Jack London Short Guide

Jack London by Daniel Dyer

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Dyer's Jack London is far more detailed than most biographies of London. It is even more detailed than many biographies written for adults, and this may be Dyer's special contribution to studies of London's life.

Using plain English, he carefully explains the difficult aspects of London's life and clarifies aspects from London's literary inspirations to the ailments that caused his death. This makes Jack London a tour deforce, a surprising, robust, and enlightening account that anyone can enjoy, from which anyone can learn. If one wishes to understand the complexities of London's contradictory personality, Dyer's biography is a good place to begin reading. It is considered one of the best young adult biographies on London and is among the best biographies for any age group.

About the Author

Daniel Dyer has a Ph.D. from Kent State University. He became interested in Jack London when teaching The Call of the Wild to eighth graders, and subsequently published an annotated edition of the novel as well as a teacher's guide for the novel. He and his son actually visited the sites of the Klondike gold strikes, following in London's footsteps.

Setting

Jack London was born John Griffith Chaney on January 12, 1876, in San Francisco. He was disowned by his biological father, William Henry Chaney. His mother, Flora Wellman, married John London later in September that year, with her husband giving her son his last name. Young John became "Jack" to distinguish his name from his adoptive father's name. London lived most of his life in the San Francisco Bay area, and as a youngster roamed the streets of the cities. In 1883, at age seven, London began drinking beer, which soon led to alcoholism and spending much of his free time as an adolescent in rough, rowdy bars.

Some of the most exciting of London's adventures took place in San Francisco Bay, where in 1891, London became an oyster pirate. The dangerous and illegal occupation threw him in with very rough people.

Drinking himself into a stupor became a way of life for him. Even so, gripped by novels of sea-faring adventure, in 1893, seventeen-year-old London signed on as a crewJack London 207 man on the freighter Sophia Sutherland to sail to Japan and hunt seals. Life on the ship was difficult, but London won the respect of his crewmates with hard work and physical courage. One of his adventures aboard the Sophia Sutherland would become the basis of his first publication, the story "Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan."

When London returned home, he found an America in the throes of a depression and employment scarce. Therefore, in 1894, he joined the Industrial Army, a protest movement for workers hurt by the economic depression of the 1890s, and he marched to Washington, D.C., to join a national protest. He left the protest, wandered to New York, and there was arrested for vagrancy and imprisoned. The rapes, beatings, and other horrors he witnessed and possibly endured colored his political views and writing for the rest of his life.

The discovery of gold in the Yukon inspired him to undertake the arduous journey to Alaska, across the Alaskan wilderness and into the Yukon, where he did not find gold but instead found a host of memorable men and women who became the inspirations for a multitude of short stories and novels. By 1902, he was a well-known author, and he was hired by newspaper publisher William Randolf Hearst to cover the Boer War, but London persuaded Hearst to instead have him write about the living conditions of the working class in London, England. The resulting book The People of the Abyss (1903) was and remains controversial. London had disguised himself as a roustabout and wandered for weeks through slums, finding the living conditions of England's workers to be appalling.

In 1904, London agreed to cover the Russo-Japanese War for Hearst and sailed to Tokyo. Even though the American press corps in Japan was avidly pro-Japanese, the Japanese tried to keep the reporters away from any uncensored news about the war.

London, ever impatient, sneaked out of Tokyo to a southwest Japanese seaport and contrived to gain passage on a boat to Korea.

London was the only American reporter to get anywhere near the war front, and one of only two reporters to even make it as far as Korea. Envious fellow reporters denigrated London, but others admired him for his daring and determination to find his story.

His giving Hearst several exclusive accounts of the war before the Japanese authorities found him and send him south to Seoul, away from the front, won him much favor with Hearst.

Using his fame to draw large audiences, London traveled across the United States in 1905, giving speeches in favor of socialism. He embarrassed his fellow socialists somewhat by insisting that peaceful means for transforming society were not enough, that instead the working poor should use violence to overthrow the unjust economic system. His tour fizzled out midway when he both received his divorce decree from his first wife and the mother of his two daughters, Bess Maddern, and married his lover Charmian Kittredge on the same day, November 19, 1905. He and his new wife settled in Glen Ellen, California, and in spite of finding his reputation tarnished because of his abandonment of Bess, his home became the focus of the artistic society of the San Francisco Bay Area, with writers and artists constantly coming and going.

