In the House of My Enemy Short Guide

In the House of My Enemy by Charles de Lint

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Contents

Overview

In most of his works about adolescents, de Lint uses his fantasy trappings to create symbolic tales that cut sharply into uncomfortable aspects of human experience. "In the House of My Enemy" depicts the consequences of child abuse, teenaged pregnancy, and abandonment through a survivor, Jilly, and a lost soul, Annie, a fifteen-yearold who is eight months pregnant and who has lost hope for herself. For all the touches of magic and supernatural beings, the story is never evasive, always focused on whether an adolescent such as Annie can be saved from her own self-rejection.

About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, the Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmit, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmit-de Lint, was a school teacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 19.61. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15,1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he was a record store manager until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends. A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His Jack the Giant Killer won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "HOMer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for The Little Country. The Little Country also was included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected Trader as one of its Best Books for Young Adults in 1998.

De Lint has become the quintessential crossover author: His writings intended for grownups have found a large audience among young adults; he doubles his crossover appeal because his writings for young adults have found an appreciative audience among grownups.

Setting

"In the House of My Enemy" takes place in the imaginary city of Newford, where the everyday world and the supernatural coexist, even mix. Sophie Etoilee's mystical heritage is an example of how the world of magic and the world of the commonplace often mix within a single character. In Newford, anything can happen: Comic books can come to life, animals can be part human, and abstractions such as "small deaths" can take human form. The setting allows de Lint to examine tough personal and social issues in tightly wound narratives that use symbolism heavily to convey complex ideas simply. De Lint says that he has discovered that some of his readers are sure that Newford is in Canada, while others are sure it is in America. He declines to say which nation it is in, although, he says, its legal system is American.

"In the House of My Enemy" focuses on a small artistic community that has chosen to create an exhibition of art about wounded souls, especially abused children. The street life of Newford is as bleak and unforgiving as that of any real-life city, and youngsters such as Annie people it with hopeless figures lurking in the darkness. Jilly's apartment is a haven away from the harshness of street life, a place where the soul can heal. Sophie specializes in finding such places for homeless children to stay—places where they may find an older, wiser soul mate who can nurture them and help them overcome bleak childhoods to become strong grownups.

Social Sensitivity

De Lint is just about as frank as any writer, even Judy Bloom, when it comes to formerly taboo subject matter for fiction.

Early in "In the House of My Enemy," Jilly says, "I guess I was around three years old when my oldest brother started molesting me"; later she says, "I didn't know that what he was doing was wrong.... " Such phrases may make many parents jump in surprise, and even young readers may be offended. Librarians may be forgiven if they are torn between where to shelve such a book: the young adult section because it focuses on young adult issues, or the grownup section because its subject matter is bluntly presented and the language is more appropriate to adult audiences.

Yet the subject of "In the House of My Enemy" is an ugly one, and it is part of Jilly's character that she look at it in frank terms. She was abused; she grew up in a household in which both parents were alcoholics and the children had little supervision and apparently little moral guidance.

Her blunt remarks about child abuse serve to show her to be someone who knows exactly what she is talking about; it gives her the authentic tone that enables her to talk to abused children with honesty. She knows them because she is them.

The subject itself is a tough one for any audience. Throughout his fiction, de Lint makes it plain that issues that affect many young adults are not ones he thinks should be glossed over. He also seems plainly respectful of his audience. The issues are tough ones, and they are handled in such a way as to show confidence in his audience's ability to think about and understand them.

At present, children having babies is a very important social issue, with millions of young girls having babies they are too young to raise. Some high schools even provide day care for the children of students. An issue of such importance and as widespread as it is cries out for coverage that invites thoughtfulness from young readers.

In this, de Lint may not quite hit his mark. The question of whether the subject matter is fit for young adults seems to have already been decided by young adults themselves—abused and abandoned children seem almost universal in big cities, and their pregnancies and panhandling are plain social problems, ones that older teen-agers in particular are likely to be aware of. De Lint's open presentation of the issues involved in Annie's homelessness and pregnancy may well be good; many a young reader craves honesty in his or her reading.

Even so, de Lint is sometimes trapped in a surfeit of political correctness, with human villains with not a shred of humanity, and a placing of blame on society for misconduct that may be more individual in nature. In the case of "In the House of My Enemy," part of Jilly's personal growth was her development of self-worth and her determination to take her life into her own hands.

