

# **The Keeper of the Isis Light Short Guide**

## **The Keeper of the Isis Light by Monica Hughes**

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## Overview

Olwen Pendennis and her Guardian live in splendid isolation on the planet Isis of the star Ra, maintaining the beacon which announces the presence of this habitable planet to any space travelers, till the day of Olwen's tenth birthday. She would be sixteen in earth years, and she has never seen anyone but Guardian.

But eighty settlers arrive in the space ship Pegasus Two, with Captain Jonas Tryon. They will now live on the planet that Olwen has considered her own. She tries to put aside her childish, selfish impulses and finds herself curious about the newcomers.

Guardian makes her an isolation suit with a face-mask, to protect her in case the settlers have any germs which would harm her.

Mark London is one of the settlers. At seventeen, he is the oldest of the twenty children among the settlers, and Jody N'Komo is the youngest at nine. Mark is curious about the high places above their valley, which the settlers cannot explore without an oxygen breathing mask and an ultraviolet-opaque suit. Among the young settlers, he is the only one who takes Olwen's invitation to visit her home, and the mesa and the trail to the northern mountains when the settlers have acclimatized. They become friends almost at once, talking of her shy pet animal Hobbit.

The day after they meet, Mark climbs as high as Olwen's home, half-way up the cliff, but can go no higher. Two days later, Mark asks the doctor Phil MacDonald to take a sample of Olwen's blood to see if she is at any risk from germs from the settlers.

Then Mark and Olwen climb together to the top of her mesa, and he understands the beauty of the high places.

Olwen resents how her suit and mask keep Mark from seeing and knowing her, as she has come to love him. She tells Guardian that the doctor took her blood sample and will soon be able to prove that the suit is unneeded. Guardian confronts the doctor, demanding that the blood sample be returned. Mark hears them argue as the doctor demands to know what Guardian is hiding. Sent away, he takes an oxygen mask and UVO suit and climbs the cliff. Mark finds Olwen is not at home but on the mesa.

When she hears Mark call, she turns. Mark staggers to his feet and steps backward. In horror, he falls and she watches him drop.

Olwen climbs down to where Mark is caught on a spur of rock and puts his oxygen mask against his face again. When Guardian leaves the settlers' village far below, Olwen tosses a rock which alerts him so he spies her. Guardian climbs up quickly and sends her to radio the village, then get a floater car ready so he can take Mark to the doctor.



Guardian returns to tell Olwen that Mark will recover, but it is not advisable to visit him. He does not love her yet as she loves him because he does not know her properly.

Olwen is deeply distressed and goes to walk in the valley. Her pet Hobbit comes to play with her, a large animal that she has left alone since the settlers arrived. Hunters from the village shoot Hobbit, mistaking it for a dangerous beast, and one nearly shoots Olwen before they run. She walks to the village, where children and women run screaming from her as she throws angry words and stones at the houses until Guardian picks her up and takes her home.

He explains to her carefully that he has given her post-hypnotic suggestions not to remember her parents, who died in a storm on Isis when she was four earth-years old.

Her mother had lived long enough to appoint him to be the Guardian of Olwen; she had directed him, "Do whatever you must to keep her safe and happy." He has always tried to do just that. Since Guardian could not make Isis safe for Olwen, he made her safe for Isis. These changes altered her appearance considerably. She does not look like the settlers, but Guardian considers her both beautiful and perfectly functional.

Olwen asks him to make her a mirror, and on inspecting herself, she confirms that she is perfectly happy with her appearance and the life that Guardian made possible for her. She wishes that the settlers would be willing to have similar changes made for them, so they would have the freedom of all Isis. But they are all too old for such changes to be even partly successful. Olwen realizes that Mark must have been horrified at the sight of her and that was why he slipped and fell off the mesa. She resolves never to go back down into the village again or to have anything to do with the settlers.

Gone for a week's walkabout, Olwen finds another valley, meets a young wild Hobbit-creature and survives a great solar storm in a cave. On her return she learns that the settlers took shelter in the Pegasus Two. Olwen allows the Captain to meet with her, agrees that Guardian will laser shelters for the settlers into the cliff, and in her place he will attend meetings to share his knowledge of conditions on Isis with the settlers. She realizes something of the shock the Captain feels looking at her, remembering her father as a long-ago friend.

