

# **An Infestation of Unicorns Short Guide**

## **An Infestation of Unicorns by Jane Yolen**

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## Overview

Sometimes a story may be enjoyed just for the sheer beauty of its construction and for the melody of its language. "An Infestation of Unicorns" may be enjoyed in this fashion, just for the roundedness of its plot and for the joy of such phrases as these about the color of the abbey's apples: "Not the gold of the sun or the gold of a coin, but rather a color that would put mustard to shame and make wheat weep, if such were possible"; "And there Sandy stood, back against a tree so laden with yellow apples they draped the hero like a golden robe."

This elegance of phrasing and acuteness of description makes "An Infestation of Unicorns" a pleasurable read. It has the added advantage of sharp characterization, a seemingly insolvable conundrum that is solved in a clever way, and lighthearted humor. In addition, its unicorns are unique yet just as satisfying as the many other versions of unicorns that seem to fascinate modern authors and their audiences.

## About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

## Setting

Cranford Abbey is based on Yolen's scholarship and schooling. The Latin, she says, comes from her high school Latin teacher.

The canonical hours that appear in the story probably come from her extensive research not only into history but into religious practices. The abbey has a problem; it needs money. The new abbot, Aelian, has a solution to the problem: the selling of cider made from the golden apples of the trees in Cranford Abbey's orchard. This solution has another problem: the annual migration of unicorns that stop in the orchard to eat the apples, something they have been doing unmolested for many years. Thus the setting is a mix of a realistic abbey and a magical landscape in which unicorns exist, as well dragons and other beasts and bold, courageous heroes.



## Social Sensitivity

"An Infestation of Unicorns" is a lighthearted tale that is not laden with social commentary, but Sandy's switch from hero to maiden is worth a second look. Much of the situation of the story is designed to create a need for a maiden where no maiden is allowed to go. Hero after hero has told Abbot Aelian that a maiden is required to draw the unicorns away from the apple trees, and Abbot Aelian has steadfastly insisted that maidens cannot work on monastery grounds. This insistence has a symbolic function: It represents traditional rules that exclude women from certain kinds of work—in this case the work of a hero.

Sandy has a number of adventures on her way to the monastery, and she plainly has appeared to be a man to the people she has helped. Indeed, one woman takes a romantic interest in her, thinking her a man.

Her femaleness explains her refusal to sleep within the chambers of the monastery, because it is a place clearly forbidden to women and she is probably unwilling to push her efforts to break into masculine territory so far as to risk violation of the monks' sleeping quarters; besides residing within the chambers of the monastery is not necessary to her function as a hero. This may represent women working their way into the confines of male-dominated professions, a gradual process rather than an abrupt one. In addition, Yolen may reasonably have decided not to push her feminist theme so far as to violate religious practices and thereby distract from the point she really wishes to make.

That Abbot Aelian evidently realizes that she is female before Sandy completes her job is an interesting touch, perhaps recognizing that some men will welcome women if approached properly, and perhaps representing how men may accept women into their ranks if the women act like men. Ultimately, Sandy does the job that no man could do, as the numerous other heroes have attested. This is representative of how dysfunctional an exclusively male domain may become when faced with tasks that require flexibility. The work of a woman has a positive effect on the male community, and it seems to have opened Abbot Aelian's mind somewhat. He seems to have moved from forbidding women to be in his work place to toleration of the presence of a woman to admiration of a woman's work.

Thus the presence of a woman worker has had a transformational effect on the boss—a "good man, but he had no sense of humor" learns to smile by the story's end.



