

A Killing Freeze Short Guide

A Killing Freeze by Lynn Hall

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Overview

In a mountain town during its annual Winter Fest, two people die, apparently at the hands of a deranged murderer. Clarie, the main character, finds Mrs. Amling in the snow: "She lay facedown, arms upflung, lookinggrotesquely childlike in her blue coveralls. Against either side of her body, her dogs huddled, shivering and looking up at me." The elderly woman who wrote children's books and seemed to have no enemies has died from a blow from a blunt instrument to the back of her head. Suspects are hard to come by. Could the killer be Ray, a lazy handyman who had worked for Mrs. Amling, and who claimed she had been infatuated with him? Perhaps the killer is Richard Moline, an untalented artist who had hoped to illustrate a book by Mrs. Amling, but had been rebuffed?

The possible suspects shrink in number when Mr. Moline is found dead in a block of ice: As I looked, other details began showing through the glitter and glare of the ice: a hand with fingers splayed, grasping. A knee, bent so that it came close to the surface of the block, so close the fabric of its jeans was clear.

The grotesquely frozen body of Moline makes it seem as though a madman is loose in Harmon Falls, perhaps hidden among the celebrants in the Winter Fest. Then footprints are found on the roof of Clarie's home; plainly someone was eavesdropping on Clarie and her father. If it was the killer, then the killer knows that Clarie possesses the clue that can identify him.

About the Author

Lynn Hall was born November 9, 1937, in Lombard, Illinois, to Raymond Edwin Hall and Alice (nee Seeds) Hall. Her father worked for Standard Oil; her mother was a high school teacher of English and Spanish.

While she was still a child, her family moved near Des Moines, Iowa. Hall remembers being a loner, not for a particular reason, since her family life was a happy one; she simply preferred being alone. She developed a fondness for animals, especially horses. When fourteen years old, she used money she had earned to buy herself a horse. She rode everyday; her knowledge of horses provides backgrounds for several of her books.

After graduating from high school, Hall held a wide variety of jobs in Colorado, Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, and Wisconsin, and Iowa. On May 1, 1960, she married Dean W. Green; they were divorced in September 1961. From 1955 to 1966, she seems to have been dissatisfied with her life, moving as she did from one unfulfilling job to another, and having what appears to have been an unfulfilling second marriage.

She remembers being inspired to write by seeing a badly written, inaccurate horse book in a book store; she believed she could do better. She sold her chinchilla herd to pay for her living expenses while writing her first book, *The Shy Ones*, about a dog. Horse stories soon followed, and by the end of 1968, Hall had established herself as a full-time writer.

In the early 1970s, Hall moved to the country, living in a farmhouse. In the late 1970s, she built a stone cottage she calls Touchstone. There, she lives with Cocker Spaniels, horses, and other animals. Her love of country life and animals continues to inform her writings.

In 1972, her book *Sticks and Stones* was selected a "best book" for young adults by the American Library Association, as were *The Leaving* in 1980 and *Uphill All the Way* in 1984. In 1981, *The Leaving* received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award.

Setting

Events take place in the environs of Harmon Falls, a small Minnesota town.

It is wintertime, and snow covers the ground and buildings in and around the town. For several years, Clarie's father has organized the Winter Fest for Harmon Falls, which draws tourists and local people to contests such as snowmobile racing and ice carving.

The Winter Fest serves as a way for local business people to make money: Although the events of the Winter Fest themselves do not bring in much money, those who attend the festival tend to buy goods at the local stores, including snowmobiles from Clarie's Dad.

The success of the Winter Fest is essential to the merchants making a profit on the year, whose success this year is threatened by the deaths of Mrs. Amling and Richard Moline.

Most of the events in *A Killing Freeze* take place outside, in the cold and snow. Clarie and her father live in a remote area, with only Mrs. Amling's house nearby. A young woman who has had always to be independent, Clarie is often alone. She usually likes her solitude, but with a murderer on the loose, the isolated roads and woods seems ominously treacherous. Her father's store is small and often crowded with locals who are just hanging around, chatting with each other.

About her home, Clarie remarks: "Our house was weird looking. I loved it.

