

Land of Loss Short Guide

Land of Loss by K. A. Applegate

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Overview

Land of Loss is the second novel of Everworld, and while it can be read and enjoyed apart from the first book, Search for Senna, reading the first book would clarify why four high schoolers are fighting for their lives in an ancient Aztec city that is inhabited by a god who eats people's hearts.

This is no ordinary god; this is Huitzilopochtli, a monster of evil. In Search for Senna, David describes him: He was shaped like a man. Blue, the blue of the sky late on a summer day. His face was striped horizontally with bands of blue and yellow. Around his eyes were glittering white stars, stars that seemed real and hot and explosive.

Iridescent feathers grew from his head, spreading down across his shoulders and back. In his left hand he held a disk, a mirror that smoked and burned. In the right hand was a snake, a twisting, writhing snake that breathed fire and almost seemed an extension of his hand.

His other hand, the one that held the mirror, dripped red. It dripped red and you knew, knew deep down, that it could never, would never be wiped clean.

This is why Christopher (the narrator of Land of Loss), April, and Jalil are afraid. They are at first trapped in a city that serves the evil god.

Everworld is the place where the ancient gods of earth went eons ago, taking their followers with them, but leaving most of humanity behind. As Christopher explains, "Somehow, somehow, for some reason, the old gods of Earth decided to abandon the real world. We didn't know why. Just knew that the gods of the Norsemen and the gods of the Greeks and the gods of the Aztecs and the Inca and the Egyptians and all the endless panoply of immortals, all decided they'd had enough of the real world. Our world." A terrifying being that consumes gods is headed for Everworld. One problem is that the gods are thinking of returning to earth, and the Norse god Loki is trying to open a way back to earth for himself and the other gods in order to escape. Once back on earth, they would reassert their rule over humanity. The blood sacrifices to feed Huitzilopochtli are merely one example of the horrors that would fall upon human beings. Somewhat nicer gods than Loki (such as Thor and Odin) have disappeared because of Loki's treachery, so it seems that Loki is not necessarily intent on taking all the gods back to earth; he may wish to take only the evil ones. (He will claim otherwise in Enter the Enchanted, but can his word be trusted?)

Christopher, David, April, and Jalil were drawn into Everworld when a giant wolf kidnapped Senna, who is, unbeknownst to them, a witch. They are all pulled into a vortex that seems to turn them inside out at first. It takes them much of Land of Loss to figure out what happened to them. Early on, they suspect that Senna exerts some sort of mind control over David, and perhaps Christopher, who was her boyfriend before David became her boyfriend. By the novel's end, they have put together some of the pieces of the puzzle that is Senna. She is a teenager on earth, but, in Everworld, she is

the witch who is the key to opening the passage to earth for Loki, Huitzilopoctli, and others who live in Everworld.

About the Author

Katherine Alice Applegate is simultaneously one of America's most famous authors and one of America's most mysterious. She guards her privacy, as does her publisher, Scholastic, which has brilliantly marketed her Animorphs and Everworld series with astounding success. Applegate was already a well-established writer of books for young readers, mostly romance novels, when she proposed the Animorphs series to Scholastic, where the proposal was met with enthusiasm. She wanted to write a series of books that showed how the world might look from the perspectives of different animals; the result has been a series of fascinating novellas for readers from late elementary school to junior high school.

After moving around the United States several times, the Michigan-born writer now resides in Minneapolis. Over a hundred of her books have been published, and she has written them at an amazing pace. Begun in 1996, her Animorphs series numbered over forty books plus several spin-offs by 2001. Her series intended for adolescents, Everworld, begun in 1999, numbered nine volumes by the end of 2000. Sally Lodge, in Publishers Weekly, quotes Applegate, "A series writer has to develop plotting and pacing that become a well-oiled machine. You don't have the luxury of spending a year on a book and absolutely cannot indulge in writer's block. Yet I knew I had to write in perfect language and choose just the right images, to make sure that my middle readers fell in love with the characters and returned again and again." The two hundred letters from young readers Applegate receives per week, as well as the one hundred emails she receives per day from youngsters, attest to the success she has had in reaching her intended audience. They love her characters.