A letter comes for Olwen from Mark, who writes of missing her and a wish to explore her new valley as if he does not remember what he saw before falling. Olwen sends him a careful reply, with a good color photograph of herself, for Guardian to deliver. Mark's reply is but two sentences: "I will abide by your decision. I wish things had been different. Mark." Guardian's assessment of the reply is to tell Mark that he is wasted as a farmer; he should have stayed on earth and become a politician. Guardian tells Olwen a magnificent lie that Mark would never hold her back from the freedom of all Isis.

There is another solar storm approaching, and when the settlers take shelter in the Pegasus Two, the youngest child is out exploring on his own. Olwen is less vulnerable to the radiation from Ra than anyone.



She searches until she finds young Jody and brings him safely to the space ship. The settlers are grateful to her, but pity her appearance, and let her slip away home as soon as it is safe to leave the ship.

When the Captain comes to thank her and to ask that she make her home in the valley, perhaps after surgical alterations to her appearance, Olwen informs him that Guardian is company enough. The Captain cannot understand how she considers a data collecting and processing robot to be sufficient company.

After a sleepless night, Olwen goes down to the village to say goodbye to Jody and to Mark. She asks Guardian to make a new home for her and for him in the valley she discovered, where the little Hobbit is waiting. From there she can send warnings to the village when solar flares will send storms howling out of the north.

## About the Author

Monica Hughes was born Monica Ince in Liverpool, England, on November 3, 1925. Her parents then both worked at the University of Liverpool, her father (E. L. Ince, a Welshman) in mathematics and her mother (Phyllis [Fry] Ince, an Englishwoman) in biology. A few months after young Hughes's birth, her parents left Liverpool so that her father could take up a new position as head of the department of mathematics at the new University of Cairo in Egypt.

*What If . . .?*, 1998 (anthology edited by Hughes) Young Hughes's first memories are of Egypt: their first house in Heliopolis, walks in the desert with the nanny for Hughes and her younger sister, and seeing mirages of palm trees and buildings floating in the sky. Later they lived in an apartment in Cairo, with a spectacular view of the pyramids, which they visited on weekends. (Her parents climbed the Great Pyramid for the view, while the girls played with bottle caps littered in the sand at its base. "So much for history," sighed Hughes in the *Something about the Author* Autobiography Series.) She still remembers little lizards, birds of prey, and the wind-blown sand; these and other memories became elements in her novels *Sandwriter* and *The Promise*.

The Ince family returned to England in 1931 so the girls could attend school in a suburb of London. Young Hughes was pleased and excited by the exposure to music and a wider range of books, particularly Norse mythology and the works of E. Nesbit. For a while she wanted to be an archaeologist and Egyptologist, but seeing Boris Karloff in the film *The Mummy* gave her nightmares for weeks and put an end to that ambition.

When the Ince family moved to Edinburgh in 1936, young Hughes found refuge from the plain, cold city and boring school in the nearby Carnegie library. She plunged into the dramas of nineteenth century writers and the works of Jules Verne. All of her small allowance went toward purchasing hardcover blank books in which she would write exciting titles and "Chapter One."

Then she would sit and dream of being a famous writer. That and a journal kept when she went on vacations was all the writing she did at that time.

When the war began in 1939, Hughes and her sister were sent away to school, first to an isolated hunting lodge in Scotland, and later to a boarding school in Harrogate, not far from the Yorkshire moors where the Bronte sisters had lived. There she was encouraged to write fiction, as well as essays and compositions.

After her father died, Hughes could no longer plan to go to Oxford; Edinburgh University was the best the family could afford. At age sixteen she began an honors mathematics degree, though the English lecturers were far more interesting to her.

At eighteen, she volunteered for service in the Royal Navy, was sent down to London, and spent two years working with thousands of other WRENS (Women's Royal Navy



Service) on the secret project of breaking German codes. Every free moment she had, young Hughes spent in the gallery of the New Theatre watching ballet.

After the war, Hughes transferred into meteorology, first in Scotland and then Belfast, where she was delighted to find food rationing a thing of the past. When she left the Women's Royal Navy Service (called Wrens) in 1946, she lived in Chelsea (London) with her mother and sister. For a few years she worked freelance as a dress designer, before taking a friend's advice and traveling to visit South Africa and Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe). She lived and worked with that friend's sister and husband for two years, making first-run dresses for a local factory and later working in a bank. Her journey to Africa and back remained in her memory for a long time, and her experiences filtered into many of the books she later wrote.