In 1907, London and Charmian, with a handpicked crew of inexperienced and incompetent sailors, set off to spend several years sailing around the world on his custom-built ship, the Snark. The ship became lost because its navigator did not know how to navigate, but London taught himself how to read charts and use navigational instruments, and he directed his ship to Hawaii, where he and the crew rested. While there, he discovered surfing and spent weeks out in the sun learning how to use surf boards. His writings about surfing helped to popularize the sport on the mainland, but he sunburned so badly that he could barely crawl for days.

As the Snark made its way through the islands of the South Seas, London and his crew were beset by injuries and illnesses, with crew members gradually leaving the voyage. Although well treated wherever he went, London was disheartened by what white colonialists had done to the islands and he quietly dropped his advocation of white supremacy. He, Charmian, and the one remaining original crew member, Martin Johnson, reached the end of the Snark's journey in Australia, where London was hospitalized for several days.

In 1910, he and Charmian established Beauty Ranch in the Valley of the Moon, near Sonoma, California. London was determined to make Beauty Ranch a model of modern agriculture, and it was a forerunner of environmentally friendly farming techniques. The ranch was never profitable because London obsessively bought more land to add to it whenever he could, putting him in debt even while writing best sellers.

Even so, had he lived a few more years, he would likely have begun turning a profit because his many schemes were paying off in abundant productivity as well as high

quality produce and farm animals, somewhat to the dismay and envy of other local farmers.

London had been building a huge lodge that he hoped would become a center for artists and writers. He called it "Wolf House." Almost completed, it burned down on August 22, 1913. At the time, nearly everyone was certain that Wolf House was the victim of arson, set on fire by neighbors jealous of his farming successes, but it was more likely the victim of spontaneous combustion from a pile of kerosene-soaked rags left overnight in the lodge by the construction workers. Wolf House was London's last great passion, except for Charmian.

Social Sensitivity

London "recalled that the first time he got drunk he was five years old," notes Dyer. "In truth, I had been poisoned," declares London. From early childhood, London was a heavy drinker, often prone to binges. He recalled nearly drowning while drunk when he was an adolescent—floating off in the currents of San Francisco Bay only to be fortuitously saved. His abandoning his life as oyster pirate and wharf rat was motivated in part by the realization that the heavy drinking associated with that life would kill him at an early age.

Eventually, his lifelong battle with alcohol resulted in his writing John Barleycorn (1913), a story of alcohol addiction that remains a landmark for its realism.

Alcoholism was not the only legacy of London's childhood of hard labor and little education. Dyer emphasizes how London's work in factories and railroad yards left him with an oft-stated determination not to be a human animal, laboring as if he had no mind. His determination to be the opposite, to be someone who earned his living with his mind is one of the principal motivations Dyer cites for London's determined struggle to become a writer, even when circumstances seemed to deny him any hope of being anything other than a physical laborer.

His becoming a socialist stemmed in part from his anger at himself having been cruelly exploited when a boy, and he wrote extensively about the reforms that should be made for the lives of the working class: "He wrote about how working conditions ought to be more humane—workers should have shorter hours, longer vacations, better salaries, better benefits," says Dyer. "He 211 did not believe children should be laboring in factories. He thought that people should be able to retire, to receive a pension, and not have to work until they died." Such modest reforms were regarded as radical in his day; they have yet to be found in much of the modern world. London did not envision the working class gaining such rights easily. He angrily declared that the working class must gain its rights through the violent overthrow of their exploiters, the owners of industries. One of his greatest frustrations was that his own example of a man rising out of poverty and exploitation was not followed by others.

He also became angry at his fellow socialists, who seemed to favor a gradual empowering of the working class, rather than London's view that exploitation should be brought to an end as quickly as possible.

