

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters Short Guide

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters by Laurence Yep

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Contents

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters is a sensitive psychological novel that explores themes of alienation, tolerance, and understanding in the relationship between two young characters who possess what at first seem to be irreconcilable differences. The novel is narrated by Charley Sabini, a logical, selfpossessed sophomore at a Catholic high school who discovers that he has earned a considerable amount of hostility from his old grammar school friends who have transferred to public school. Chris Pomeroy, the girl who instigates this hostility, has a reputation for being an oddball. Chris is emotional, candidly critical of others, sarcastic, and often deliberately shocking in her behavior. Chris and Charley meet as the result of a poison-pen chain letter started by Chris and directed at Charley. Charley, in confronting Chris about her accusations of arrogance and lack of sensitivity, finds himself entering a romance in which he and Chris learn lessons about human understanding and tolerance.

For different reasons, both Charley and Chris are outsiders, but both of them begin to overcome this isolation through increased understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and through their awareness that people carry "monsters" inside of them — monsters that are "gentle," however, if they are approached with human sympathy. The monsters of the novel's title are most fully realized in the character of Chris's mother, a demanding, neurotically meticulous, and subtly tyrannical woman with suicidal tendencies.

Mrs. Pomeroy dominates her daughter's life, criticizing her every action, demanding her attention, and filling her with guilt while robbing her of any sense of self-esteem. Chris sees her mother as a monster who has eaten her deceased father "up alive." The novel's development is largely woven around Chris's struggle with her mother and Charley's attempt to both understand her struggle and help Chris understand it as well.

Both Chris and Charley learn to recognize their own monsters in the form of the personal feelings and characteristics which they both possess but either will not admit to having or dismiss as abnormal. These two young people discover that they are not as different as they assumed and each learns to view life from perspectives never experienced before. Charley discovers that the abrasive and often desperately boisterous behavior of Chris disguises a person who is essentially tender, emotional, and in need of encouragement and support. Chris learns that Charley's logical, restrained and seemingly unemotional appearance hides a growing sensitivity about others. Although she originally attacks him for being a "meddler," she discovers that meddling is often necessary to make human contact.

It is the believability of Yep's central characters and the vivid and crafted development of their growing awareness of self and others that, rather than plot, holds a reader's interest in the novel. Chris and Charley are both intelligent, often humorous, articulate, and always sympathetically portrayed young adults whose development consists not so much of changing each other as of discovering and understanding their own identities and the identities and feelings of others.



About the Author

Laurence Yep was born on June 14, 1948, in San Francisco, California, where his parents lived in a mainly African-American neighborhood, running a small grocery store. For his early education Yep rode the bus to a Catholic grammar school in Chinatown. During high school he developed a strong interest in science fiction and fantasy, an interest that led to writing short stories. Although he originally intended to be a chemist rather than a writer, his English teacher encouraged him to submit his stories for publication. By the age of eighteen, when he had entered Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Yep sold his first story to a science-fiction magazine for a penny a word. Yep later transferred to the University of California in Santa Cruz where he completed his bachelor's degree, then continued his studies in English at the State University of New York in Buffalo, where he received his Ph.D. in 1975.

Yep's first major publication was the novel, *Sweetwater* (1973), the result of encouragement from a friend who worked at a major New York City publishing firm who suggested that Yep try writing science fiction for young readers. However, it was Yep's second novel that led to national attention and acclaim. *Dragonwings* (1975), based on a newspaper clipping about a Chinese American who in 1909 constructed and flew a flying machine in the Oakland hills, was selected as a Notable Children's Book of 1975 by the American Library Association and was chosen as a Newbery Honor Book in 1976. The novel also was picked as a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book (1976), won the Carter G. Woodson Book Award (1976), the International Reading Association Children's Book Award (1979), and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award (1979), and was on the "Best of the Best 1966-1978" list of the *School Library Journal* (December 1979). Further acclaim was gained by Yep's third novel, *Child of the Owl* (1977), which received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Fiction Award and the Jane Addams Children's Book Award.

Yep is chiefly noted for his exploration of science fiction and his sensitive treatment of Chinese-American themes and characters. He frequently draws inspiration from Chinese mythology and from the history of Chinese immigrant culture in the San Francisco area.

Yet Yep's books display a range of material beyond these central interests.

The Mark Twain Murders (1982) and *The Tom Sawyer Fires* (1984) both draw on Mark Twain's youthful experiences as a reporter in San Francisco during the Civil War. In *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* (1982) Yep departs from his usual mode of science fiction/fantasy to explore psychological realism, and in *Liar, Liar* (1983) he creates a realistic murder mystery in the contemporary setting of southern California's Silicon Valley.

