The Hero Short Guide

The Hero by Patricia Windsor

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

In The Hero, young Dale O. Fither (his name is an anagram for "life or death") is at first shocked and then ultimately dismayed by the discovery that he has the ability to foresee life-threatening incidents, especially those involving children. Acting on his visions, Dale rescues several children from imminent death, thereby earning for himself the reputation of a hero.

But the same psychic gift serves to alienate Dale from others, including his domineering and aloof father, his passive mother, and his school friends at St. Asaph's, where his father is headmaster. Dale is sent at last to a secretive institution for other young psychics, presided over by the brilliant but sinister Dr. Airman, who intends to use their talents to further his own megalomaniacal ambitions. In unraveling and finally revealing Dr. Airman's designs, Dale simultaneously strives to come to terms with the burdensome label of "hero" which has been thrust upon him.

About the Author

Patricia Windsor was born in the Bronx, New York, on September 21, 1938, and began writing at about age ten, accumulating no fewer than thirtyfive rejection slips from Seventeen magazine by the time she graduated from high school. Abandoning the idea of writing as a career, she studied modern dance at Bennington College and at Westchester Community College (her associate's degree is from New York University), only to have her writing skills land her post-college employment as an editor and copywriter—including a stint on the staff of Mademoiselle magazine and as a senior editor at Harper and Row. In the early 1970s, she worked in London, England, as a counselor at a family planning association and at the National Council of Social Services, bringing her into direct contact with the special challenges commonly faced by the young.

More recently, she has taught creative writing at the University of Maryland's Writer's Institute. She resides in New Jersey.

Windsor turned to writing books for young audiences only after marrying and having two children of her own. A friend gave her a copy of Paul Zindel's My Darling, My Hamburger, a work which convinced her that books for young adults could address authentic problems and issues, in stark and telling contrast, she says, to "the goody-goody Nancy Drews I had read as a kid." The result of this discovery was her first novel, the award-winning The Summer Before, about the emotional breakdown of a young girl following the accidental death of her boyfriend.

The Summer Before remains Windsor's best-selling book.

The Summer Before was cited in 1973 as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association; in a German-language translation, it was honored with the Austrian State Award for Books for Youth in 1981. In 1976, Diving for Roses was named by the New York Times as an Outstanding Book for Young Adults, while in 1985 Windsor's The Sandman's Eyes won the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

Setting

The Hero is set in contemporary times, the action centering on Dale's home in suburban Washington, D.C., and on Dr. Airman's private institute in rural Virginia. This proximity to the nation's capitol facilitates Airman's ominous ties with military and political figures within the highest levels of the American government. In Dale's mind, fond memories of his childhood life in Wisconsin are repeatedly contrasted with his current difficulties, to the point that the idea of Wisconsin itself becomes for him a kind of pastoral, carefree, and welcome alternative to the troubled time and place which he actually inhabits. This "doubling" of setting encourages Windsor's young adult audience to similarly contrast the often complex reality of teen life with the remembered simple pleasures of childhood.

Social Sensitivity

Generally, Windsor handles the trials and torments undergone by Dale and his fellow juvenile psychics with care and sensitivity. However, there are a few aspects of The Hero that could worry some readers. For example, the novel's dialogue is occasionally sprinkled with common adolescent vulgarisms. Further, the details of Dale's psychic visions—most notably, one imagining the accidental amputation of a hand—are fully intended to shock; indeed, not a few passages in the book might well betray the squeamish. And finally, nearly all of Dale's relationships with authority figures—whether at school, at home, or within the vaguely medical context of Airman's institute—are viewed negatively, even with outright hostility. Parents and teachers of readers in search of sunnier, more optimistic, and less controversial fare might therefore hesitate before recommending this volume.

Literary Qualities

The tone of The Hero—that is, the attitude which Windsor conveys to her audience about her themes—is almost unremittingly dark. Dale must struggle with demons both within (his searing telepathic nightmares) and without (the evil Dr. Airman), to the point that he feels cut off from all potential sources of empathy and help. Windsor, perhaps reacting against the escapist tradition in books for young audiences, portrays Dale's descent into despair with unflinching and pitiless accuracy; for example, there is not even a hint of sentimentality in her depiction of Dale's arid home life. But her consistency of vision may prompt the reader to long for at least a few happy oases within the bleak and limitless desert that is Dale's life. In sum, there are precious few upbeat moments in The Hero.

However, the novel's characters, even when they are not pleasant, are usually memorable and multifaceted.

Dale's father—"the Man"—is emotionally frigid and has been accused of physically abusing a student at the last school where he served as headmaster; but Dale also recalls childhood episodes during which his father was caring and attentive. Similarly, Dale's mother is oppressed and defeated; but her mousy domesticity masks the fact that she, like her son, was born with (and plagued by) extrasensory perception. Moreover, Windsor's plot is taut and generally well-crafted, filled with complications and conflicts which mount relentlessly toward a suspenseful conclusion. It is for these reasons that Windsor's books have earned significant critical acclaim.

Themes and Characters

In The Hero, young Dale Fither wrestles not only with the evil Dr. Airman but also with his own sense of isolation from family and friends. The psychic talents which set Dale apart may be unique and fantastic; but many specially-gifted young people must feel similarly estranged from peers who seem to them to be "ordinary" and, therefore, fortunate. More than anything else, Dale longs to live an uncomplicated and humanly warm life, but instead confronts complexity and hostility everywhere.

