Gypsy Rizka Short Guide

Gypsy Rizka by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

Gypsy Rizka is a novel of intelligence triumphing over brute force, the powers of the law, and the restrictions of social conventions. By living outside of town, alone, without family or any adult supervision, Rizka is automatically in defiance of the society of Greater Dunitsa, where people are expected to live by rules and customs.

For most of the novel, Rizka is an outsider, slipping into Greater Dunitsa to do her rounds, as well as to con people out of money and food. A generous person, she is quick to share her bounty with others, even giving away her money to help someone solve a problem. This means that Greater Dunitsa is more to her than just a place to exploit; she cares about the people who live there, and she is devoted to making justice when injustice seems to overtake those who can only poorly defend themselves. Perhaps she regards Greater Dunitsa as her family and herself as its shepherd.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander is a towering figure in literature for young adults, with his fiction drawing awards, critical praise, and a large audience. He did not come by his fame and popularity easily, even though his novel The Book of Three, his second one for young adults, was a great success. Based on the strength of its lyrical prose, complex characters, and well-structured plot, Alexander became seemingly overnight one of the foremost writers for young people. However, he actually labored for many years and endured many rejections and failures before achieving his success.

Gypsy Rizka 187 He was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924, to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. As a youngster, Alexander was an avid reader of mythology and folk tales; these readings early in his life may have been the inspiration for The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen and his other recent writings, especially Gypsy Rizka. All these works are intended for young adults and younger children and they focus on the traditions of different cultures. As a teenager, Alexander worked to earn money for college but only attended a semester at West Chester State Teacher's College before joining the army in 1942. In the army, he was an intelligence agent; he was stationed for a time in Wales, where he developed the passion for Celtic folklore and culture that inspired his Prydain Chronicles. He was later stationed in Paris, where he worked in counterintelligence. After being discharged from the army, Alexander attended Sorbonne University, where he not only received a college degree but met and married his wife, Janine Denni.

Alexander bounced from one job to another for years, working as a cartoonist, artist, advertising writer, editor, and similar jobs while writing novels in his spare time. His first three novels, all for adults, went unpublished while Alexander struggled to support his family. He turned his frustration into humor and wrote a book And Let the Credit Go about the travails of writing for publication. This book was published in 1955 and was followed by others for grownups. In the early 1960s, Alexander turned his attention to young audiences and wrote Time Cat, which was published in 1963 (republished in 1996). While writing this book, he came across Welsh folklore that rekindled his youthful interest in the mythology and culture of Celts, inspiring his first great published success The Book of Three (1964) and the Prydain Chronicles, a series of daring yet humorous adventures set in a land of mysterious magic.

Since then, Alexander's reputation has climbed not only among critics, but among a large audience that includes adults as well as children. C. S. Lewis once wrote that a way to tell whether a book for young readers is a good one is to read it as a youngster and enjoy it and then read it again years later—if one still liked the book as a grownup, then it is probably good literature. Nearly every book Alexander has written meets Lewis's criterion, with graceful prose, interesting characters, sharp wit, and complex plots appealing to young and old readers. He has proven himself to be a master craftsman and has written not only swordand-sorcery fantasies such as those of the Prydain Chronicles and adventures set in mythological worlds and ancient cultures like The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen, but also a series of fine melodramatic

mysteries featuring the courageous and versatile Vesper Holly, as well as a more realistic series of novels about war and its effects—the Westmark Trilogy. As of the present writing, Alexander seems to be focusing on the mythologies, folklore, and cultures of the world in novels such as Gypsy Rizka, which draws on Eastern European folklore.

Setting

The events of Gypsy Rizka take place in and near Greater Dunitsa: Greater Dunitsa boasted a spacious public square with an excellent horse trough in the middle. The town clock, which frequently told the right time, was much admired. For the comfort of travelers, Mr. Farkas provided a luxurious inn: the only one, but who needed another? The town barber, Mr. Pugash, had invented his own amazingly aromatic hair oil. The highly educated Mr. Mellish taught the young folk and occasionally strummed the zither. Big Franko, the blacksmith, could straighten a horseshoe with his bare hands. Not to be overlooked: all the rest of the town's diligent, public-spirited citizens.