No matter what type of fiction Yep explores, he persistently displays a concern with the condition of being an outsider. As Yep has frequently stated, this concern, which his novels share with much other young adult fiction, grows out of his own experiences



growing up in San Francisco. As a Chinese-American boy in a mainly African-American neighborhood, Yep knew what it meant to be different. And even at school in Chinatown he was marked as an outsider, first because his family did not speak Chinese, and second because of his more reclusive interests in science and science fiction rather than in sports. In his fiction Yep explores these feelings of exclusion in creating characters who are placed outside society by their ethnic heritage, their special abilities and sensibilities, or their conscious rebelliousness. The outsiders of Yep's books all have roots in the author's own experiences of alienation, but Yep's sense of being an outsider is treated most autobiographically in his novel, *Sea-Glass* (1979) which treats the conflict between generations within the Chinese-American community. Yep's identification with the character of the outsider has earned him acclaim as an author who sympathetically and imaginatively deals with the problems of alienation, tolerance, and identity so familiar to young adulthood.



Setting

As with several of Yep's other novels, *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* is set in San Francisco where the author grew up. The narrator, Charley Sabini, attends a Catholic school as did the author, and the city is portrayed with the realism of long familiarity, although it functions mostly as a backdrop for the central psychological interest, the relationship between Charley and Chris Pomeroy. Occasionally, however, Yep employs setting in a way that effectively reveals or reflects the psychological state of the characters.

The compulsively controlling and organizing behavior of Mrs. Pomeroy is mirrored in the restrained Christmas preparations in her home where she sets up a metal artificial tree with ornaments that are all identical. The Christmas season itself is used as an appropriate setting at the end of the novel when Chris and Charley, originally alienated characters, are seen reaching out to each other and displaying new understanding and warmth toward their friends.

Perhaps Yep's most significant use of setting to reveal and reflect character is in his use of the zoo as a place where Chris reveals qualities of tenderness and vulnerability that she usually keeps locked up like the zoo animals.

For Chris the zoo offers escape from her oppressive mother, preservation of pleasant memories of her deceased father, and a place to exercise a hidden part of her personality. For Christmas, Chris and Charley unknowingly give each other year-long passes to the zoo, which by the end of the novel becomes not so much a place of escape as a place of discovery and honest confrontation of emotions in the characters' developing relationship.



Social Sensitivity

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters treats the topic of conflicts in parent and child relationships. The potentially destructive relationship between Chris Pomeroy and her mother is presented realistically and with sensitivity, yet involves behavior that may be of concern to some readers, especially parents. Chris is presented as both having the desire and the need to rebel against parental authority, something common at her age even when the parental authority is not obsessively neurotic, as it is in Mrs. Pomeroy's case. That Chris is seen as the victim and her mother as a "monster" who is destroying her may strike readers as an oversimplified and unhealthy representation of family conflict. However, Yep provides a psychological depth and human sensitivity that goes far beyond this simplified perception. That Chris has come to see her relationship with her mother in black and white terms may be true at first, but through her relations with Charley, a more distanced observer, she is able to face the complexities in her family that make the simplistic view of a bad mother versus a good child impossible.

Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters is more than simply a portrait of rebellion and generational conflict with parents cast as one-dimensional antagonists. Yep's central concern is with the need for understanding and tolerance.

The need for Chris to stand up to her mother and resist her control is seen as healthy not only for Chris but also for her mother. It is a step not simply toward a growing child's inevitable independence, but toward greater understanding and possibly even love. Chris, in the novel's last chapter, expresses her guilt for not loving her mother enough and not doing more for her.

Charley points out that "There's only so much that you're supposed to do for another person." Charley, however, is not being insensitive, for he goes on to say that Chris should not cut herself off from her mother completely and that her mother's psychiatrist will help them through this struggle. It is clear that Chris wants to love her mother, but without the guilt that her mother imposes on her. It is also clear that Chris must face the difficulties of this desire for love and continue, as she has done, towards greater understanding of her mother even though her mother is clearly the cause of Chris's problems.

Yep's realism faces the fact that parents and children often get locked into mutually destructive relationships, but Yep's psychological insight will admit no easy solutions, and his sensitivity will settle for no alternative that excludes tolerance and understanding.



Literary Qualities

Charley Sabini, who narrates Yep's novel of psychological realism, speaks in a believable voice that is simple and direct, but also probing in its focus on revealing details. Yep creates believable young adult characters not through slang or dated allusions to teen culture, but through a direct style and straightforward diction that nonetheless reveal sensitivity, liveliness, and curiosity. Charley is perceived by his peers as rational and self-controlled—perhaps too much so, according to his girlfriend, Chris. These qualities come across in his narrative style, which contains an analytical distance one would expect from such a character.