Living once again with her mother and sister in an unheated London apartment got her thinking about the sun. Australia seemed to be the place to emigrate, but the waiting list was three years long. Hughes left for Canada instead, in April of 1952, intending to work her way across to the west coast and pick up a ship across the Pacific to Australia. Working in Ottawa, Ontario in the National Research Council, she began writing stories to combat loneliness. At a writing class at the YMCA she met a woman who became her best friend in Canada and who introduced Hughes to Glen Hughes, who became her husband in 1957.

The Hugheses lived in Ontario, moving from Cornwall to Toronto and London with Glen's work. Hughes began writing again in the late evening and early morning, while caring for their four children during the day. When the youngest was a week old in 1964, they moved to Edmonton, Alberta, driving on the new Trans Canada Highway across the seemingly endless prairies—a trip that she remembered twelve years later when writing her novel *Earthdark*, and which brings to mind the colonists' journey to Isis in *The Keeper of the Isis Light*.

This began a furiously creative time for Monica Hughes: she painted in oils, embroidered wall hangings, wove tapestries and wrote, but never sold a single short story, article, or novel.

With the death of her mother and sister, and as her children grew older, Monica Hughes had few touchstones to her memories. In 1971 she resolved to spend a year writing for four hours each day. She read armloads of books by the best writers for young people. After some unfruitful efforts, she was inspired by a Jacques Cousteau movie, *The Silent World*, to begin her novel *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*. In 1974 it was accepted by a British publisher, who asked for another story about the lead character.

Since then, Monica Hughes has written over thirty books for young people. Her works have been translated into over a dozen languages. Though she did eventually tour Australia and New Zealand in 1990 with her husband, she feels firmly settled in Canada with her husband, grown children, and grandchildren. In the winter of 2001, with new projects in hand, she fully intends to write as long as she possibly can.

## Setting

The novel is set a few hundred years in the future, entirely on the fictional planet Isis, the fourth planet in orbit around an F5 star called Ra, in the constellation Indus, about five parsecs from earth's own sun in our Milky Way galaxy. What this means is that the author had a good deal of scientific information which she used to make informed guesses about what it could be like for people to live on a distant planet, one with thinner air than earth and a brighter sun that emits more ultraviolet light than our sun.

Hughes suggests that Isis would become a colony planet only after the more "comfortable" planets near earth were already in use. Humans would find the deeper valleys of the planet Isis more comfortable than the mountains—the air would be thicker and so easier to breathe, and it would screen out more of the ultraviolet light. The mountains and mesas would be beautiful, though, in the author's opinion, as mountains often are on earth, and particularly so on Isis where there are small plants and living creatures to enjoy as well as the stunning views and clean winds.

Olwen lives in a simple, luxurious home set into the rock of a cliff, half-way from a valley to the mesa at the top. The comforts of her well-furnished home have all been made for her by Guardian, who has also set a series of handholds and footholds into the cliff so that Olwen may climb it easily as a stairway. She knows the valleys and the mountains in this region quite well but loves the high places best.

The author takes some pains to describe what settlers coming to Isis have left behind on earth: Mark's laugh was bitter . . . "We lived in an apartment block that had four units.

Each unit was thirty-five storeys high.

Each floor had fifty apartments, with an average of four people in each . . . parents and two children, you know. Two children are the most a family is allowed, even with planning permission. So there were about twenty-eight thousand people in our apartment block alone. We lived in a suburban ring that surrounds the city. I don't know how many apartments like ours there were . . . You could never be truly alone, not for a minute . . . That's why we take the risk of colonizing, of course . . . In spite of the shortages, the overcrowding, the awful boredom of knowing exactly what every day is going to be like, in spite of everything I miss Earth."





# Social Sensitivity

Teachers using this book will find material to study for discussion of religion, racism, and colonization.