When one provides the clock with a ghost, the inn with enormous fleas in its beds, the barber with insane patent medicines, and the schoolmaster with a hot air balloon that he does not know how to navigate, the town seems ripe for fun. Add to the mix a war hero who is not, but everybody knows he is not and treats him like a hero just the same; a prosecutor who wants everyone put in jail; a town council composed of officious but addle-brained merchants; a Gypsy girl who lives in a vardo (wagon) just outside of town; and throw in for good measure Ali Baba's cave nearby, and the town is certain to benefit from an honest blacksmith, a shy town clerk, and a clever girl who knows how to get the best out of people.

Social Sensitivity

A young woman of about twelve years of age living on her own would be a matter of concern in our culture, even though her living by her wits makes for entertaining reading. If Greater Dunitsa were a little less civilized, worse could be done to her than Sharpnack's schemes to force her to leave the area. It may be worth reminding younger children that Gypsy Rizka is a fantasy of clever tricks meant to entertain rather than depict real life. Young adults are likely to recognize the folktale background of the novel and have little difficulty recognizing that Rizka leads an idealized existence.

The novel is a seductive tale of a girl's managing to always outwit her antagonists, and it appeals, as folktales tend to do, to wish fulfillment. In a society of grownups who threaten to step on her, Rizka manages to trick the adults into doing what she wants and thereby is a hero to the town's children. It is likely that most young adults—and many grownups, as well— yearn to live life on their own terms while putting interfering busybodies in their places.

As such, Gypsy Rizka can act as a safety valve for frustrations and even as inspiration for more such tales, perhaps in somewhat more modern settings.

Literary Qualities

Gypsy Rizka is an episodic novel: It has a thin overall plot and nearly all the action occurs in mini-stories that are complete tales by themselves, although each carries forward the overall plot a little. For instance, there is the ghost story in which Rizka haunts the town, the fish story in which she cons a fish out of Sobako, and the two chicken stories, in one of which Sharpnack tries to convict Rizka's cat of stealing a roast chicken and in the other of which he makes a fool of himself as Rizka cons him into taking a cure that coats him in honey and feathers and has him running in circles clucking. Each of these and other stories could stand alone, but each is enriched by the careful development of characters from one story to the next, especially the wonderful Rizka. It is the characters who bind the novel together more than the theme of some community bigwigs wanting to drive away Rizka and more than the thin hope that her father will return and set matters right, someday. Alexander is a master of characterization, having created memorable characters who seem more like friends than figures in printed pages. From one adventure to another Rizka's character deepens, adding richness of emotion and intelligence, and she draws the stories together to form a unified whole.

Themes and Characters

"The only blot on the town's reputation was the girl Rizka," notes the narrator: She was skinny as a smoked herring; longshanked, bright-eyed, with cheekbones sharp enough to whittle a stick. She had nothing, but was generous with it. She preferred laughing to crying; she could whistle every birdsong, and the birds whistled back at her. She lived by her wits and, since they were very quick wits, she lived not too badly.

Rizka's clothes bother some of the inhabitants of Greater Dunitsa: Rizka wore her usual costume: a pair of homeless breeches she had rescued; boots cracked and split, hardly a memory of their former selves; an old army coat so outnumbered by patches the original garment had surrendered; her black hair tied with a string, a felt hat cocked on top.

Particularly worrisome are the patches, because they also serve as pockets and there is no telling what Rizka might be carrying in them.

Rizka is usually accompanied, "except when he had urgent engagements elsewhere," by a remarkable cat named Petzel, who is "a big mustard-colored cat with an impudent tail, whiskers that looked a yard long, and a head the size of a cabbage."

Petzel is the source of some of Rizka's adventures because he steals a roast chicken (which he shares with Rizka) from the table of Sharpnack and he fathers kittens that are obviously his.

"She's [Rizka is] only half gypsy," Mayor Pumpa notes, and this turns out to be a key aspect of her character. Whereas she shares much in common with her Gypsy father, from his dark hair to his cleverness, she shares with her mother, who had been a townswoman, a love of Greater Dunitsa and its people. Her love of place conflicts with her desire to wander about the world, and the conflict is a source of tension in her character that she resolves only at the end of the novel.

Rizka lives in a vardo, a Gypsy wagon, where she waits for the rom, the Gypsies, to come for her. This gives her an excuse to remain in one place, and not wander like her father, because she must stay put in order for her father to be able to find her.