In spite of the success of Applegate's writings, they have received scant attention in the press, perhaps because of a prevailing view that books written so quickly cannot be worth writing about, or perhaps because of the immense difficulty in keeping current with all the books Applegate publishes. In spite of the great pace at which Applegate has written her books, they tend to be of higher quality than other massmarket writings. In the Animorphs series the perspectives of characters as animals, whether fleas or birds, are artful and informative. The Everworld novels offer fine introductions to the mythologies of the world. In both series, the suspense is captivating and the characterizations are sharp but well-rounded; the books are pageturners, I-can't-go-to-bed-until-I-finish tales of adventure.

Applegate does not shy away from the tough questions about growing up and building sound, honest relationships with others. For instance, the nonseries title *Sharing Sam* deals with the prospect of a close friend dying and how to love in spite of the pain. In *Everworld*, the relationships among the principal characters are essential to the appeal of the novels. The art of characterization is one that Applegate has mastered, and it is perhaps the most important reason her rapidly-written works stand as good literature as well as entertaining reads.

Setting

Everworld is a wonderful place for adventures, another one of author Applegate's remarkable imaginative creations. In *Land of Loss*, the narrative clarifies some of the background of the four youngsters: Christopher, David, April, and Jalil. They are from Chicago, and the lake where they were pulled into Everworld is Lake Michigan. One of the special complications in their adventures is that they are simultaneously living in both Chicago and Everworld.

Whenever they fall asleep in Everworld, they merge with themselves on earth, and their memories mingle. At home, they are living their ordinary lives while their Everworld selves are struggling to stay alive.

When they merge, they take advantage of the possibilities living lives on two different worlds at the same time offers: On earth, they research the cultures they have encountered in Everworld and try to find answers to questions they have about how to survive in Everworld. When they awaken in Everworld, they remember what they learned while back on earth. In addition, this comes in handy for keeping track of each other. When April is separated from the boys in the Aztec city, David suggests that they can find out where she is and how she is doing by going to sleep and asking her earthly self about her Everworld self.

After being captured by the minions of Loki, the youngsters escape Loki and join a Viking invasion of the Aztec lands across a sea from the Viking lands, until the Viking invasion is crushed by the gigantic god Huitzilopoctli, and they are taken prisoner.

Part of the fun of *Land of Loss* is the ancient Aztec setting, with impressive temples, big stone walls built to keep out the jungle, and buildings that make up a thriving Aztec city, New Tenochtitlan. The jungle itself proves to be an interesting place, too. Not only does it have the standard obstacles to be found in a hostile jungle, but it has wandering aliens from outer space, the CooHatch of the Third Forge.



Social Sensitivity

The obvious social issues in *Land of Loss* arise from Christopher's sometimes angry intention to hurt others. For instance, he picks on David's Jewishness: "Hey, David. You're a Jew, right?"

"Half Jewish," he said.

"Yeah? Well you know the word 'schmuck'?"

Did I pronounce that right? 'Schmuck'?"

Or maybe you'd prefer a good old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon word, you—" "Back off," David warned.

This passage illustrates Christopher's self-destructiveness, because he knows better than to make mocking remarks about someone's ethnicity and to pick on someone like David, who is bigger and stronger than he is. When put in the context of the stress that at one point had Christopher crying at the dead end of a street, as well as Christopher's self-hatred, his taunting of David is just one more miserable outburst. But it also reveals an aspect of his character that goes beyond the normal anxiety of being a teenager.

Later in *Land of Loss*, Christopher touches on Jalil's ethnicity by suggesting that the situation in *Everworld* is like an adventure movie: David plays the hero who is supposed to save Senna, Christopher himself is the hero's best friend, April is the requisite female companion, and Jalil is the black companion. He notes that he and Jalil would be killed, and if a sequel to the movie were anticipated, then the female companion would die, too, so that a new one could be used in the next motion picture. Sensibly, April notes that their adventure is different from a movie, but Jalil objects to his characterization as the standard "black" man who is supposed to be killed. He and Christopher have nearly come to blows before, so Jalil deserves credit for being restrained in this scene and not striking Christopher.

This scene is symptomatic of Christopher's tendency to express his anxieties out loud without thinking about what he is saying.