Even so, she is crippled in her relationships with men, knows it, but cannot get around it. Her effort to take responsibility for another is in part an effort to take charge of herself; caring for Annie requires self-discipline and a focus on Annie's needs. Part of the tragedy of the story is that she cannot do enough; Annie must do some of the work herself, and she feels too beaten and overwhelmed to survive. The point that childhood experiences have real, sometimes severe, adult consequences may be a bit commonplace, but it is well made in a story of one woman trying to help another.

Literary Qualities

De Lint's narratives tend to be experimental, as if in constant rebellion against the expectations of his audience. This very rebelliousness is exhilarating and may account in part for the appeal of his work for teen-agers; his narratives seem to make their own rules, to stand apart from the ordinary, much as a reader might like to do. In the case of "In the House of My Enemy," he employs alternating narrative perspectives, one from the first-person point of view, the "I" of the narrative. This is Jilly Coppercorn commenting on herself, her feelings, and her observations of others, particularly Annie, with whom she feels a strong connection. The other narrative voice is thirdperson omniscient, meaning a point of view that allows the narrator to describe anything in the story, even the thoughts of the characters. The result of this is very effective because it creates a powerful irony: The third-person narrator is merciless in describing events, letting the audience in on the impending tragedy even as Jilly strives to save at least one teen-ager from a terrible life.

De Lint often makes references to other art forms in his fiction. Usually the art form of choice is music, a natural one because of his lifelong work as a musician. His association of modern popular music with events in his fiction gives his work a topical tone that is particularly appealing to youngsters who have a passion for music—which means most young adults. In the case of "In the House of My Enemy," he employs not so much music as painting. The events in the story are keyed to paintings created for the exhibition about displaced children. The paintings are described, with the subject of each then played out in a short chapter.

These paintings, ordered as they would be for an exhibition, give the story its structure, holding together its elements that could easily become confused because of the shifting narrative points of view.

Themes and Characters

Jilly says of herself: I've been so many people; some I didn't like at all. I wonder that anyone could.

Victim, hooker, junkie, liar, thief. But without them I wouldn't be who I am today.

I'm no one special, but I like who I am, lost childhood and all.

Most of "In the House of My Enemy" is about Jilly and her effort to establish her own self-worth. Her friend Sophie Etoilee, a fairylike woman, has helped her and has brought her into a group of artists who are working to put on an exhibition depicting the darker side of growing up. One of Sophie's engravings is Stolen Childhood, a symbolic depiction of "A child in a ragged dress" holding a stick doll, with "A shadowed figure" standing "behind the screen door, watching her." That symbolic child could be Jilly, who had a childhood haunted not only by her abuser but by those who blamed her for the abuse once it was discovered. Her entire family treated her as if she were the guilty party.

Much of Jilly's life seems to have been an effort to escape out of the shadow. Her listing of "Victim, hooker, junkie, liar, thief" represents the motivations she thinks many homeless young people have—each act really being a submission to the evil done to the youngster, even though each act may seem like a rebellion against society. Jilly tries to convey this idea to Annie, a pregnant fifteen-year-old who panhandles Jilly.

To degrade oneself, to abuse drugs or to steal, is a victory for the abuser. The weakness that Jilly has yet to overcome is her inability to form long-term loving relationships. She retreats whenever such a relationship seems to be developing. It may be this weakness that proves fatal in her effort to help Annie; her abuser still has his victories long after he is part of Jilly's past.

Even so, Jilly recognizes her weaknesses and has enough strength to face adversity.

She remarks, "But that's the way it works in fairy tales, too, isn't it? Something always goes wrong, or there wouldn't be a story.

You have to be strong, you have to earn your happily ever after." This seems a coldhearted remark in the light of Annie's suicide, but for Jilly it is important to try again, not to give up on helping teenagers because of her failure.

Of Annie, Jilly notes that she "was strong enough to go away from her baby when she felt like all she could do was just lash out, but she wasn't strong enough to help herself. That was the awful gift her parents gave her." How does one give another person self-worth? Throughout the story, Jilly tries to imbue Annie with a sense of being worthwhile, of being a human being worthy of living, worthy of being happy. This theme ties together the action of the story, but in the end, is the effort futile? Despite Jilly's efforts to help

her, Annie flees and commits suicide. This makes for an enigmatic conclusion. Annie Mackle's pencil drawing In the House of My Enemy is included in the art exhibit: The images are crudely rendered. In a house that is merely a square with a triangle on top, are three stick figures, one plain, two with small "skirt" triangles to represent their gender. The two larger figures are beating the smaller one with what might be crooked sticks, or might be belts.

The small figure cringes.

