

The Haunting of Cassie Palmer Short Guide

The Haunting of Cassie Palmer by Vivien Alcock

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Haunting of Cassie Palmer Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Themes and Characters.....	7
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

The Haunting of Cassie Palmer explores the mysterious world of the supernatural, arousing reader apprehension and fear. Ghost stories give many people a safe opportunity to enjoy such emotions and to delight in the resulting goosebumps and the satisfying escape into fantasy. Cassie's unusual encounter with the raised spirit, Deverill, who most frequently appears to her when she is in need of an understanding friend, fulfills our desire for a vicarious journey through the land of the unknown.

Knowledge about the world of the supernatural can provide satisfactory explanations about paranormal events, but in Alcock's book, Cassie's mother misuses her psychic gift, resorting to deceptive practices to strengthen her unprosperous career. Her hopes for the future lie with Cassie, her youngest daughter, the seventh child of a seventh child, and fated to have great psychic powers. Unfortunately, Cassie has no interest in her supposed capabilities or in the spirit world. Her views about the "Other Side" contribute to an interesting mother-daughter conflict similar to conflicts many young readers themselves face. Eventually, Cassie and Mrs. Palmer resolve their differences, with both making concessions, and preserve their love for each other.

Thirteen-year-old Cassie also demonstrates how difficult it can be for a maturing adolescent to accept what many adults have already realized: that everyone has faults, and that major life decisions are not easy to make. While her dismay at her mother's unethical practices during seances does not diminish, the disappointment she feels becomes tolerable when she develops a more sympathetic view of her mother.

Cassie's confusion about Deverill's morality and intentions is significant and is related to her maturation from an egocentric child to a compassionate young adult.

About the Author

Vivien Alcock was born September 23, 1924, in Worthing, England, a Sussex seaside town, where she lived until her family moved to Wiltshire ten years later. She attended the Oxford School of Art which led to her employment as a commercial artist in London.

She also has worked as an ambulance driver, a secretary in a beauty salon, and a clerk in an antique shop. She currently is a full-time writer, married to author Leon Garfield.

Although *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* is about the use of psychic powers, Alcock has never consulted a medium or been to a seance. The ideas for her books grew from stories that she used to share with her daughter and neighborhood children. These stories culminated in several novels, published when Alcock was in her fifties. Her books are popular in England, and television serials have been made out of three of them: *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*, *Travelers by Night*, and *The Cuckoo Sister*.

Three of her novels, *Travels by Night*, *The Sylvia Game*, and *The Cuckoo Sister* have been Literary Guild Selections, while a fourth, *The Stonewalkers*, was selected as The School Library Journals Best Book. In addition, both *The Cuckoo Sister* and *The Mysterious Mister Ross* were nominated for the Young Observer Teenage Fiction Award.

Setting

Cassie's haunting takes place in a small town near London. Here, Mrs. Palmer has set up her crystal ball in a nondescript, dreary, cramped house on Shakespeare Street; and, here, for two long summers, the three youngest Palmer children play contentedly and comfortably in the corner of a nearby cemetery that Cassie's sister has christened the "Garden of Death." The children fantasize about the people buried beneath the heavy stone slabs and invent stories about them. Thus, years later, when Cassie accepts the dare to call up a spirit, it is natural for her to select from the familiar names at the old cemetery, since she is more comfortable with those departed souls than with any spirits at large.



Social Sensitivity

Many books for young people deal with magical or mystical events; what singles out *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* is Cassie's background. Her mother has psychic powers and regularly communicates with the dead. Cassie's imitation of Mrs. Palmer's seance chants results in the appearance of a man whom Cassie initially thinks is a devil—a man who suggests that Cassie make voodoo dolls of her mother. Cassie does not take Deverill's suggestions seriously, but is, like the reader, at times alarmed by their implications. Alcock tempers this alarm by suggesting the possibility of coincidental occurrences rather than true supernatural events. Also, Cassie never uses her emerging powers to hurt or take advantage of anyone. Instead, she becomes responsible and compassionate. She rushes to save Mr. Roberts's life, rescues the small boy from the agitated townspeople, and legally procures Deverill's hidden treasure.

Some readers may be offended by the occasional use of "damn" and "hell" by members of the Palmer family. When she becomes upset about her poverty, Mrs. Palmer angrily resorts to using these mildly irreverent words to vent her frustrations. Her children follow her example: Cassie, when she is confused about her feelings for Deverill or angry at her brother; and Tom, when he feels insecure about leaving the family or puzzled about Deverill's visit to their home.

Much of the book's family tension is created by the discrediting of Mrs. Palmer as a medium and her defensive attitude about the allegations. There is no doubt that she has engaged in fraudulent practices. While readers will agree that such unethical behavior in an adult does not provide a good role model, Mrs. Palmer's actions are never presented as acceptable, and her own children are anxious for their mother to retire. Even young readers will have a tendency to pity Cassie's mother, rather than to emulate her actions.



Themes and Characters

The main characters in *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* are almost all members of the Palmer family: Cassie, her mother, and her siblings, Tom and Mary. However, Deverill, the spirit Cassie befriends, plays an important part in the family's affairs.