Thus she waits year after year for the chiriklos, migratory birds whose return to Greater Dunitsa should mark the return of the rom, and Rizka's father. Her life is unstable—she sometimes has food and sometimes does not, but she earns some money by practicing folk remedies for the townspeople who come to her when sick or injured, and the town's blacksmith Big Franco provides her with a reliable grownup friend and protector.

"The blacksmith [Big Franko], hard-muscled but softhearted when it came to Rizka, could refuse her nothing." And Big Franco was not big; he was huge. The heat of the forge had scorched his face and singed his iron gray beard; sparks had scarred his shaven head; his skin was tough as his leather apron. Not only the town smith, he was

also the local horse doctor. Rizka had been with him when he helped a mare birth a foal; his hands were battered, broken-nailed, but she had seen them work with such delicacy and tenderness that it brought her close to tears—a rare condition for her.

In spite of his ominous appearance, Big Franco is a gentle man, given to lending Rizka emotional support when she needs it.

He is like a father to her, giving her guidance and advice. When Rizka visits Karpath the carpenter, who is building a large flatbottomed boat in his yard in preparation for the flood he is sure will come (although the town has never had a flood), she treats him respectfully, because "As Big Franco once told her, it was wise to keep an open mind about lunatics and doomsayers; they could turn out to be right." Although Rizka is already a good-hearted girl, Big Franco provides nurturing that reinforces the good in her.

Rizka knows other grownups who are kind to her. One is the town's clerk Fibich, who uses his knowledge of Greater Dunitsa's arcane laws to help Rizka stay out of the clutches of the town's chief councillor— prosecutor Sharpnack, who along with the town council would like to have her leave the area because she looks disreputable and is a bad influence. Another helpful grownup is Mellish, the schoolmaster. Rizka recognizes the value of education, but she cannot abide sitting in cramped school seats, so Mellish lets her sit outside a window to listen on his lessons.

Other townspeople such as Karpath are charming eccentrics, and Karpath's sailing his boat through the center of Greater Dunitsa is a scene not to be missed. Karpath builds a boat in anticipation of something that has never happened, but "the carpenter took the logical position that if something had never happened, sooner or later it would." Other townspeople are devoted antagonists of Rizka. Although Mayor Pumpa and town council member Podskalny are devoted enemies of each other, they are united in their dislike of Rizka. They are somewhat bumbling enemies, and Mayor Pumpa seems to be honest in spite of his yearning to be rid of Rizka, but Sharpnack, chief councilor, is vicious. "Sharpnack devoutly believed that everyone, except himself, if properly scrutinized, was a criminal of some kind or other."

He is a stubborn antagonist, but so is Rizka. "When I go, it won't be his [Sharpnack's] doing. My decision. Not his," she declares. There is charm in the way the fishmonger Sobako "could hardly wait to tell Mrs. Sobako how cleverly he had outwitted Rizka," after she cons him out of a fish that she and Petzel dine on, but there is glee in how mean-spirited Sharpnack becomes the town's chicken man, followed everywhere by clucking children, after he tries to convict Petzel of chicken theft only to have Rizka point out that in fact Sharpnack had failed to pay for the chicken in the first place. There is even glee in how he is tricked into being covered with honey and then chicken feathers and persuaded to walk around acting like a chicken. "You must find your inner chicken," Rizka tells him, or his nose will fall off and be replaced by a beak.

Such tricks suggest the folkloric origin of Rizka, even though she is a very well developed character and not a stereotype. She shares traits in common with the

trickster character found in many folktales. In literature, one of the most famous figures may be Puck in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. In folktales, Puss in Boots, a clever cat, is a trickster figure who serves his master by tricking evil people, acquiring a castle in the process. Rizka shares with that cat and similar figures a devotion to clever schemes.

"As an artist in her profession, she [Rizka] relished a challenge, the more difficult the better." She has a faraway look in her eyes as she dreams up a new scheme to thwart bad people and to reward good ones. Her masterpiece may be her elaborate series of tricks designed to help Lorins Podskalny, son of the council member, and Esperanza Pumpa, daughter of Mayor Pumpa, who "were secret sweethearts." Placing the old enemies, their fathers, in a position in which they would have to agree to a marriage between their children requires an elaborate scheme involving a cave full of dangers and a hot pool of mud. Greater Dunitsa is full of people needing help as well as people whose plans must be thwarted, and there is much pleasure in watching Rizka's ghost do its work and observing the town busybodies getting themselves locked in a jail already full of furniture because of a law they passed against people insulting other people. It was supposed to ensnare Rizka, but instead ensnares much of the town council and even the supposedly upright Sharpnack. The novel is rich in characters and schemes.