Dad and I built it entirely with our own hands, starting when I was about ten." The house is a source of pride for Clarie, who has always tried to share the workload with her father. Thus, she helps him with the Winter Fest by keeping track of contestants and keeping events running on time. This often means traveling alone from one event site to another.

Social Sensitivity

The theme of the broken family is found in many, perhaps most, of Hall's novels. Many of these broken families result in misery for the children. For instance, in *The Solitary*, the main character has lived such a painful, humiliating life because of her destroyed family that she takes the first opportunity she can to live by herself, far from others. In Hall's novels, including *A Killing Freeze*, the main character forms a close bond with whoever cares for her.

The key to this close bond in *A Killing Freeze* is the father's dedication to caring for his daughter; Clarie has never had reason to doubt that he loves her and wants to care for her. Further, he has never rubbed her nose in the sacrifices he has made in order to raise her.

This is where Hall usually places most of the responsibility for successful or unsuccessful family life, with the parents. Even so, her books depict in detail what young people should do to help themselves. Clarie is a very responsible person, who intelligently knows the value of a loving parent, as well as the importance of her own contributions to making life good. In Hall's novels, broken, even awful, families are no excuse for a young person's misbehavior; she shows how young people (which extends to those who were young people once) can take charge of their lives and do good for themselves and others.



Literary Qualities

The narrative of *A Killing Freeze* is told in the first person by the main character Clarie. Hall sometimes runs into the problem of having her firstperson narrators speak in a language that is too sophisticated for them, which slightly diminishes the credibility of the characterization. This is not the case in *A Killing Freeze*. The diction throughout rings with authenticity; Clarie is an interesting, intelligent, and energetic person whose powers of observation seem entirely appropriate for someone with her characteristics. Her voice is authentic.

It's [the Winter Fest is] the high point of the year for Dad and me, even though it means busting our butts chasing details. For instance, spent all day Wednesday in Dad's shop, which was headquarters for the Fest. I stuck labels on one hundred eighty trophies. I checked the trophies against the master list and ran down the three missing ones that the trophy company sent to the wrong address. I answered at least three million phone calls and sent people out four times to find Dad when emergencies came up.

A special challenge in *A Killing Freeze* are the physical descriptions. In mysteries, descriptions hold important clues to the solution; in a narrative with a first-person speaker, it would be easy to slip into a voice that is more authoritative—the author's own voice—and out of the realistic voice of the narrator. In *A Killing Freeze*, Hall skillfully avoids this problem. The descriptions are vivid, clear, and true to Clarie's characterization. For instance, when driving on an errand for her father, Clarie describes what she sees: I drove our pickup slowly, absorbing the beauty of the place. I never got tired of it. A narrow blacktop road twisted through the forest, following a stream bed, then climbing again to a meadow. The trees were giant white pines that shaded out the undergrowth and carpeted the ground with decades of shed needles. The trees were mounded with snow now, and the stream was just a flatness under the snow.

One of the features that elevates *A Killing Freeze* out of the ordinary is its distinguished prose style that is well adapted to the narrator.

Another feature that elevates *A Killing Freeze* above the ordinary is its mystery. It has significant twists and turns, turns clues upside-down on one another, and builds suspense, with danger first circling around Clarie, then focusing on her, putting her life in dire jeopardy. The techniques Hall uses to do this are not particularly unusual.

Clarie is the first to find Mrs. Amling's body, which thrusts her right into the middle of the investigation into the elderly woman's death. At first, suspects are few—one is even killed. Then, as Clarie gathers clues, the number of suspects expands, so that in the second half of the novel, even a close friend could be a crazed, murdering fiend. As the number of suspects increases, the number of potential victims decreases.

Hall pulls this off by having Clarie recognize something in an old photograph—something she cannot quite figure out—which is an old standby in mystery fiction; when Clarie tells her father that she saw something in a photograph that she almost



recognizes, somebody is listening. When Clarie and her father discover that someone heard Clarie's remarks, the novel focuses on the mortal danger to Clarie, heightening suspense that has been building throughout the narrative. Although the techniques Hall uses are ones often used by mystery writers, she applies them adroitly, and they do not call attention to themselves, thus allowing the narrative to flow smoothly. The solution to the mystery is well disguised, and is likely to come as an "ah ha!" surprise for most readers.