Although Cassie initially sees herself as "spineless," she is actually a rather headstrong young lady who is not easily intimidated. When abandoned in the dark cemetery, she overcomes her fear by directing her anger towards Tom and Mary. This enables her to complete her "mission" which results in the appearance of Deverill. An independent thinker, she has difficulty reconciling her own ambitions with those her mother has for her. She is careful to avoid hurting her parent's feelings but feels betrayed when "Mum's" shortcomings are revealed—especially when Mrs. Palmer attempts to cover up her own deceit. Yet, Cassie is not without compassion. She risks what she perceives to be her safety and well-being to intervene when the vision of Deverill's child-spirit, being stoned by a "neat, clean, respectable" eighteenth-century crowd, appears.

Cassie's widowed mother, known professionally as Madame Palmer, is a loving, supportive parent who tries to make life pleasant for the three children still living at home. She attempts to teach proper values to her offspring but has difficulty incorporating the same values into her own behavior. The burden of single-handedly supporting seven children tempts her to make her seances more realistic and profitable, though less honest. When caught in the act, she is defensive and self-righteous. Nevertheless, the reader is able to see that Madame Palmer regrets the need for her deceptions and would like to be more straightforward in her psychic affairs.

Her favoritism for Cassie can be traced to her family's poor financial status: Cassie is destined to have second sight and to be successful as a clairvoyant.

Cassie's reluctance to disillusion her "Mum" (Cassie wants to be a doctor, not a medium) is touching and reinforces the picture we have of a mother who is so loved that her children go to great lengths to avoid hurting or disappointing her.

Mary is the more reserved of Cassie's two siblings still at home. She dares Cassie to raise a spirit, never believing that one would actually materialize. Her absolute fear of Deverill contrasts sharply with Cassie's cautious enjoyment of the ghost.

Cassie is very attached to her older brother Tom. A sensitive and intelligent young man, he is protective of his youngest sister and overcomes his fear to come to her aid when she is compelled to meet with Deverill in the cemetery. He is able to make astute observations about his mother, realizing that she finds it difficult to accept the oncoming adulthood of her last three children. His wisdom helps Cassie come to terms with her own difficult relationship with their mother.

Alcock's presentation of Deverill, a middle-aged man dead for over two hundred years and inadvertently called back to earth by Cassie, keeps the reader questioning this



spirit's origins and authenticity and adds to the suspense in the novel. It is tempting to believe that Deverill is nothing more than a homeless tramp, and to call his reappearances during stressful moments in Cassie's life simple coincidences. But his transformation into a child during his final encounter with Cassie can only be explained as a psychic phenomenon. Despite his questionable origins, Deverill is usually softspoken, polite, and gentle. He occasionally seems evil, but that is more a reflection of eighteenth-century culture and attitudes than a reflection of any intent to do harm. He is a product of the 1700s and even Cassie finds his witchcraftlike suggestions for revenge, such as causing someone to break out in green boils, to be absurd. He remains essentially harmless throughout the story, never threatening anyone or anything. His love and appreciation for Cassie is sincerely portrayed in the climax, when he finally is given the power to "rest in peace."

Cassie's experiences with her mother and Deverill lead her to realize that moral issues are seldom clearly defined.

Knowledge about a person's past and empathy for the decisions that person had to make often leads to a deeper understanding of others and genuine compassion for them. While this is not a new or unique theme, it is enjoyable to see it presented in such a subtle manner. Cassie's internal struggles with the concepts of good and evil are not reconciled until she acknowledges the hazy boundaries between these two extremes. Only then can she appreciate the sacrifices made by her mother, and the horrors experienced by Deverill.

Cassie matures when she is able to see the world through the eyes and emotions of these two adults. The book demonstrates that the development of empathy expands our understanding of the human condition.

Literary Techniques English literature is filled with supernatural happenings. The popularity of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1606), Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) attest to this fascination with the unexplainable.

Vivien Alcock makes use of this interest in creating the puzzling character, Deverill. Longing for a definitive explanation about Deverill's origins, the reader becomes adept at playing sleuth, groping for clues while the visitor from the "Other Side" remains an enigma. Deverill only appears when Cassie is in a heightened emotional state, contributing further to our doubt and wonder about his reality. Is he merely a figment of the imagination of a young girl whose struggles with family, ethics, school friends, and financial worries make her vulnerable to visions? By keeping the reader uncertain, Alcock is able to maintain her suspense effectively. Even the conclusion, although it satisfactorily resolves the problem of Cassie's haunting, avoids a definite end to Deverill.

Alcock uses understatement to enhance the suspense created by Deverill's appearance. The spirit's words and actions are described simply and are sometimes



deliberately omitted, creating pleasant excitement and anxiety about his existence and purpose.

In an allusion to some of the ghosts, spirits, and supernatural creatures that appear in well-known works of literature, the Palmers reside in a neighborhood of streets named after literary greats. Cassie lives on Shakespeare Street and regularly walks on Spenser Street, Marlowe Drive, Chaucer Avenue, and Blake Road. Many readers will be familiar with the unearthly events that occur in some of the works of these writers.