The first overt reference to religion in this novel is made when Guardian is taking the injured Mark to the doctor. When Olwen asks what she can do for Mark, Guardian tells her, "Pray." On his return, Olwen admits she could not pray, she was so angry. "It is all right," Guardian tells her. "He will understand." Whether Guardian means that God will understand, or Mark will, is unspecified. English is a satisfactorily vague language to use at this point of the story. It would be worthwhile to compare this scene with that in the French translation of the Isis trilogy of novels (being translated by the Canadian novelist Jean-Louis Trudel for publication in 2002).

Aside from the one-time use of "lord!"

as a brief mild oath by Mark, the only other overt reference to religion comes during Captain Jonas Tryon's final meeting with Olwen, in which he tells her: "Living alone is not healthy for body or mind. As you get older . . . "

"Alone? Have you forgotten Guardian? I have never been alone. Guardian has been mother and father and friend and teacher and counsellor. I don't need any of you, Captain Tryon."

"Good grief, Miss Pendennis, you talk of your so-called Guardian as if he were Jehovah. He's only a damned robot, after all!"

The suggestion that Olwen talks of Guardian as if he were Jehovah should stimulate some discussion among young readers and their teachers. Has Olwen sinned against the first and second commandments? It can be argued that Guardian is a graven image of a man, and Olwen certainly venerates him as her respected caregiver. But her respect does not extend to actual worship.

Neither does it keep her from honoring her father and mother's memory nor prevent her from responsible behavior towards her community.

It is startling for the reader, as well as Olwen, when the Captain uses the name of Jehovah, rather than a human hero. Perhaps he does so because Guardian's long service to Olwen has clearly exceeded the performance of the Twelve Labours of Hercules. No one human hero could have had the time to collect and process data for the Isis Light's transmissions, the dedication to prepare, furnish, and maintain an elegant home for Olwen, and the talent to educate her growing mind so splendidly. But that is not why the Captain names Jehovah rather than a human hero.



It is because Guardian scrupled to use the life-changing manipulations which changed Olwen to make her safe for Isis.

Guardian usurped the godlike role of medical interventions which are both life-saving and life-manipulating. When the doctor treats Mark's injuries, Guardian stays to help where needed. The reader is shown that Guardian is as capable and as responsible as a doctor. The Captain recognizes that Guardian has played God with young Olwen.

Since the Captain recognizes that Guardian has performed as a child's guardian, a doctor and as the data collector and processor for the Isis light, but he does not treat Guardian as a person it can be argued that he is prejudiced against Guardian as a robot. Even if Olwen is human and a person by the Captain's definition, Guardian certainly is not. Olwen's mind is clear: she is a person, but not the kind of human who kills. To her, Guardian is a person and her beloved friend. Readers will have to make up their own minds whether genes and bodies and behavior define a person.

The colonization of an uninhabited land is different morally and ethically from the colonization of a land where people already live. It is significant to note that, in this novel, the eighty settlers began their colony by alienating the only two sentient inhabitants of Isis. The author could be stating her beliefs about the difficulties of colonies interacting with previous inhabitants. It is worth recalling that Hughes spent not only much of her childhood in Africa but returned to that continent as an adult, then later emigrated to Canada and even visited Australia. Her experiences with people of various races in many countries may have influenced the writing of this novel.

Monica Hughes has been called "Canada's finest writer of science fiction for children" by critic Sarah Ellis in the Horn Book magazine. Ellis goes on to say: There is a gentleness to her books that is rare in science fiction. The hairsbreadth escapes, the exotic flora and fauna . . . the villains and the heroes—all are enclosed in one overriding concern, subtle but everpresent: the value of kindness. This theme seems rather a nonrobust one for science fiction. But Monica Hughes manages to clothe the homey quality inflesh and blood . . . to give it strength and resilience.



# Literary Qualities

The character of Guardian is clearly derived to a great extent from the character Spock (created by producer Gene Roddenberry and actor Leonard Nimoy) on the classic television series *Star Trek*, broadcast in 1968-70 when the author Monica Hughes was raising her own children. His impassive face, his many talents, his superior knowledge and scientific analysis, his efforts to be logical and his distress when his feelings interfere with the prompt completion of his duties—these are all traits Guardian shares with the half-Vulcan Spock.

Hughes has gone to considerable efforts to ensure that every mention of Guardian, right up until the last pages of the novel, could be interpreted as referring to a tall, tanned man with the manners of an English butler and the competence of a polymath. It is very clear that Olwen, and the author, consider Guardian to be a person by every definition that counts, and the wisest person on Isis at that.