In the visitor's book, someone writes that "I can never forgive those responsible for what's been done to us. I don't even want to try." Jilly responds, "Neither do I . .. God help me, neither do I."

Topics for Discussion

[A note to teachers: One possible response to "In the House of My Enemy" is for a teenager to realize that his or her problems may not be as awful as he or she thought when compared to what Jilly and Annie—and the people they represent—have endured. Another response could be a strong reaction to a powerful narrative that vividly depicts the psychological damage caused by abuse. You may wish to be sure that your students are mature enough to handle the subject matter intelligently. It may also be wise to be sure good school counselors are available for any student who finds the subject matter striking too close to home.] 1. Would Jilly benefit from forgiving those who abused her? Should she forgive them?

2. Why would Annie still commit suicide after being given a home with Jilly, who is sympathetic and supportive of her?

3. "In the House of My Enemy" is a sad tragedy. Are sad stories fit reading for young people?

4. Would "In the House of My Enemy" be better if Annie lived?

5. Is child abuse a suitable theme for a story to be read by a young audience?

6. What do the works of art symbolize in "In the House of My Enemy"?

7. What has Jilly done to overcome her life of abuse and self-abuse? Would any of her techniques work in real life?

8. Is the language of "In the House of My Enemy" too graphic?

9. What effect would an art exhibit like that in "In the House of My Enemy" have? Would it have the effects Sophie and Jilly hope for?

10. Why is Annie's "crude" drawing included in the art exhibit?

11. What constitutes abuse rather than proper discipline?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the ways communities try to help teenagers like Annie? Are any of these ways successful?

2. What efforts are there to prevent child abuse? Which work best? Why?

3. How common is homelessness for teenagers in the United States or Canada?

Why are the teenagers homeless? Can they be helped?

4. Teenaged motherhood and fatherhood is considered a great social problem by many people in government and in social charities. Why do they think it is a problem? What are they doing to fix the problem? What do teenagers themselves have to do to fix the problem?

5. How accurate is the portrayal of Annie as a representative of abused children? As a teenaged mother? As a drug abuser?

6. What do psychologists say are the longterm effects of child abuse?

7. Why are abused children often blamed for the abuse? Why do the children often feel guilty about it?

8. What institutions exist in your community for helping abused children and homeless youngsters? What do they try to do? Do they do enough?

9. Why does self-destruction sometimes result from being abused?

10. Why do some who were abused as children become abusers when they grow up? Can this be stopped?

For Further Reference

Cassada, Jackie. Library Journal 118, 5 (March 15, 1993): 111. Highly recommends Dreams Underfoot, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

de Lint, Charles, http://www.cyberus.ca/ ~cdl. An exceptionally fine author's web site with information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and an FAQ (frequently asked questions) section in which he answers questions about himself and his views.

. "Interview with Charles de Lint."

Conducted by Chuck Lipsig. De Lint says, "This interview first appeared in an on-line magazine called Sphere, albeit in a much altered form." The present writer has not been able to find the original interview, but the version to which de Lint refers is to be found at his web site, hi the interview, de Lint says, "I write in what I call a very 'organic' style of writing. In other words, I'm finding out every day what happens, the same way a reader would."

. "An Interview with Charles de Lint."

Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine no. 32 (Summer 1996). Conducted by Lawrence Schimel. This interview was conducted via written correspondence.

Although the interview is extensive, it remains throughout well focused on de Lint's literary work. In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world." A copy is available at de Lint's Internet web site.

. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint." The Wordsworth 8, 4 (January 1998). Conducted by Mike Timonin. A longer version of this interview appears at de Lint's web site. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."

Easton, Tom. Analog Science Fiction & Fact 113, 13 (November 1993): 167-168. Mildly positive review of Dreams Underfoot, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

Green, Roland. Booklist 89, 14 (March 15, 1993): 1301. A rave review of Dreams Underfoot, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

Related Titles

De Lint is a prolific writer of short stories. Most of them take place in urban settings, especially the fictional town of Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life. These stories often feature outsiders such as Jilly. The characters of Jilly and Sophie appear in other Newford stories. For example, they appear in "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep" (1993), in which Sophie works out "the classic abandoned child's scenario" in a series of dreams in which she must save the moon, her mother, from drowning. The story shares the complex structure of "In the House of My Enemy," with the narrative voice shifting from third person to first person from chapter to chapter. The issue of child abuse also shows up in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," in which a woman, Jaime, mourning the loss of her lover, Annie, becomes like a comic book superhero, avenging the abuse of children. She finds that a life devoted to revenge diminishes her.

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