Readers recognize that Applegate has Christopher talking nonsense, since many adventure movies do not follow the pattern to which he alludes.

April has many appealing qualities, including courage, good sense, and sensitive leadership, but she has a blind spot when it comes to characterizing men: "I don't know, maybe males aren't capable of ever really being adults. Maybe you're crippled by your hormones or something." Her attitude that she is the only grownup among a bunch of childish boys becomes wearisome after awhile, and it is as much of a cliché as Christopher's description of adventure movies. Applegate does not delve deeply into April's attitude toward male lack of maturity in *Land of Loss*, but she does let



Christopher have his say, "You know what, I'm sick of your 'better-than-everyone, my crap doesn't stink' attitude. In case you missed it, this isn't Political Correctness World, okay?" This is one more source of friction among the characters, who must learn to work together in order to survive. It is also an interesting complication that raises a good question about whether twentiethcentury American cultural values can function under life-or-death stress—an issue that could have been explored in more depth in the Everworld series.

The treatment of Aztec culture may be an issue in reading *Land of Loss*, although it may prove to be no issue at all. In any case, Applegate sketches some brutal rituals of the religion of the ancient Aztecs, who engaged in horrendous human sacrifices in which they cut out the hearts of living human beings in order to offer blood to their gods. They would start wars with their neighbors in order to take prisoners— sometime by the thousands—to sacrifice.

This is one reason many Native Americans, of what is now Mexico, helped the conquistadors conquer the Aztecs.



Literary Qualities

When an author uses a narrator who cannot be a skilled writer, critics often complain that the narration reads like the author rather than the fictional narrator. For instance, one could suggest that Christopher's descriptions are vivid because Applegate actually writes them. Having mentioned this obvious argument, let me put it away. Applegate is no ordinary writer; even though she has written a huge number of books in a seemingly short time, she is a conscientious writer, and in *Land of Loss* much of her talent for characterization is put on display. Key to her artistic success in this novel is her ability to let Christopher have his say in his way. Rarely is there even a hint that Christopher is not the person talking to the audience of *Land of Loss*. He has his limitations and has a tendency to see himself enclosed in a dark box, sometimes perceiving little that is around him. The incident when he cries while at a dead end is an example of this; whereas David is looking for a place to go, Christopher sees only the ending. His introspective nature and self-hatred cause him to burst out with long disquisitions about other people's faults, but he is intelligent and able to understand what others feel. David would not have recognized the evil, satisfied look on Senna's face as the dragon approached, but Christopher notices it because he cares about such matters. He knows enough about himself to see her for what she is even as he yields—as he knows he must—to her influence.



Themes and Characters

"If I believed in hell," says Jalil, "it would be approximately like that city," New Tenochtitlan, the city of Huitzilopochtli. He may be forgiven his sentiments, given that people tried to sacrifice him to a bloodthirsty god there. He is the most fastidious of the four teenaged adventurers and resents the dirt, sweat, and other unpleasant aspects of Everworld. Less fussy, David remarks that not all of Everworld can be that bad.

But Land of Loss is Christopher Hitchcock's novel. He is the narrator of Land of Loss, and his point of view prevails throughout. He is a complex character who is fond of making long speeches to whomever will listen. Sometimes, eventually realizing, he talks even if no one is listening. It is "my own simple belief that we were screwed, screwed, utterly, irretrievably screwed by Senna Wales." Part of his complexity is that he is aware that Senna controls him in an unnatural way and resists her influence, yet sometimes gives in to her.

Senna manages to be the crux of Land of Loss (just as she is in Search for Senna), by being the person almost everyone wants something from. The gods want her power to open a way to earth and the youngsters she pulled with her from earth to Everworld want her to send them home. Diffident and mysterious in Search for Senna, she becomes menacing in Land of Loss. When April slaps Senna, Christopher closely watches her reaction: "Arrogance. That was it. The calm, superior sneering look of the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound linebacker who's just been punched by the ninety-five-pound gymnast." Even as Senna exerts her influence over Christopher, making him defend her against another of Everworld's menaces, he sees her face, "a vision illuminated by the dragon's fire. A smile. A killer's smile, as though the lips might stretch still further and reveal vampire fangs." She remains more a mystery than a developed character, but the hints Christopher gives of what she may truly be like add to the interest of Land of Loss and are some of the elements that make the novel a page-turner: Will we find out who she is? And what is her purpose?