Since *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* is about supernatural events, the symbolism of the occult is present throughout the story. Numbers and colors with mysterious connotations abound. Cassie is thirteen years old and the seventh child of a seventh child. Her mother's seance is held on Friday the thirteenth and has seven participants. The curtains are crimson; the seance lamp is ruby red; Cassie's blood from a bramble scratch appears to be ebony; Deverill's clothes are black. Eerie events take place under a full moon, with the silent London fog obscuring vision.

Alcock's background as a commercial artist has influenced her writing, making it highly evocative. Many of her word choices are image-provoking. A lighted bus "hisses by" when Cassie is feeling frustrated and angry; the portly Mrs. Palmer "plumps down" in a chair; tiny stones "chatter" on a gravel path; a huge voice "bounces around" a little kitchen; polished cars "wink" in the sun.

Such word pictures stimulate the imaginations of readers, allowing them to personalize events in the book.



Topics for Discussion

1. Many children would not find a cemetery a comforting place to play.

Why did Cassie, Tom, and Mary choose to play there?

2. Why did Cassie accept the dare to raise a spirit?

3. Why did Mrs. Palmer not believe Cassie's story about raising Deverill?

4. What does Deverill mean when he says, "Anger and fear and hate are all akin"?

5. Why is Cassie reluctant to accept Deverill's friendship?

6. Cassie begins to touch Deverill's arm with a comforting gesture when he tells her of his bad dreams. Why do her fingers stop of their own accord before they get to him?

7. Cassie has trouble deciding how she feels about Deverill. What contributes to her sometimes sympathetic, sometimes antagonistic moods?

8. Mary and Cassie are delighted when they discover the house that is for sale.

How is Deverill involved in the discovery?

9. Why does Cassie decide that Deverill really is a devil after her secretive entry into the house where the treasure is hidden?

10. After the car crash, Cassie and Deverill discuss her premonition that caused Mr. Roberts's accident. Deverill suggests that possibly Mr. Roberts was not intended to reach his destination, and that perhaps a real tragedy would have occurred if he had. What did Deverill mean by this?

11. Why does Deverill ask Cassie if she thinks she is the stronger of the two of them?

12. Why is it ironic that the old man searches for Lovey, his dog, near Deverill's tombstone, and that the two lovers kiss and embrace near this same gravesite?

13. Why does Deverill disappear after Cassie saves him from the villagers?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Alcock allows her readers to wonder about the actuality of events that occur in *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*. Compare the events that you would categorize as psychic phenomena with those that seem to be simply coincidental occurrences or illusions.
2. The author once worked as a commercial artist in London. How does she create mental pictures for her readers, helping them visualize characters and events?
3. Mrs. Palmer recognizes that she often is "foolish and ambitious." How do these characteristics affect her role as mother?
4. Deverill wonders why it is a mere child that has raised him from his grave.

Was it important that Cassie be his link with the twentieth century? Why?

5. Some people find Cassie's eventual loss of powers disappointing. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Although there are many cultural similarities between England and the U.S., there are also many differences.

Compare Cassie's lifestyle with that of a typical American thirteen-year-old. Are they more alike or different? How so?



For Further Reference

"Books for Adolescents." *Journal of Reading* (February 1983): 467-468. In this article, several types of books for junior high, senior high, and adult readers are reviewed. The works include historical fiction, science fiction, mystery tales, and poetry.

Carlson, Dudley. "Review of *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*." *Horn Book* 58 (June 1982): 294-295. This reviewer finds *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer* to be a satisfying story of the supernatural world.

"Review of *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*." *Book Review Digest*, edited by Martha T. Mooney. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. This is a synopsis of five reviews of *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*. It also provides the names of two additional magazines where Alcock's book is evaluated.

Raburn, Josephine. "Ghost Stories."

School Library Journal (November 1984): 25-27. This article reviews several types of ghost stories, including those which are intellectually challenging, those which explore psychological conflicts, those which have religious overtones, and those which are philosophical in nature. Alcock's novel is considered, by the author, to be a religious story.

Spiegler, Jerry. "Review of *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*." *School Library Journal* (April 1982): 78. This reviewer considers Alcock's book to be appropriate for young people in grades seven to ten. He feels, however, that the novel is handled poorly and, as a result, is disappointing.

"Vivien (Garfield) Alcock." In *International Authors and Writers Who's Who*, edited by Ernest Kay. Cambridge, England: Melrose Press, 1986. This short article gives biographical information about Vivien Alcock.

Wilms, Denise M. "Review of *The Haunting of Cassie Palmer*." *Booklist* (June 1982): 1308. This review of Alcock's first novel finds the book interesting and suitable for young adults in grades six through eight.

Related Titles

Vivien Alcock's affinity for tales of the supernatural can be seen in several of her other works. Her second novel, *The Stonewalkers*, recounts the adventures of Poppy, a twelve-year-old girl, who has terrifying experiences with graveyard and garden statues that come alive.

Another of her books, *Ghostly Companions*, is a collection of short stories about preternatural apparitions.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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