Guardian shows considerably more emotional interaction than Spock, his literary ancestor. His physical strengths and intellectual achievements are subtly shown in his accomplishments, rather than stated baldly as the narrative progresses.

Hughes has a natural writing style, which sustains all her novels. When writing her book *The Tomorrow City*, Hughes developed an awareness of two halves of her mind: the right brain (imaginative, holistic, in touch with one's dreams and subconscious) and the left brain (linear, logical, from which comes language, without which stories cannot be written). From this understanding came Hughes's ability to construct a story which would be of interest, make sense, and mean something important to the reader.

Monica Hughes finds story ideas everywhere. Thoughts drifting through her head, the question "What would happen if . . .," the curiosity about a passer-by—these can be the tiny seed out of which grows a novel.

On October 1, 1974, she read a newspaper article about a boy named David, condemned to an isolated life because of a faulty immune system. "The story moved me deeply," Hughes said in a personal interview. "I cut it out and filed it in my 'Ideas' file, where I place every thought, chance news story, passing event or character, that I feel may one day be a story." She kept the clipping in her "Ideas" file for five years, read it at least ten times, and worried about it. She realized that what was in her mind was the question: "David, are you lonely?" To answer this question by researching the real David would be a horrible invasion of privacy, she knew, so she resolved to find a character in a situation similar to David's, put this person in a story and then ask him/her this question.

First she thought about isolated places such as lighthouses, but nowhere on earth is so very isolated these days. "Then I realized the strength of science fiction—that by taking my character to a planet far away from Earth, alone, I would achieve a real isolation," Hughes said in a personal interview. "This had to be done logically, and the working out

of this logic gave me my initial plot development, of Olwen, alone on Isis after the death of her parents, alone except for Guardian." From her thoughts about isolation and loneliness came her novel *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, and two sequels.

These are her most popular and celebrated works to date.

Along with her "Ideas" file, Hughes keeps copies of a series of personal essays written on the origin of most of her books. Many readers write to Hughes through her publisher or Web site, asking "Where do you get your ideas for your stories?" On her Web site, [www.ecn.ab.ca/rnhughes/](http://www.ecn.ab.ca/rnhughes/), Hughes has posted these essays describing the ideas, thoughts, and analysis that were the origins of many of her novels. She is also generous with printed copies of these essays for readers, teachers, and librarians with questions.



# Themes and Characters

The first book in Monica Hughes's Isis trilogy, *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, is a masterpiece and arguably her best work. It is both a love story and a poignant comment on prejudice. Hughes explores, in this light adventure romance, the nature of what it means to be human.

This book is a real page-turner as the author gradually reveals its two surprises: Olwen's physical appearance and the fact, unrealized by Olwen till the last pages, but probably guessed by the reader, that Guardian is a robot.

There are other small surprises, such as the revelation that Olwen's pet, Hobbit, is not only a large, hairy animal but actually quite fearsome in appearance. The beast that Guardian has given the taxonomic name *Draco hirsutus* is not the large dog-like animal the reader may have assumed from Hobbit's friendly behavior in chapter 1.

Hobbit is a large, hairy dragon, but as gentle as a dormouse. The pup Olwen later finds in a northern valley weighs a hundred kilograms or more.

Another small surprise is that the Captain of the Pegasus Two, Jonas Tryon, is more willing to accept a variety of conditions provided that they are identifiably foreign from what he expects to see. After he has climbed laboriously up the steep stone "staircase" of the mesa to the terrace, Olwen's home is not a rustic cave; it is seen by him as beautiful when he compares it to "an incredibly expensive hotel on the French Riviera which he had once visited, when he was younger and more reckless, and a new captain's pay had seemed like a fortune."

More revealing is his opinion of Olwen herself, detailed below.

The settler Mark London is younger and more inclined to enjoy everything he sees on Isis. He has, after all, chosen to emigrate here with his parents and younger sister Connie. His appearance makes a big impression on Olwen—he is taller than Guardian's two metres, with a mop of brown hair, pink skin with freckles, blue eyes streaked with brown. He is warm and friendly from their first meeting in the new village.