Eventually, he came to believe that socialists were part of the problem. They were well-to-do people who favored sacrifices for others but not for themselves. "In March 1916, both Jack and Charmian abruptly resigned from the Socialist Party," notes Dyer.

"He said in his letter that his resignation was due to the party's 'lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis on the class struggle.'"

It is odd that a man who devoted much of his time to urging social and political reform to aid the poor, child laborers, and overworked and underpaid laborers would have notions of racial superiority, but as much London disliked his mother, he adopted for himself her attitude that white people were superior to other races and that AngloSaxons were superior to all other whites.

This view was mixed with his haphazard reading of history and philosophy. London's "own studies of history had convinced him that white Anglo-Saxons were destined to control the world," Dyer mentions. Dyer does not give a full account of London's racial views; they do not seem to have affected his fiction or his socialist ideas.

Still, someone seriously interested in London's racism should consult Alex Kershaw's Jack London: A Life (1997), especially the account of the Snark's adventures in the South Pacific, during which London abandoned his views of racial superiority. He expected whites, Anglo-Saxons in particular, to rule to the benefit of other races, but found that white colonialists brought destruction and misery, instead.

In a biography that masterfully explains the important aspects of London's life, London's racism stands out as a nettlesome exception. Early on, Dyer notes London's ethnic prejudices. Yet, the evolution of London's thought about race and racial groups is not explained, and his relationships with people of races other than his own are little mentioned. Even his relationship to his childhood nurse Jennie Prentiss, an African American, is touched on only a couple of times. Dyer's noting that Prentiss and her husband were the people Jack first called "Mamma" and "Papa" only highlights the problem of how London could at any time regard his ethnic fraction of white people—Anglo-Saxons—as superior to any of the loving strong people of other races about which he wrote feelingly and honestly. London's racism, left underdeveloped in Dyer's biography, can be a troubling factor for a youngster to consider while reading about him or while reading his writings. That London shed some of his nonsensical prejudices late in his life is important to know.

His adventures in the South Pacific resulted in writings that affected American society significantly in at least three ways.

One is that he made Hawaii and South Sea islands into popular tourist destinations for mainland Americans, and they remain immensely popular. In addition, "Jack London is one of the reasons that surfing is now a popular sport," claims Dyer. He may have badly sunburned himself while learning the sport (doing anything in excess seems to have been a fundamental part of London's nature), but London loved surfing and wrote of it in essays about Hawaii, and in so doing captured the imaginations of young men and women who tried the sport out for themselves.

Perhaps more important were London's accounts of visiting lepers. Leprosy was then a poorly understood disease that horrified people; responses toward lepers were traditionally ones of revulsion. London and Charmian visited lepers, and although horrified by what the disease did to its victims, they viewed the lepers as otherwise ordinary people. London's essays about their lives and his travelogues about visiting

them set a new tone for how society regarded leprosy and helped begin the long process of research that resulted in treatments for the disease.

But London still had a restless spirit and a desire to be at work. Even though he drove himself to write every day without fail, he decided to take on the challenges of ranching. Dyer does a marvelous job of explaining how London developed Beauty Ranch in the Valley of the Moon. For Californians, London's work became a powerful influence on farming; he introduced techniques for farming without pesticides— environmentally friendly farming—that are now widely practiced. The "organic" vegetables in America's supermarkets are likely to have been grown similar to the way London grew his.

London pursued his dream of an ideal ranch with the same obsessiveness with which he pursued his writing: He reconstructed and repaired buildings.

He bought a blacksmith shop in Glen Ellen and had all the equipment hauled to the ranch. He planted and harvested hay. He studied farming techniques of the ancient Chinese—especially concerning plowing and drainage—and borrowed freely from every source that seemed to work. He applied no artificial fertilizers but used the manure of his own animals. He grew spineless cactus to feed his cattle. He rotated crops so as not to exhaust the soil. He wired buildings for electricity. He built the first concrete-block silos in California— forty feet tall—and filled them with feed.

From England he imported the famous shire horses and began to breed them. One of his animals—named Neuadd Hillside— took first prize at the California State Fair.