More noteworthy, perhaps, than the realism of the voices of Yep's characters is the way *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* is meaningfully built around a central symbol and its variations. The idea of monsters announced in the title is woven carefully throughout the book. What is monstrous is what isolates us from others, the problematic emotions that characters keep bottled up, and the behavior others see, often mistakenly, as abnormal. Images of "monstrosity" appear in Bernard's concern that his feet have become odd, clumsy, or monstrous, although later in the novel he overcomes this fear, having learned to tap dance. The movies that Chris wants to see on her first date with Charley—Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* and the German expressionist silent film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—both involve monstrous, abnormal characters and incidents. Chris Pomeroy's neurotic and abusive mother is seen as a monster who has, according to Chris, eaten her father alive. The ostriches that ruin Chris's much-loved ritual of feeding the barking deer at the zoo appear as abnormal, monstrous creatures who devour the deer's peanuts. Most noticeable is the image of the movie monster Godzilla that Chris and Charley learn about through their encounters with Duane, the disturbed boy who believes obsessively in Godzilla's reality and gains a desperately needed sense of importance and power from his belief. The understanding that Chris and Charley finally achieve in their relationship involves the awareness that everyone has a "monster" inside and these monsters are made "gentle" through the contact of human sympathy. The repeated images of the monster and monstrosity not only give Yep's novel a carefully crafted unity but also provide a central metaphor or symbol that helps explain both the problems of the characters and the possible solutions for those problems.



Themes and Characters

As with much of Yep's fiction, *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* explores the theme of the outsider and develops Yep's concern with the need for human understanding and tolerance. The author's Chinese-American heritage seems to have brought him into sympathy and understanding with the lives of those who find themselves excluded not only because of ethnic background but for other reasons as well. Although most of Yep's fiction is noted for featuring Asian-American characters, *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* presents a cast of Caucasian characters, one of whom in particular is seen as an "oddball" and hence an outsider.

Chris Pomeroy is a high school sophomore with a reputation for being outrageous in her behavior. She has "a regular chainsaw for a tongue" and tends to deal with others by using her usually sarcastic sense of humor. Because of her vocal and nonconforming manner she is rejected by her peers, who see her as abnormal, "crazy Chris." As the narrator Charley Sabini discovers, much of Chris's behavior is meant to hide painful feelings of guilt, inferiority, and hatred that grow out of her relationship with a neurotically compulsive, critical, suicidal, and quite possibly abusive mother.

Mrs. Pomeroy, too, is an outsider, isolated in the small world of her home where she tries to gain a feeling of power and self-worth by compulsive routines and abusive criticism of her daughter. The compulsive neurosis of Mrs. Pomeroy is vividly portrayed in the narrative's attention to her meticulous mannerisms and her obsession with being on time. Her life is a pattern of isolated repetition that hides her fear of others and her low self-esteem. Although Chris sees her mother as a destructive monster, Mrs. Pomeroy is presented through the eyes of Charley, the narrator, as lonely, afraid, and deserving of human understanding.

Although Charley Sabini feels like an outsider when he first discovers hostility among his old grammar school friends, his alienation is the least severe of any of the novel's major characters. However, Charley does tend to distance himself from others by showing only his calm, controlled, and logical exterior. Others, especially Chris at the beginning of her relationship with him, see Charley as an arrogant and insensitive meddler in other people's affairs. In his relationship with Chris, however, he learns to display emotion and sensitivity with an increased spontaneity. At the same time Chris learns to value the controlled and logical aspect of Charley's character.

Two minor characters that are closely linked to Yep's themes of estrangement and the need for tolerant understanding are Bernard and Duane. Bernard introduces the theme of the outsider at the opening of the book when he comes to see Charley about his own feelings of exclusion. Chris has told Bernard there is something wrong with his feet, and as a result he has been teased continually by his schoolmates.

Bernard's worries about his feet being "monstrous" introduce the central symbol of monsters displayed in the novel's title. The monster symbol is most thoroughly developed in the character of Duane, a young boy Chris meets through her job at the



library. Duane is also an outsider who isolates himself in an obsession with the Japanese movie monster, Godzilla. Duane, a friendless and possibly disturbed child, has a desperate need to believe in Godzilla from whom he gains a sense of power and self-esteem. In an unsuccessful attempt to befriend and help Duane, Chris and Charley learn, as Chris says, that monsters "are human," that we all carry monsters inside us, and that those monsters are essentially gentle and require tolerance and understanding.