Themes and Characters

Clarie is not only the main character of *A Killing Freeze*, but she is the novel's narrator. She is engagingly intelligent, with her narrative sparkling with ideas. Tall and thin, she looks like a boy, something which does not seem to bother her. Her mother was a teenager when Clarie was born, and her mother abandoned her. Her father was then seventeen years old, but he took on a parent's responsibilities and raised her.

They lived for about ten years with his parents, then they moved to the home they had built themselves. Clarie takes pride in contributing to the welfare of her father and herself, and she finds her work fulfilling. In part because she and her father share in their labors, they have a particularly strong bond of mutual respect and love.

The other characters in *A Killing Freeze* are not as well drawn as Clarie.

This is typical of Hall's books, most of which emphasize a strong main character, using other characters primarily as foils. Thus Clarie's father Mel is not as sharply described as Clarie. He is evidently a man of strong convictions who takes his responsibilities seriously. He is proud of Clarie and enjoys her company. He affectionately calls her "Babe" and is relaxed in her presence.

Like Clarie, he seems to like the solitude that life in Harmon Falls affords.

Even so, he is a community leader; his store is a gathering place for locals, and he created the Winter Fest, which he organizes and runs, with the help of Harmon Falls residents, each year. According to Clarie, he and she look very much alike.

Another significant character is the sheriff, Keith. He is a steadying influence on those around him as he goes about the business of figuring who killed Mrs. Amling and Richard Moline. Intelligent and well-schooled in the techniques of police investigations, he draws several meaningful deductions about the crimes as the novel progresses. His characterization is a pleasant contrast to the common and usually pointless stereotypes of rural peace officers as foolish or ignorant, and Hall makes good use of him—even allowing him to become one of the suspects, adding to the novel's suspense and the tension surrounding Clarie as she tries to figure out who killed her elderly friend, Mrs. Amling.

Indeed, from just one or two suspects, Hall's skillful development of the plot allows almost everyone (never Clarie nor her father) to become a possibly crazed murderer, perhaps from Mrs. Amling's mysterious past. The mystery of who killed Mrs. Amling and Richard Moline drives the plot and the novel is primarily an entertainment.

However, it has a few significant themes: the importance of the family bond; the importance of sharing responsibilities; and the capacity young people have for mature behavior.



Throughout *A Killing Freeze*, the relationship between Clarie and her father is of primary importance. His taking on the grownup responsibilities of raising a child he could easily have abandoned has been rewarded by his daughter's love for him and her own pride in living up to the standards he sets by his example. Just about as old as her father was when she was born, Clarie values what he has given her, finds her contributions to their small family unit to be rewarding, and admires him for having built a happy life for them. Important to this theme of the family bond is how both her Dad and Clarie conduct themselves. He is a fairly quiet man who has earned his daughter's admiration by what he does. He shares his leisure time with her, always makes it clear that he values her company and work, and he rewards her efforts with trust in her ability to handle important responsibilities. On her end, Clarie does not expect her father to give her the moon; she accepts their small financial resources and focuses on what pleasures are to be had close at hand. She likes being on her own and makes sure that her father rarely has cause to regret trusting her. The woodlands, the snow, and her high school friends provide her with pleasure. She especially likes evenings with her father, when they watch television or share time by the fire. By putting effort into helping her father and herself survive, she has found rich satisfaction and a strong sense of self-worth.

The people of Harmon Falls seem accustomed to sharing responsibilities.

They help each other out almost as a matter of routine, the way Clarie helped Mrs. Amling. Even though Clarie's father created the Winter Fest to improve his business, many community members help to organize and run it. The benefits of their efforts spread to the community's merchants, so that Harmon Falls in general is enriched. The Winter Fest is macrocosm of how sharing responsibility can benefit an entire community; the relationship between Clarie and her father is a microcosm of the same principle. Without the contributions of each, they would have no home of their own.