Mark is one of eighty settlers: first there are the ten couples under twenty years of age and, next, ten childless couples aged from twenty to thirty. There are ten married couples between thirty and forty years old, with twenty children among them ranging from young Jody N'Kumo at nine to Mark, who is seventeen.

Jody comes across as younger than his age in some ways because he is the youngest member of the colony, too little to do much of the interesting work as the village is constructed. New colonies do not bring small children to wander off and succumb to conditions less dangerous for stronger and experienced youths. Jody is almost too young to emigrate, but he is a bold child not afraid to explore on his own in this valley free of dangerous animals. Nor is he afraid of Olwen when she appears without her



mask, and he calls her the "funny lady." He blithely assumes, as children do, that if he needs help some grown-up will come and help him, and is not alarmed by Olwen when she saves him from certain death.

Because of this rescue, the settlers are more willing to accept Olwen, though they pity her visible differences.

The only other settler who is named and has an active role in the story is the young doctor, Phil MacDonald. A redheaded Scot, he is an energetic and enthusiastic guardian of his new community. He is the only settler who understands Guardian well and can work with him when Mark is injured, and when insisting that Guardian explain to Olwen the changes that have been made to her.

The most strongly realized characters in *The Keeper of the Isis Light* are Olwen Pendennis and her Guardian. All others are peripheral, even the "love interest" because Mark is mostly just a healthy young man whose essential nature is shown only in his brief note that Guardian brings to Olwen.

Guardian is described mostly as Olwen sees him and interacts with him. He is tall, about two meters in height, and goldenskin, always wearing a tunic. Olwen can feel the aliveness in him when he puts an arm around her shoulder or sits near her.

When Guardian first appears in the novel, he stands very correct and formal, but there is "a hint of a smile upon his normally sober face." Since Olwen is later fascinated by the facial expressions of Mark, the reader can infer that Guardian's impassive face is not as expressive as a human face; it is clear, however, that Guardian has become very expressive of subtle nuances of feeling through choice of words and cadence of speech, through gesture and his behaviors.

He learned to do so in order to be a good caretaker for the young child entrusted to him by Olwen's dying mother.

Olwen is a confident, strong, and strongwilled young woman of sixteen earth years, or ten Isis years. Her first reaction to the news of the settlers' arrival is resentment, but her natural traits of curiosity and enjoyment of her home planet (which is more than large enough to share) quickly win out. Mark realizes this early on, during his first climb to the top of the mesa with Olwen, saying: "You must have hated it when we came, spoiling the newness."

She looked up at him quickly. The blank charm of her face mask told him nothing, but her voice was warm and surprised.

"Oh, I did. Then afterwards I felt so guilty.

After all, that is what the Keeper of the Light is for, to make a planet safe for other people to come to. But I couldn't see it that way at first. I hated you, all of you. Imagine you understanding that!"



Guardian adapted Olwen surgically and genetically as a young child so that her skin would be opaque to the ultraviolet light, and her eyes would be protected by an extra eyelid like a nictitating membrane.

Her rib cage was deepened and her vascular system extended so that she could use more of Isis's scant oxygen. Her nostrils were widened so she could breathe more fully, her ankles and fingernails were strengthened to help her climb, and her metabolism was altered slightly so that poisonous plants and insects could not harm her—this last change made her skin a bronze-green color.

Whenever he thought of her as the native of a distant planet, then he could see how beautiful she was. There was a dignified symmetry in the wide nose and heavy eyebrows that balanced the weight of glorious red hair cascading down her shoulders. The goldish-green of her skin was exotic. . . . But when he saw her as the daughter of his old friend Gareth . . . then she was disgusting. Words like Neanderthal and reptilean sprang to his mind. He thought of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; and the horrifying monster movies of his childhood crowded into his mind.

The result is that her physical appearance is perceived as very different from her superficial appearance of a slim girl of Celtic descent. The blue-eyed Captain Tryon sees her heavy brow ridges and flared nostrils and is reminded of Neanderthals. It is worth recalling that the author was herself terrified by a Boris Karloff movie in childhood.