Topics for Discussion

1. In Chapter 16, Chris becomes extremely upset about ostriches having been put in the same pen as the barking deer. But is there more that is upsetting her than this? What is it? What is Chris "taking out," as Charley puts it, on the ostriches?
2. How is the Christmas season atmosphere of Chapters 12-14 appropriate for the developments that are taking place in Chris and Charley's characters?
3. How do you feel about Chris's relationship with her mother? Is she taking the right steps by standing up to her and trying to become more independent? Do you feel that Chris is in any way being disrespectful and uncaring? Why or why not?
4. At the beginning of the novel Chris attacks Charley for being an "arrogant meddler" (Chapter 2). Is this an accurate assessment of Charley or is Chris as wrong about her perception of his character as Charley is about his view of hers?
5. In Chapter 13, Charley, the narrator, pays a great deal of attention to Mrs. Pomeroy's hands playing with a roll of scotch tape. What do Charley's comments about the tape imply about Mrs. Pomeroy's state of mind? In what way is the tape symbolic of Mrs. Pomeroy's character?
6. In *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters*, Yep is writing in a literary genre called "realism." How realistic, how believable do you find the characters in this novel? Discuss the way they speak as well as their general behavior.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Yep weaves many references to monsters into this novel. Locate as many of these references as you can and discuss what these references reveal about what Chris and Charley are learning about themselves and others.

2. Do some research on, or if possible, watch Roman Polanski's film, *Repulsion* and the classic German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

Discuss why it might be significant that these are the movies Chris wants to see on her first date with Charley.

What do Charley's reactions to *Repulsion* reveal about his character? What does Chris's taste in films reveal about her problems? How do both films relate to the theme of "monsters" in the novel?

3. Look up some material about the *Godzilla* films that are so frequently referred to in the novel. Discuss the possible psychological reasons for Duane's fascination with these movies.

What sort of interpretation of *Godzilla's* significance is implied in Chris's observation that monsters are "only human, after all Well, almost human" (Chapter 8)?

4. Two major turning points in Chris and Charley's relationship take place by the deer pen at the San Francisco zoo. Discuss what Chris and Charley learn about each other in these two scenes. Why is the zoo such an important place for Chris? How are the two incidents at the zoo different in terms of the development of Chris and Charley's understanding of each other?

5. Yep has frequently stated that he writes consistently about characters who are outsiders, people who are excluded or exclude themselves from the society around them. Which characters qualify as outsiders in *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters*? Are some characters more alienated than others? Discuss the various possible reasons for the isolation and exclusion these characters experience.



For Further Reference

Dinchak, Maria. "Recommended: Laurence Yep." *English Journal* 71,3 (March 1982): 81-82. Dinchak presents a succinct appreciative overview of Yep's first four novels.

"Laurence Yep on Being an Outsider."

In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, by Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen. 3d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1980: 109. This brief sketch deals with the role of autobiography in Yep's fiction and notes his early appreciation of C. S. Lewis's Narnia books and the L. Frank Baum Oz books.

Rodowsky, Colby. Review. *The New York Times Book Review* (May 23, 1982): 37. Although Rodowsky feels gets off to a slow start, his review is otherwise representative of the generally favorable response to Yep's books, finding them especially strong in their sympathetic presentation of the conflicts and concerns of believable young characters.

Wigutoff, Sharon. "Junior Fiction: A Feminist Critique." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 5 (1981): 4-18. The article contains a favorable discussion of Yep's sympathetic treatment of parent and child conflicts and his noteworthy attention to the adult role in such relationships. The discussion focuses primarily on Yep's *Child of the Owl* and *Sea-Glass*.

Yep, Laurence. "Fantasy and Reality."

The Horn Book 54,2 (April 1978): 137-143. The insightful discussion of *Godzilla* that Yep provides in part of this essay has a direct bearing on Yep's use of the monster metaphor in *Kind Hearts* and *Gentle Monsters*.

———. "Laurence Yep." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990: 222-223.

Yep writes briefly here of his experience as an outsider and how it has affected his fiction.

———. *The Lost Garden*. Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett Press, 1991. A memoir covering Yep's childhood up into his college years.

Related Titles

The conflict between a parent and a child that is central to *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters* is also sensitively explored in *Child of the Owl* (1977), *SeaGlass* (1979), and in Yep's first novel *Sweetwater* (1973). *Liar, Liar* (1983) treats parent and child conflict in a contemporary setting, combining a murder mystery with the story of how an unstable relationship between father and son grows towards stability and understanding. As with *Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters*, these four other novels present parents not simply as stereotypical antagonists but as sympathetic characters possessing human complexity. Readers interested in Yep's treatment of characters who are outsiders will find variations on this theme in most of his works.



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