapped boy and his dysfunctional family. Although themes of escape, despair, responsibility and irresponsibility, and need appear, the emphasis is on the characterizations of Davey and his family members, who include his seventeen-year-old married sister Joanne, their divorced parents, Lois and "Sneaky Pete," and Joanne's infant son. The characters are shown across the span of several years, from the time Davey is a little boy and his sister is forced to take care of him until the present time, when Joanne is an uninvolved mother and twelve-year-old Davey tries to take care of her baby, Dennis.

All the characters are well realized, though only two garner much sympathy from the reader. Davey has a mental disability that is never disclosed. His sister calls him a "retard" at one point, although he probably does not fit the clinical description of mental retardation. He can apparently read (he is shown reading some envelopes on his sister's porch), but he is slow and emotionally immature. He seldom speaks aloud because the words he is thinking are "flying around playing inside like a racquetball game in my skull so loud and so fast and so every which direction at once that I can't even try to talk over it." One of the themes of the novel is escape. Each character seems to be trying to find some way to escape from his or her existence.

Sneaky Pete escapes to Florida, Lois escapes to bars, and Joanne escapes into a bad marriage. Davey's mode of escape is his bicycle, an eighteen-speed tiger-paw mountain bike that he rides constantly—escaping but always circling home.

Joanne is a far less sympathetic character. The reader can empathize with what Joanne went through having to raise Davey while her irresponsible mother went to bars and met men. Her excitement over her wedding day is somewhat touching as well. But Joanne is revealed as a truly awful mother almost from the first page of the book, and this image lingers throughout. Joanne calls her own baby "crazy" and uses foul language with him; she does drugs while breastfeeding Dennis and also gives Davey wine while he baby-sits the child. Her neglect and abuse of Dennis cause authorities to threaten her with removing the baby from her house. Joanne represents the themes of responsibility and irresponsibility at different times in the novel. Early in Davey's life, she is shown responsibly fixing his meals, buying him toys, and taking him on trips to the library. Yet her neglect of her own baby exemplifies irresponsibility. As the story goes on, she also represents the theme of despair. No longer changing Dennis's clothes for days on end and completely ignoring letters from the Department of Social Services, she prefers to dwell on pictures from her wedding and, it is suggested, spend time with another man while her husband is out of the country.

Lois and Sneaky Pete are equally irresponsible. Pete, who loves cheap, tacky jewelry and gambles for a living, has left the family and lives in Florida. He sends child support intermittently. Lois is a particularly interesting character. The reader is repeatedly told how much she loves Davey, though "she wasn't very good at it anymore." Later we are

told: "She did so love Davey, as much as she could." The implication seems to be that Lois knows she is supposed to be a loving mother, but she also knows she's too self-centered and limited as a person to make that commitment.

Although it is true that she provides a home for her son, calls him "sweetie," and gives him "sloppy" kisses, she supplies no nurturing whatsoever, and all that she teaches her kids is "by accident." Despair is evident in Lois as well, especially in the scenes where she lays stricken in bed, staring straight ahead, or sits in the window seat staring at the rain.

Baby Dennis is perhaps the saddest figure in the book—sadder even than Davey, because Davey has a means of escape with his bicycle. Dennis, representing the theme of need, must rely on others for every creature comfort. No one, with the exception of Davey, is responsible enough to fulfill his needs, and Davey is allowed to visit Dennis only occasionally. Dennis suffers from lead poisoning from eating chips of paint off his crib (though no one ever thinks of removing him from the crib), and there are indications he has other physical or mental problems. Davey talks about how the baby "stops still and stares for almost ever" and "moves funny sometimes more like a praying mantis than like a big baby boy." Even Davey's attempts to help the baby, though well intentioned, are probably hurtful: for instance, he feeds Dennis Bavarian cream doughnuts instead of nutritious food. It is as if Dennis is the vessel for two generations' worth of irresponsibility and despair.

All the characters in the novel are needy, but Dennis—only seven months old—is clearly the neediest.

With Davey at the center, these five characters are the main players in the story, but there are others who make brief appearances, including Joanne's gang friends, an amoral priest, a drug dealer and his cohorts. These characters show that Davey's family are members of a particular subculture in which irresponsibility and despair are all too common.

Topics for Discussion

1. Consider the parent-child relationship across the generations as depicted in this novel—between Gram and Lois, Lois and her children, and Joanne and Dennis.

2. Why is the buzzer in the "Operation" game called "the failure alarm"? What are the implications of that term when it is used in reference to Davey playing the game? What are Joanne's reasons for cutting the wires in the game?

3. Is shifting between the omniscient viewpoint and Davey's perspective an effective means for presenting the story?

4. What does the line "cheese jewelry was Sneaky Pete" mean?

5. What are the implications of Davey's reference to his mountain bike as a "control machine"?

6. The protagonist has many names in this book, including Gypsy Davey, Okay Davey, and "maybe Davey." What do all these names mean, and what do they say about his personality?

7. Although he never makes an appearance in the book, Davey's older brother Gary is mentioned frequently. What do we know about him, and what purpose does he serve in the novel?

8. Nearly everything about Joanne's wedding—and the preparations leading up to the event—seems a bit offkilter: for example, the statement that the limousines are more important than the church, and the description of the limo as the "ugliest, most beautiful" vehicle. What other elements in this wedding are described in unusual ways?