The book's themes of discrimination and exploration of human possibilities are still current and relevant, decades after the book first appeared in print. The exploration of possibilities for human life on the fictional planet Isis proceeds in three stages: the first is by Gareth and Liz Pendennis with the assistance of their robot Da Co P 43 (data collecting and processing robot), which lasts some six earth-years until they are killed in a catastrophic storm. The second stage of exploration is largely done by the robot now called Guardian, who is assisted to an increasing extent by young Olwen as she grows from five earth-years old to sixteen.

The third stage of exploration begins when the eighty settlers arrive in the Pegasus Two with Captain Tryon and his crew. The settlers have enough to do, establishing their colony in the valley, and any further explorations continue to be performed by Guardian and Olwen. Nowhere is there any justification for human exploration on Isis; in this novel it is axiomatic that humans explore places and planets. Whatever justification is necessary for colonizing other planets is given when Mark describes his life in an ordinary suburban city on earth.

The freshness and risk of Olwen and Mark's love is matched by the scary excitement of coming to live on a pristine new planet: Here, closer to the centre of the galaxy, the stars burned twice as thickly as even in a southern sky back on Earth. The patterns of the constellations were new. Nothing was familiar any more. He looked for Earth, but how could he tell, in that crowded sky? . . . For a second Mark felt a twinge, almost like stomach ache, for the familiar things of Earth, for a Sun and Moon that looked like the Sun and the Moon, for stars whose patterns were familiar. But then he remembered the





actualities of the city where he and Carrie and their parents had lived; the choking smog, the hours standing on the rapid transit, shoulder to shoulder with other half-asleep commuters, the line-ups for food, for movies, for a day in the country or by the sea . . .the continual inhuman jostling for space.

Here on Isis there was at least space. A man could stretch and feel free to be himself.

The theme of discrimination becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses.

Discrimination can begin with isolation of a group or a person, and Olwen has been isolated from other people all her life, even the crew of a passing cargo vessel which visited the planet when she was a child. The settlers have been selected from the crowded population of earth and isolated on their space ship for the journey to Isis. They have been encouraged by hypnosis to feel closeness as a group. This closeness does not encourage the settlers to accept Olwen or Guardian as part of their community.

Discrimination is not by itself a social error; when it leads one to perceive others and one's own self accurately, it can be a useful guide for making considerate choices of behavior. The social errors made in this novel come from prejudice and bad choices of behavior: the settlers' non-admission of Olwen and Guardian into their community, Olwen's pique at the young settlers' mild rejection of her invitation to enjoy the mountains above their valley, Mark's unthinking step backwards off the mesa when he sees Olwen's face for the first time, the Captain's revulsion at the mingling of familiar and alien features in Olwen.

It is worth mentioning that the only newcomer to Isis to feel no revulsion at Olwen's visible differences is young Jody N'Kumo.

His heritage is from the highlands of Eastern Africa, and his figures are described as Negroid. Few of the other settlers are identified by racial type (Mark London's family and Captain Tryon are of British stock and the doctor, Phil MacDonald, is a red-haired Scot) but it is safe to guess from the few names given that many of the settlers are either pale-skinned Caucasians from English-speaking countries, or they are from families that have emigrated to Englishspeaking countries and adopted English names. Jody and his parents are probably almost as visibly different in this community as Olwen, but they are not rejected as she is.

The Keeper of the Isis Light contains no prejudice against persons of color. Clearly, the author drew on her own experiences in Africa, and in countries where people of many races live, when creating the characters for this novel. This novel would be good to include in a unit studying the experiences of discrimination and prejudice, colonization and race relations.





# Topics for Discussion

1. What is the difference between being alone and being lonely?
2. Do morals and ethics change, whether one lives in isolation or in a community? If so, in what way?
3. Why do people colonize new places?

Why have these eighty settlers come to the planet Isis?

4. What is one major difference between the colonization of Isis and the colonization of North America by Europeans?

5. By what standards has Olwen lived in wealth all her life?

6. What changes in living standards have the settlers taken on by coming to Isis?

Are these positive or negative?