Without Clarie taking responsibility for seeing as much as she can to her own needs, her father might not have been able to raise her himself. On the other hand, he not only provides them an income, he bears without complaint those responsibilities any father must bear, seeing to Clarie's need for a secure, stable relationship without smothering her. *A Killing Freeze* focuses on the importance of a family life of shared caring and responsibilities.

Clarie herself represents a theme frequently found in Hall's writings.

Although a teen-ager with typical teenage desires for fun and independence, Clarie is also a responsible member of her small community. None of the work she shoulders seems too much for a young adult, so her behavior is profoundly realistic. She is a demonstration of what young people can do for themselves and those they love, and the novel shows how her taking on important responsibilities helps even members of the community whom she does not know well. Her efforts bring her much satisfaction. Her kindness in assisting Mrs. Amling with the care of her dogs is returned with Mrs. Amling's company and friendship, both of which had made life a little less lonely and a little more interesting.



Topics for Discussion

1. Did the solution to the death of Mrs. Amling surprise you? What had you expected?
2. Did you figure out who Bernie was before Clarie did? If so, how?
3. Describe the business Clarie's father runs? What other sorts of businesses are found in towns like Harmon Falls?
4. Clarie says that most of her friends "seem to feel obligated to sneer at Harmon Falls because it's a little dinky town where nothing ever happens." Why would her friends say that? If the town is so dull, why would people choose to live there?
5. Why is Clarie devoted to her father? Should she not feel the common teen-age desire to distance herself from her parents?
6. What sort of planning goes into putting on the Winter Fest?
7. Why does Clarie like solitude? 8. Why do the killings not scare off the people attending the Winter Fest?

If you were a tourist, would you stay in Harmon Falls while the killings were still unsolved?

9. Is Clarie's shouldering of responsibility realistic?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Hall's novels often feature young people who share significant adult responsibilities with their parents. For example, in *A Killing Freeze*, Clarie helps run the Winter Fest and helps in her father's business. She takes pride in contributing to their welfare. Find other such characters in other novels by Hall. What do these characters have in common? Do any of them differ in important ways? How do these characters help us to understand some of Hall's purposes in her fiction?

2. What are snowmobiles? How can a person tell a good snowmobile from a bad one? What are snowmobiles used for?

3. One way books appeal to young readers is by showing a main character learning to take control of some aspect of his or her life. For example, in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (by Scott O'Dell, 1960), the main character learns how to fend for herself on a remote island, far from help. How do authors use the theme of competence to attract readers?

What are the best ways the theme of competence can be used? What are the worst ways?

4. What are the special difficulties of a family in which a teen-age father, without the help of the mother, has taken responsibility for raising his children?

5. How important is the characterization in *A Killing Freeze* to its mystery?

6. What is a winter fest? Are they common in snow country? How realistic in the Winter Fest of *A Killing Freeze* when compared with real ones?

7. How much responsibility do modern teen-agers take for the welfare of their families? Do many help in the family business, as Clarie does?

8. How good of a mystery is *A Killing Freeze*? Does it measure up to other mystery novels? Does it do a good job of presenting clues? Does it keep you guessing until the end?

9. How accurate is the depiction of a rural Minnesota town in *A Killing Freeze*?

10. Keith seems to be dependable, intelligent, and skilled. What are the requirements for becoming a sheriff in Minnesota? What do their jobs usually entail?

11. Keith says that there have been no killings in Harmon Falls for sixty years. How common are murders in rural Minnesota? Are small towns like Harmon Falls as safe as Clarie says Harmon Falls is?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Hall, Lynn." In *Something about the Author*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987: 97-104. Includes extensive autobiographical account of Hall's background and career.

Hall, Lynn. "Lynn Hall." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 145-147.

Brief autobiographical article about how Hall became a writer and her interest in animals.

Related Titles

Hall's books usually feature independent, strong-minded young women.

Part of the appeal of the books comes from following the protagonists' increasing competence in coping with life's problems. The books subtly suggest to young readers that they can not only learn to cope with adult problems but that they can even triumph over the problems, turning each step in acquiring self-sufficiency into a victory in the process of learning to control one's destiny.



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