## Literary Qualities

"An Infestation of Unicorns" has the pattern of a fairy tale. Its tone, its setting, and its unicorns are all the stuff of fairy tales. From the golden apples (reminiscent of Ancient Greek tales) to the parade of heroes, elements of the fairy-tale tradition abound. In fairy tales like "An Infestation of Unicorns," in which seemingly intractable problems are solved by clever protagonists, the main characters usually gain the security of wealth, or the healing of ills, or the satisfaction of putting stuck-up people in their place. In "An Infestation of Unicorns," an abbot learns the worth of a woman's work and the need for a female presence in all-male preserves is emphasized, both issues more associated with modern feminism than medieval folk tales. Yet, Yolen does not stray as far from her folk-tale inspirations as she might seem to do from a modern reader's perspective. There is considerable evidence that in the Middle Ages, when the folk-tale pattern flourished, there were women who yearned to be knightly heroes, and some—like Joan of Arc—who actually were. Also, if one goes to the originals for tales such as "Cinderella," one finds, in addition to sleeping beauties awaiting their princes, women who are smart, vigorous problem solvers, who often intrude into traditional male domains to set right what the men cannot fix. Folk tales are often expressions of the desires of their original audiences, and may feature clever people who through their wits and courage rise from poverty to wealth, defeat those who steal from them, gain expensive educations and become esteemed for their intelligence, and heal seemingly incurable diseases. These matters were much on the minds of the often impoverished audiences who were victimized by the powerful. In this sense, "An Infestation of Unicorns" is smartly in the folk-tale tradition as an expression of a woman's aspirations to be both hero and maiden and to earn the respect of men and women alike for her deeds.



## Themes and Characters

"Unicorns are wily animals." The idea of unicorns as an "infestation" is an unusual, twist; usually people seek out unicorns, but in "An Infestation of Unicorns" the monks would like them to go away and stay away.

Yet Cranford Abbey is on the annual migration route of a herd of unicorns, and the efforts of the monks to drive them away only result in injured monks; the apples are eaten, anyway. This is a confrontation of man against nature, with nature in the form of hungry, smart unicorns defying the wishes of human beings.

The story of the confrontation and its resolution is told through three characters, Abbot Aelian, James, and Sandy. Abbot Aelian is a nicely drawn figure—well rounded in his good and bad qualities. He is a sensitive man and self-conscious about his position: "He [Abbot Aelian] felt that the entire countryside was laughing at the monastery, at the monks and—most particularly—at him. And he was right." But if grumpy and without a sense of humor, he has a good sense of proportion about life: He looked years older than when he had arrived at the abbey just eighteen months earlier. His temper was as sour as his stomach these days, but he would not take it out on the boys.

Instead being angry with James, who volunteers to help save the apples, Abbot Aelian controls himself and speaks to James kindly. Add to this that he is concerned about the abbey's funds—when James says that he knows "A small hero, but a hero nonetheless," the abbot muses that "A small hero . . . would not eat much"—and his characterization amply foreshadows his relationship with Sandy. He exhibits the most growth during the story, changing from a stick-to-the-regulations administrator to a more flexible thinker who learns to smile and to appreciate a woman's work, even if it means bending the rules for monastic life a little.

James is the figure who starts the chain of events that result in the unicorns leaving the apple trees alone—for one season, anyway. He is the catalyst of the story, the element that makes all the other elements work together. After at first dismissing James's idea to write to a hero named Sandy, Abbot Aelian "a week later, after having gone over the abbey's accounts one last time," "summoned" James and asks James to write to Sandy for help. Even though he is essential for bringing Sandy and Abbot Aelian together, James is not fleshed out, but instead remains a fairly ordinary, goodhearted boy throughout "An Infestation of Unicorns."

Sandy is the central mystery of "An Infestation of Unicorns." It takes her months to travel to the abbey, mostly because she has much hero work to do on the way. By the time she reaches the abbey, her "armor was burnished a bit brightly from dragon's fire, and dented in odd places, clearly from battles." Appearing to be a man, Sandy is a mysterious figure. She refuses lodging in the abbey, but instead camps out by the trees. She refuses all help, even that of her brother James, who presumably knows that she is a woman: "A hero's business can be . . . complicated . . . by small boys," she tells Abbot





Aelian. Her remark that "A plague is a plague, my Lord Abbot, whether of beauty or terror, don't you agree?" sums up the unifying theme of "An Infestation of Unicorns."