7. Is the planet Isis a place you would enjoy visiting? Would you want to live there? What impresses you most about it?

8. What sort of changes has Guardian made in Olwen? Does this affect who she is?

9. How much variety is there among the colonists? Are they tolerant of differences among themselves?

10. What sort of future do you expect lies ahead for the people on Isis? Will their lives be enviable?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the major difference between the colonizing of the planet Isis and historical colonizing of the Americas and Australia by Europeans? Why has the author invented no alien people populating Isis? What can it mean for the colonists to be living where there are no other people, human or alien?
2. What is the nature of the changes that Guardian has made in Olwen? Has her mind been changed by the procedures and by her experiences? Is she still human?
3. How can a large animal such as *Draco hirsutus* be as gentle as the creature Olwen calls Hobbit? What visible, physical clues to its gentle nature does the author describe? Are there any similar animals which actually exist on earth?

What could have been the author's intentions when she invented Hobbit?

4. How can the reader evaluate the relative and absolute wealth of Olwen's life, compared with the settlers? What abundance and freedoms does she have that they do not? Is there anything she lacks, as the story ends, and is this a true deprivation for her?
5. What defines a person? Is it the physical body? If so, how are the relatively fragile settlers defined compared with Olwen? Is it the function? If so, how is Guardian defined compared with the Captain and Olwen and the settlers?

What insight can you take from Descartes's statement: "I think, therefore I am?"

6. The animal and plant life of the fictional planet Isis could be very different from that on earth. Based on the author's descriptions, make detailed drawings of the animals and plants of Isis. Annotate your drawings to list the life forms depicted, and note where they are located, for example, on the mesa, in the deep rift valley, in Bamboo Valley. Note which life forms resemble those on earth, much as sharks and dolphins superficially resemble each other though they are not closely related.
7. What sort of life lies ahead for the settlers on Isis? What similarities can you draw between their lives and the homesteaders in the American and Canadian West, or perhaps Alaska and the Canadian North? What will be the best features of their lives, in your opinion? What will be their greatest obstacles to overcome?
8. Compare *The Keeper of the Isis Light* with C. S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Find several major differences between these novels, both of which involve people from England arriving in another world of enchanting beauty and realistic physical struggles. What evidence can you find that Monica Hughes has read the works of C. S. Lewis? How is her fantasy world at least as practical and yet different from Lewis's Narnia?



9. Select an episode from the television series "Star Trek" to compare with *The Keeper of the Isis Light*. (You may select from any of the four series which have appeared under that name.) Name the episode and summarize it in 200 to 300 words. Compare and contrast the novel with the episode. How is it clear that both were written in North America during the latter part of the twentieth century? Does it matter that there are no non-human races on Isis in Hughes's novel, but there are non-human races in "Star Trek?" Is Guardian's robot nature important to your discussion?

## For Further Reference

Egoff, Sheila A. "Canadian Literary Rarity Draws Readers." Review of *What If?*, edited by Monica Hughes. *Quill & Quire* (October 1998): 44-45. This is a positive review of the anthology, praising Hughes's selection of a variety of speculative fiction stories that surprise the reader.

Ellis, Sarah. "News from the North." *The Horn Book* (October 1984): 661. This is an analysis of Hughes's merit as an author of imaginative writing for young people.

"Isis Pedlar." *Resource Links*, vol. 2 (August 1997): 246. The reviewer offers positive statements about the peerless writer Monica Hughes (in the genre of Canadian science fiction for children) and her Isis trilogy.

"Isis Trilogy: The Keeper of the Isis Light."

*Resource Links* (October 2000): 24-25. A positive review on re-reading the trilogy twenty years later, though much more complimentary of the first book than the second or especially the third. "The book's themes of discrimination and exploration of human possibilities are still current and relevant."

"Monica Hughes." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, vol. 11. Detroit: Gale, 1992. This entry provides insight into the life of the author who has lived on four continents and written over thirty books for young adult readers.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers who enjoy *The Keeper of the Isis Light* will want to read the other two books in the trilogy: *The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar*. Also to be recommended for their environmental and ethical themes are Hughes's novels *The Golden Aquarians* and *The Crystal Drop*.

Other contemporary authors whose works may be enjoyed by fans of Monica Hughes are Dave Duncan (especially his three Young Adult novels in *The King's Daggers*), Eileen Kernaghan (*Dance of the Snow Dragon* and *The Snow Queen*), and Julie Lawson.

## Related Web Sites

<http://www.ecn.ab.ca/mhughes/> Accessed May 13, 2002. This is the author's personal Web site with interviews, listings for each of her novels and her home e-mail address. It also includes a series of personal essays on the origins of many of her books.



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