Topics for Discussion

1. Should Rizka have left with the rom rather than remain in Greater Dunitsa?

2. How is Big Franko a father to Rizka?

3. How good is Leric's excuse for Rizka's father never coming for her?

4. Why would Alexander title his novel Gypsy Rizka even though Gypsies do not figure in most of the events?

5. Should Big Franko take Rizka into his home or should she remain living outside the city limits in her vardo?

6. Although Gypsy Rizka seems to draw on folktale traditions, sometimes modernism slips in, such as Rizka remarking to Sharpnack that "You must find your inner chicken," a reference to present-day pop psychology. What other modernisms are in Gypsy Rizka? How do they affect the stories?

7. When Rizka is appointed mayor, why does she want out of the position? At last, she would have some power to set the town aright. So why try to avoid the honor and once mayor, why resign so quickly?

8. Rizka attends class by sitting outside a window and listening to Mellish teach.

Why does she do this when she does not have to attend school at all? Why is she grateful to Mellish for allowing her to do so?

9. Why do Mayor Pumpa, Sharpnack, and others want to get rid of Rizka? Why does Rizka stay where she is not wanted? Or is she wanted by someone?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who are the Gypsies? What are their origins?

2. In what part of the world are the names Rizka, Pugash, Podskalny, Franko, Fibich, Mellish, and Karpath to be found? How well does Gypsy Rizka represent that area?

3. At the novel's close, Sharpnack has been reduced to assistant clerk and Fibich has become chief councillor. Sharpnack is always scheming about something, believing as he does that everyone but he deserves to be in jail. What scheme does he concoct to raise himself into a position of authority, and how will Rizka deal with his scheme?

4. What are folktale elements in Gypsy Rizka? Are there any Eastern European folktales that share themes or events with Gypsy Rizka?

5. What is the trickster figure? Where is the figure to be found? What are the traditional traits of the trickster figure in literature? How is Rizka related to trickster figures?

6. What techniques does Alexander use to make the narrative of Gypsy Rizka sound like folktales?

7. Mellish plays a zither. What is a zither?

Where is it a traditional musical instrument? How is it played?

8. Why do East European folktales have so many orphaned figures?

For Further Reference

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——. My Love Affair with Music. New York: Crowell, 1960. This is an autobiographical account of Alexander's artistic interests, especially music, and of the sources for his inspiration.

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This seems to be in part a defense of how he uses humor in his own writings.

——. "Wishful Thinking or Hopeful Dreaming." Horn Book (August 1968): 383-90.

Fantasy offers hopeful dreams of a better future and can teach moral behavior to its audience.

Barrow, Diana. "The El Dorado Adventure." In Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults. Volume 6. Edited by Kirk H. Beetz. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1994, pp. 3081-89. This is a good, thorough analysis of Alexander's novel The El Dorado Adventure (1987), and has a good biography of Alexander.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. "Lloyd Alexander."

In More Books by More People. New York: Citation Press, 1974, pp. 10-18. A brief biographical account of Alexander with an emphasis on the sources for his fiction.

Related Titles

Alexander's focus presently seems to be on exploring cultures ancient and modern in different parts of the world. Gypsy Rizka focuses on Eastern European folkloric traditions, whereas The Iron Ring focuses on ancient India, The Arkadians focuses on the roots of Ancient Greek culture, and The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen focuses on ancient China. Gypsy Rizka is significantly different from the other three novels in that it stays in one place, emphatically in contrast to the wandering rom, while The Iron Ring, The Arkadians, and 77K Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen all involve long journeys for their main characters. In all four novels, Alexander takes significant cultural values and works them into plots that reflect the formats of the traditional literary narratives for the cultures they depict. For example, in The Iron Ring, the Indian concept of dharma is carefully woven into a plot that depicts a close interrelation among humans, the natural world, and the supernatural. This use of cultural values does not prevent Alexander from imposing a few of his own such as modern feminist views about the roles women should have in society. Curiously, while this feminist theme is to be found in The Iron Ring, The Arkadians, and The Remarkable Journey of Prince fen, it is absent from Gypsy Rizka, even though the main character is female.

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