When can the beauty of nature be harmful to people? The unicorns are magnificent animals, able to leap over high walls, "cavorting and capering" as they enter the orchard. Clever animals and beautiful to watch, their insistence on eating the abbey's apples puts them at odds with the needs of the monks. In real life, a solution to the problem would be to kill them, but neither Abbot Aelian nor Sandy wants this.

If both the unicorns and the golden apples are to be preserved, a way to shield the apples must be found. This notion is evident early in the story, because people do not discuss annihilating the unicorns, instead suggesting that they be led away by a maiden. The maze Sandy constructs gives the unicorns something to do other than eat apples, and since she is a maiden, she is able to lead the unicorns through the maze and away from the apple trees. The plague of beauty is averted by patience, planning, and intelligence.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why put an anachronism like smoking into "An Infestation of Unicorns"?  
("Some—like Sir Sullivan—even smoked and looked like dragons on a bad day.")
2. When does Abbot Aelian realize Sandy is a woman? Why does he let her continue her work?
3. What is the significance of Abbot Aelian smiling at the end of "An Infestation of Unicorns"?
4. What effect does its light tone have on how you experience "An Infestation of Unicorns"?
5. Is it true that "A plague is a plague . . . whether of beauty or terror"?
6. Why does Sandy not spear the unicorn that points its horn at her?
7. What will Sandy do with the herd of unicorns that she has led away?
8. Who is the main character of "An Infestation of Unicorns"? How do you know?
9. When did you figure out that Sandy was a woman, even though the story was discussing her as if she were a man? How did you know?
10. What is the significance of Sandy knowing Latin?
11. Why does James put "P.S. Abbot Alien says no girls" in his letter to Sandy?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What sort of boys, like James, were sent to live at abbeys? What were their lives?
2. Write a sequel to "An Infestation of Unicorns," showing what happens during the next seasonal migration of unicorns to the abbey. How will the abbey be different? How will Abbot Aelian react?
3. Yolen has written extensively about unicorns and in fact has a book devoted to them, *Here There Be Unicorns*, which has poems and stories. How does Yolen present unicorns in her other writings?

What similarities do you find? How do you account for the differences among unicorns in the different poems and stories?

4. Are there any real-life migrations of large animals such as the unicorns?

How do the animals behave during their migration? Is their behavior echoed in the behavior of the unicorns in "An Infestation of Unicorns"?

5. Yolen mentions the canonical hours.

What are these? How do they function? What is the history of their development?

6. How are apples made into cider? 7. What crops have abbeys traditionally grown to earn money? Are any turned into beverages like apple cider and then sold?

8. What other modern writers have written about unicorns? How does their work compare to Yolen's?

9. What is an infant oblate? 10. Where is "An Infestation of Unicorns" humorous? How does the humor affect the progress of the narrative?

## For Further Reference

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A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview of Yolen.

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Sherman, Chris. *Booklist* 91, 5 (November 1, 1994): 492-93. An enthusiastic recommendation of *Here There Be Unicorns*.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 219. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings.

———. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

*Locus* 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

———. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

———. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales." *Locus* 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

———. *The Writer* (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, and discusses why she enjoys writing.

———. *Writing Books for Children*. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.



## Related Titles

"An Infestation of Unicorns" is one of many stories Yolen has written about unicorns. The nature of the unicorns varies greatly from one story to the next, with their sometimes being herding creatures, sometimes being solitary creatures, and sometimes being a mixture of solitary males and herding females. In a story such as "The Healing Horn," the idea of unicorns is more important than their actual existence.

"The Healing Horn" has a modern setting in which two brothers and a sister (loosely based on her own children, Yolen says) discover a horn that has been made into a walking stick, along with an advertisement that says the horn will cure many diseases.

There is a foundation in reality: The walking stick and the advertisement are drawn from swindlers of the nineteenth century, and the notion of the horn having healing properties is echoed in medieval folklore.

In a story such as "De natura Unicorni" (please see separate entry), unicorns are treated as rare animals on the verge of being hunted to extinction, in contrast to the abundance, even ordinariness of unicorns in "An Infestation of Unicorns."

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