London pioneered ways to make farming less labor intensive; his experiments such as centralized feeding and housing pigs in an innovative complex of pens were sometimes mocked, but they foresaw the future of family farms in the twentieth century. According to Dyer, "Jack's dream was that the ranch would become a totally selfsufficient community." With most other modern biographers, Dyer suggests that London was only a few years away from realizing this dream when he died.

Literary Qualities

Jack London is a character study, an effort to capture the essence of London's personality. For Dyer, this involves first identifying facts and separating them from myths, exaggerations, and falsehoods: "In this biography," he says, I have attempted to stick to verified facts about Jack London's life. This is not always easy. So many legends about him have grown since his death that it is difficult, at times, to separate what really happened from what might have happened.

While he was alive, Jack himself was occasionally guilty of adding to the legend by exaggerating his accomplishments.

Thus, Dyer approaches his subject with a skeptical mind, trusting little without testing it for accuracy first. This may account for the marvelous descriptions of London and his times, as well as the clear explanations of London's views and of his importance as an historical figure.

This skeptical approach also generates a tone of authenticity. Dyer does not buy into tall tales or character assassinations, regardless of their sources, and his audience benefits by the resulting well-rounded picture of a realistic, yet remarkable, man. London's attitudes and achievements can be accounted for: a blend of hard work, talent, avid reading, determination, and good fortune that resulted in an extraordinary literary career and in one of the most captivating lives in the world of letters.

Themes and Characters

Dyer claims that William Chaney and Flora were actually married; other accounts have them as common-law spouses, or even as transitory lovers. He agrees with Jack London himself and other biographers that despite his denials, Chaney was London's biological father; according to Dyer, when contacted by London, Chaney denied all and cut off his son from communication. In any case, Jack London always regarded his mother's next husband, John London, as his true father. John London was a man of ambition, and as Jack would many years later, he tried to make a go of farming; bad luck and ill health forced him to quit. This meant that Jack had to go to work to help support his family. His mother earned money by conducting seances, but it was not enough to pay rent on a house and feed and clothe Jack and two stepsisters. At a young age, the author had experiences in factories, a rail yard, and other jobs, including pirating oysters in San Francisco Bay.

He even changed sides and became one of the officers charged with capturing oyster pirates. Much of his work he remembered as appallingly miserable or as self-destructive.

Perhaps those ugly memories underlay his work habits. '"I am a believer in regular work,' he wrote, 'and never wait for inspiration.'" Dyer sees these early experiences as motivation for London to become a writer, to live a life of the mind rather than live like a beast of burden. As a young adult, he discovered books and libraries; many an author has been inspired by books when young. For London, books were escapes from the realities of an almost unbearable childhood. They were with him wherever he went.

When he became a successful writer, earning small fortunes with his novels, he bought thousands of books, building a large personal library. London "frequently referred to his books as his 'tools,' and he used them for the remainder of his life as a substitute for teachers," says Dyer. From his reading, London developed his views on society, politics, and culture. He also found the basics for his style of writing. In a letter, he says: Don't you tell the reader. Don't. Don't.

Don't. But HAVE YOUR CHARACTERS TELL IT BY THEIR DEEDS, ACTIONS, TALK, ETC.... And get the atmosphere.

Get the breadth and thickness to your stories, and not only the length ... PUT ALL THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE YOURS INTO THE STORIES, INTO THE TALES, ELIMINATING YOURSELF... AND THIS WILL BE THE ATMOSPHERE. AND THIS ATMOSPHERE WILL BE YOU. DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND, YOU! YOU! YOU!

... Don't narrate—paint! draw!

build!—CREATE!

His relentlessly direct style with its emphasis on action captured the imaginations of a huge worldwide audience. The author "had become an international celebrity, a success beyond his wildest dreams," declares Dyer. "He had made it." Such celebrity would seem a great reward, but London seemed to tire of it.