9. What do Joanne's reactions to her wedding pictures and video say about her married life?

10. Lois and Sneaky Pete are together when the story ends. Based on how they have been characterized and how they relate to each other in their final scene, does the reconciliation seem likely to be permanent this time?

11. Joanne's departure with Dennis seems ambiguous. Is she leaving with another man or a child care worker? Which person would represent a more hopeful outcome for Dennis? Why would the author leave this scene ambiguous?

12. The haunting final sentence of the novel contains the phrase "love 'em like hell to pieces," which combines a positive emotion—love—with violent imagery.

Are there other places in the novel where words of love accompany violence?

13. Does Davey have a chance at a happy or productive life?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. "Gypsy Davey" is the name of a traditional folksong. Research the history of this song, the meaning of its lyrics, and whether any connections can be made between the folksong and this novel.

2. The term "gypsy" is used to describe both Davey and a carnival worker. What exactly are Gypsies? Where did Gypsies originate as an ethnic group? What is their culture like?

3. Child service authorities are concerned about Dennis eating paint chips from his crib. Is lead poisoning a widespread health concern? What are the symptoms, treatment, and consequences for children diagnosed with lead poisoning?

4. Joanne's early marriage seems disastrous. Is this typical when someone enters a marriage at a very young age?

According to psychologists and sociologists, what are the advantages and disadvantages of marrying young?

5. Substance abuse is always a serious issue. Is it even more problematic when it is combined with a mental handicap, as it is here when Davey drinks wine and is exposed to marijuana by Phil?

What do studies say about addictions and the handicapped?

6. Use baby books or government pamphlets on child care to determine specific ways in which the baby Dennis was mistreated, and offer recommendations on how he should have been cared for.

7. How can a child like Davey fall through the cracks of the social services systems? What agencies are out there to help children from dysfunctional families, and what services do they provide?

For Further Reference

Bush, Elizabeth. Review of Gypsy Davey. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 48 (November 1994): 93. This positive review applauds Lynch for avoiding sensationalism in his "relentlessly depressing" portrayal of Davey's family.

"Chris Lynch." In Authors and Artists for Young Adults, vol. 19. Detroit: Gale, 1996. An overview of Lynch's life and professional career that cites his goals as a writer.

"Chris Lynch." In The Seventh Junior Book of Authors and Illustrators. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1996. A brief autobiographical sketch in which Lynch describes how he came to be a writer.

"Chris Lynch." In Something About the Author, vol. 95, 115-21. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Same essay as in Authors and Artists for Young Adults, with a few brief additions regarding book titles and awards received.

Comerford, Lynda Brill. "Flying Starts: First-time Authors and Illustrators Share the Stories Behind Their Notable Fall Debuts." Publishers Weekly(December 20, 1993): 29. This biographical profile relates information about Lynch at the very beginning of his career.

Fleming, Chad. "Chris Lynch." English Journal (March 1997): 78-80. Both biographical and critical information is related in a profile that calls the author "one of the hot new prospects in young adult literature."

"Gypsy Davey." Kirkus Reviews (November 15, 1994): 1536. This review makes the unusual and questionable claim that the novel "is less about Davey than about the two women in his life"—his mother and sister.

"Gypsy Davey." Publishers Weekly (September 12, 1994): 93. A favorable review notes that the story, written in "evocative and lyrical prose," is "almost excruciating to read."

Hearn, Patrick Harris. Review of Shadow Boxer, Iceman, and Gypsy Davey. Washington Post Book World (January 1, 1995): 11. This overview of Lynch's first three novels praises the author's "authentic, distinctive voice" and describes Gypsy Davey as his best novel.

Lynch, Chris. "Today's YA Writers: Pulling No Punches." School Library Journal (January 1994): 37-38. Lynch examines attitudes toward young adult literature and envisions a time "when everyone realizes what a powerful, meaningful world is there."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Chris Lynch has written other novels that focus on troubled family relationships, including the "Blue-Eyed Son" Trilogy, composed of Mick, Blood Relations, and Dog Eat Dog, which features two brawling teenage brothers and their dysfunctional family. Another unusually structured Lynch novel that deals with family dysfunction—as well as thwarted romance—is Whitechurch.

Issues relating to abuse, neglect, and dysfunctional families are explored in many young adult novels. When She Was Good by Norma Fox Mazer is a first-person account of a teenage girl trying to create a life for herself after her abusive older sister dies.

Four children must make it on their own owing to their mother's neglect in Heather Quarles's A Door Near Here. Raina faces overwhelming odds in White Horse by Cynthia D. Grant, as does the protagonist of the Newbery Honor Book What Jamie Saw by Carolyn Coman. Chris Crutcher's gritty novel Chinese Handcuffs tackles a number of social issues, including abuse.

The problems of the mentally handicapped are fictionalized in Emily in Love by Susan Goldman Rubin, the story of a girl trying to hide her disability from a boy she likes. Probably Still Nick Swansen by Virginia Euwer Wolff concerns a boy with learning disabilities experiencing high school life.

Betty Levin's Fire on the Wind, Randy Powell's Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star, Kimberly Willis Holt's My Louisiana Sky, and A Face in Every Window by Han Nolan all feature teenage protagonists who have mentally handicapped family members.

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