Windsor's major characters in this novel are sharply-drawn. Dale's father (Dale refers to him only as "the man") is emotionally icy, aloof, self-righteous, and hypocritical. Dale's mother, mastered by her husband's personality, is weak, weepy, and fearful; she is unable to give her son the parental love which he so desperately needs. Dr. Airman is a fairly stock caricature of the "mad scientist" of science fiction, unremittingly evil, manipulative, furtive, and sinister.

Sonya, Airman's ward, is attracted to Dale, but she is also a loyal agent of her foster father's hidden and morally twisted agenda. Indeed, Dale's only affectionate relationships are with his friend Raymond at school and with Charlotte, a twelve-year-old psychic at Dr. Airman's institute. But even these alliances are finally tainted by Dale's identifying and isolating psychic gifts —capacities form which he strives to be "cured," so that he can re-enter the more normal pathways of life.

Topics for Discussion

1. Dale Fither has the ability to foresee calamitous events; other young people he meets at Dr. Airman's institute can read minds or project their own thoughts onto the consciousnesses of others. Do these paranormal aspects of The Hero strike you as unrealistic, unbelievable? If so, does that fact detract from your enjoyment of the book?

Why or why not?

2. Dale forges his strongest personal relationship at the institute with Charlotte, a twelve-year-old, while fending off the blandishments of Sonya, who is physically alluring and who is much closer to him in age. On what grounds does Dale prefer Charlotte to Sonya?

What factors finally prompt Sonya to turn against Dr. Airman and to side with Dale and Charlotte?

3. As nearly as you can reconstruct them from the text, what precisely are Dr. Airman's ultimate goals for the gifted young psychics at his institute?

That is, exactly how does he plan to use them? For what end?

4. Dale's final separation from his friend Raymond, near the end of the novel, is particularly poignant. What is it about Dale that at last necessitates this permanent severance of their friendship?

5. For a long time, Dale masks his true identity behind the made-up persona of "Joe Dean." What causes him to avoid recognition and praise for his miraculous rescues of children? If you were in a comparable situation, would you tend to similarly run away from all the resulting attention? Or would you rather seek it out?

6. At the novel's end, Dale is reunited with Charlotte and his sister, while Dr. Airman, in an epilogue, receives just retribution. But is this a happy ending? What things seem promising about Dale's future by the close of the book? What things seem less than promising?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. From Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) to J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye (1951), a consistent theme in many American novels is the alienation and estrangement of young people from the significant adults around them. How does this theme play itself out in The Hero?

2. Patricia Windsor says that she was first attracted to writing fiction for young adults by the prospect that such books could deal realistically with the difficulties often faced by youth. Do you find The Hero consistently realistic?

Do its arguably unrealistic elements necessarily detract from its portrayal of the complex problems encountered by the young? Is it possible that fantasy and science fiction novels might nonetheless be used to convey true things about persons in the "real" world?

3. Dale, in the midst of all his troubles, often reflects back on the joyful simplicity of his childhood life in Wisconsin. What causes nearly all of us, from time to time, to recreate and "live in" the past? Is there a tendency on the part of older people to romanticize childhood—to remember it as more attractive, more carefree, than it actually was?

4. Why does Dale's father suddenly warm toward him when the true identity of "Joe Dean" becomes known?

Why is Mr. Fither excited—more excited than Dale, certainly—at discovering that his son is a hero? Why is he so anxious, over his wife's objections, to refer Dale to Dr. Airman's institute? In short, what really motivates "the Man?" What sort of person is he? Provide a thorough character sketch of Mr. Fither.

5. Dale's homelife is steadfastly unhappy: He is betrayed by his father and rejected by his mother. His sister has already run away from home by the time the action of the novel begins.

Nonetheless, Dale himself seems to be highly principled, the possessor of a sound moral sense, and a resolute fighter for that which is right. Given his isolation from his own family, what is the source of Dale's virtue?

6. Dale is unconventional and wavering about his religious beliefs, finally inventing the "Starwalker" as his personal substitute for God. What prompts Dale to compose private letters in his mind to the Starwalker? What is it that Dale longs for in terms of belief? In terms of his life itself?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 30. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983: 216-218. In this illustrated entry, Windsor provides autobiographical information.

3318 The Hero Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. New York: Wilson, 1983: 328-330. A brief biographical sketch, much of it in Windsor's own words.

Metzger, Linda, ed. Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Vol. 19.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1987: 486-487.

The most recent entry on Windsor in this familiar series, updating earlier sketches.

Sutherland, Zena. The Best in Children's Books: The University of Chicago Guide to Children's Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980: 482.

An appreciative review of Windsor's Mad Martin.

Related Titles

Windsor, as a very young writer, was strongly influenced by such science fiction writers as Isaac Asimov and Theodore Sturgeon. For that reason, perhaps, elements of the bizarre and paranormal—as in The Hero—often crop up in her books, novels which otherwise strive to deal realistically with the wrenching problems faced by her teenage protagonists. For example, in her Killing Time (1980), a teenager moves with his father from New York City to a small town, where they witness the haunting rites of latter-day Druids. Moreover, Windsor spent much time in England as a counselor of troubled youth at a "walk in" social services clinic. It is not surprising, therefore, that the problems characteristically encountered by young people loom large as thematic concerns in her novels. Mad Martin, for instance, treats the title character's extreme loneliness and sense of isolation; Killing Time involves a child's perspective on parental divorce; Home is Where Your Feet Are Standing deals with learning disabilities; and The Summer Before, Windsor's best-known book, takes up the melancholy theme of bereavement and separation.

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