It was part of his character to be generous, and he gave money to those in need and made loans to others that would not be repaid. Dyer notes, "He spent money before he got it, then had to write in order to earn it." Writing became a chore; something he did whether inspired or not. Every day, seven days a week, he wrote until he died, in bed amid notes and snippets of work. Perhaps this is why, late in Jack London, that Dyer records London as writing, "The thing I like most of all, is personal achievement—not achievement for the world's applause, but achievement for my own delight." Perhaps he motivated himself by finding something fresh and interesting to engage his mind, to "delight" himself.

In addition to John and Flora London, Jack's parents, his wives Bess and Charmian are key figures in Dyer's Jack London. There is no denying" that Jack's loveless marriage to Bess seemed cruel and foolish. His leaving her and their two daughters seems at once inevitable and heartless. Even so, Dyer points out that Jack sometimes could not visit his children because Bess denied him access. Nonetheless, in Dyer's view the girls loved their father and were delighted by his rare visits, but disheartened at their ending.

Part of what ended London's first marriage was his relationship with Charmian Kittredge. She was athletic, with an agile mind and an adventurous spirit that paralleled London's own. "You [Charmian] are more kin to me than any woman I have ever known," London declares. Theirs was a passionate romance that survived tragedies and hardships, as well as London's mercurial moods. Charmian became an aide, typing London's manuscripts; she became a sparring partner, giving as good as she got in the ring; she became an adventurer, traveling far with her husband.

Dyer notes that she became valuable for biographers, too. "Charmian also kept a diary for most of her life," he says. "She did not usually write a lot each day, but she did write almost every day. Because of this, we know much of what Jack was doing most of the time for the last dozen years of his life."

Dyer has done an admirable job of sorting through Charmian's records, sorting out telling details that help flesh out Charmian's life with Jack.

In the end, Charmian and Jack suffered disappointment. A child died soon after birth. London's great Wolf House burned to the ground just before it was ready to be occupied. Dyer explains how "forensic investigators," long after Jack and Charmian's deaths, decided that "some rags soaked in linseed oil" had spontaneously combusted, using the house's ventilation to becoming a great fire. Dismayed, London nonetheless continued to work hard, even though, says Dyer, "He was aware that he was dying."

Cigarettes, alcohol, injury, and illness had taken their toll. Dyer depicts London in his last days as being overwhelmed by ailments, all conspiring to weaken him, yet London was as determined as ever, insisting on working until his body gave up.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why did Jack London yearn to have adventures?

2. How did Charmian benefit from her marriage to Jack London?

3. Were people right to be angry with London for divorcing Bess and then quickly marrying Charmian?

4. What did London's experiences in the Klondike teach him? How did he put the lessons to work in his career?

5. What did London learn while sailing the South Seas? How did his experiences during the voyage affect his attitudes and behavior?

6. What aspect of London does Dyer believe is the most important for understanding London's life?

7. What role did alcohol play in London's life? How important does Dyer say it was?

8. What does Dyer leave unexplained about London's racism?

9. If London was a racist, should his books be banned? Does his racism show up in his fiction? Why would it not?

10. If, as Dyer contends, London knew that he was dying during the last months of his life, why did London continue working? Why not take a break and rest?

11. How complete is Dyer's depiction of London? Do you feel that you now know him?

12. Taken as a whole, did London lead a good life? Was he a good man?

13. How well does Dyer explain London's attitudes toward writing? What, according to Dyer, were London's principles for writing? How well did London follow his principles in his writings? (You may wish to focus on only one significant work to answer this.)

14. Dyer notes that many legends have grown about Jack London. How well does Dyer separate fact from myth?

What about London's actual life would inspire legends? Why would it be important to identify the reality behind the legends?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What was the design of the Snark? Draw a picture of it or build a model replica.

2. What were American attitudes toward divorced people at the time London divorced his first wife?

3. Draw a map of London's journey to the Klondike. Where was his cabin?

4. What was the history of socialism in America during London's lifetime? What would make it initially attractive to London? What would make him disgusted with it, to the point that he would quit socialism?

5. Why did the working class violently not revolt against their employers, something London wanted to happen?

6. Why did London's Valley of the Moon neighbors not like him?

7. Why does Alcoholics Anonymous recommend John Barleycorn for reading?

What makes the book important?

8. London joined a march of men to a protest in Washington, D.C. What were they protesting? How was the march organized? What did it achieve?

9. Why was London dismayed by what he saw while sailing among South Pacific islands? What is the history behind what he saw?

10. Write an account of a typical day for London, telling about what he did from the moment he awoke to the moment he went to sleep for the night.

For Further Reference

Simonetti, Karen. Booklist (September 15, 1997): 218. In this review of Jack London, Simonetti writes that Jack London is "a winning read to spark further study or to simply enjoy on its own."

Sullivan, Edward. School Library Journal (September 1997): 229. A very positive review of Dyer's biography, Jack London.

Related Titles/Adaptations

When Jack London advertised for crewmen for his voyage around the world on the Snark, a young Kansas man, Martin Johnson, volunteered. When London asked him whether he could cook, he claimed he could and then went in search of books on how to learn to cook. He was the only crew member besides Jack and Charmian to last all the way to Australia. With money borrowed from London, he completed his journey around the world. Eventually he would become a famous wildlife documentary filmmaker, but while on the Snark, he was just a dedicated amateur. In 1913, his Jack London's Adventures in the South Sea Islands (also known as Jack London's South 214 Jack London Sea Island Adventures) was released, featuring Jack London.

Jack London was very much frustrated by his dealings with filmmakers, most of whom seemed determined to take advantage of him. After much fuss, more than one lead actor and at least two directors, his novel Sea Wolf was made into a motion picture. Released in 1913, The Sea Wolf was directed by and starred Hobart Bosworth.

Jack London appears in this production, playing a sailor.

The Adventures of Jack London (1943; also known as Jack London or The Life of Jack London) opened to mixed reviews and continues to received mixed responses. Its problems are its effort to work in a theme of Japanese expansionism and its disregard for accuracy in its depictions of Jack and Charmian. Directors Lumsden Hare and Alfred Santell did not have much of a budget to film the movie, and leading actors Michael O'Shea and Susan Hayward as Jack and Charmian did not have much of a script with which to work. The basic elements of London's life are there, from oyster piracy to adventuring. The effort is sincere, even if the result is poor.

A truly disappointing effort is Klondike Fever (1979), starring Jeff East as Jack London adventuring in the wilderness. East looks the part, but the roles given to Rod Steiger (Soapy Smith), Angie Dickinson (Belinda McNair), Lorne Greene (Sam Steele), and Sherry Lewis (Louise) are strange wildwest caricatures. Director Peter Carter seems bored with this movie, providing a less than exciting account of London's time in Alaska.

Biographers have long been short on details of what happened in Alaska. They seem unable to show direct event-to-fiction correlations between London's Alaskan experiences and his writings because the notable events were solitary experiences for London for which second or third hand accounts are unavailable. Details of London's adventures on the Sophia Sutherland are also scant, with biographers mostly speculating about how London was treated while on board, sometimes trying to draw out clues from his novel The Sea-Wolf. Little is known as well of London's stay in prison in New York, except for hints of rape and other violence.

In The Book of Jack London (1921), Charmian London depicts a devoted husband and man of great passion, a heroic figure beset by minor quirks in his personality. In Jack London and His Times (1939), Joan London, Jack London's daughter, defends her

mother Bess, deplores her father's marriage to Charmian, and offers an interesting firsthand account of California society in her father's day. In Sailor on Horseback (1938), Irving Stone uses London's life to create a work that is more drama than it is biography. In Jack (1977), Andrew Sinclair creates a study of someone obsessed with his own self-destruction. Kershaw praises London's socialism and uses London as an excuse to denigrate American culture in his 1997 work Jack London: A Life. In other words, each of these biographers for adults has a purpose to which he or she cuts and shapes London.

Perhaps London has seemed so very much bigger than life that biographers have wanted to cut him down to a manageable size; sometimes, as with Irving and Kershaw, he serves more as icon than human being.

Perhaps one of the few balanced accounts is Clarize Stasz's American Dreamers: Charmian and Jack London (1988), which is a dual biography of Jack and Charmian. Stasz comes as dose as anyone has—maybe closer— to revealing the real Jack London.

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