Christopher's strength as a narrator is his ability to convey the complexities of the personalities of his companions. Even while he annoys his companions with his sarcastic witticisms, as well as his profound personal insecurity, he is sensitive to their points of view.

One of his potentially irritating traits is pontificating. He can burst into a lecture or tirade at any time. Even so, sometimes his speeches are Shakespearean—fascinating for their language and insights into his character: "Just scared?" he responds to David, who views fear as something to be overcome. "No. I'm not just scared. See, that makes it sound like some plain old everyday emotion. I'm terrified. Horrified. Overwhelmed with dread. I feel like my brain has been filled full of sewage and I'll never, ever be able to get it clean, like this stuff will eat me alive in my dreams, like I'll never see the world the same again. Scared? They want to eat us, you moron! They want to cut out our hearts and they almost did, you fool!" This is punchy prose—sharp, swiftly moving prose—and the images are stark, yet as metaphors they carry much meaning beyond their words.



"My brain has been filled with sewage" conveys a weighty amount of emotion, speaking of a revulsion that is deeply dire; it is also a striking use of 234 Land of Loss words, creating an image that is difficult to forget.

One reason why Christopher is bitter and sarcastic is his penchant for self-analysis, marred by self-hatred. Losing Senna as his girlfriend was a big blow to him back on earth, and his time in Everworld is not made easier by knowing that David is her preference for her "hero," the man who would best protect her. He is disgusted with himself for still yearning for her company. When he thinks of himself as being no more than a supporting character in her life, the hero's companion who is almost always killed in motion picture adventures, he reacts by making cutting jokes about other people, as well as himself, and picking fights. He comments on his antisocial behavior, "Or maybe I was just mad at good old Christopher. I was whiny, bitchy, snide, resentful, childish. Picking stupid fights. Acting like the kind of person I couldn't stand." This helps make him a tragic figure in Land of Loss, because just as he cannot entirely resist Senna's influence even though he knows about it, he cannot make himself be the man he wants to be, even though he is aware of the aspects of his behavior that are hurtful to himself as well as to others.

For Search for Senna, David seems like the logical choice for narrator. He is, after all, strong, tough, and given to performing heroic deeds. He is able to size up opponents, spot their strengths and weaknesses, and then take action. Further, he is adaptable, using whatever tools or weapons are at hand for whatever task he undertakes, and he frankly enjoys being on an adventure.

This makes Christopher's narration a striking contrast to that of David. Adjusting is not something Christopher cares to do. He does not like adventuring; he does not like strange environments; he does not like people, either. His awareness of his own vulnerability helps to make him an attractive character, his biting wit is sometimes funny, and he has a way with words that is pithy and pleasing. For instance, his remark to April, "How do you figure your life out when you're late for class and about to be sacrificed to a pagan deity?" is a good summary of the multiplicity of problems he and his companions must overcome. By the end of Land of Loss, he is learning to summarize his ideas like this: "Lesson number one in Everworld: There's them, and there's us.

And any day we can keep them from destroying us, that's a victory."

In Land of Loss, April asserts herself more than she has before. She is active in trying to keep the four teenagers together in a group, and when others are losing their heads, she is usually keeping hers. She says to Christopher and Jalil, "David's not the hero. He's just a fool. A puppet. Like all of us. This is all Senna. It's all her. This is her game we're playing. We're all fools." Although she includes herself in the "fools" category, she seems resistant to the influence Senna exerts over the boys, which makes her an important part of the team. During Land of Loss, Christopher begins to admire her—foreshadowing events in later novels—and begins to value her as someone who will know when he is losing control of himself.



Applegate's novel is a story in which exciting events and new obstacles pop up everywhere as her characters progress through the tale. Perhaps one should not be surprised that after escaping imprisonment, saving a bunch of Vikings from having their hearts cut out, and fleeing a city of evil into a dark jungle, the teenagers would be set upon in their sleep by aliens from another world. The Coo-Hatch of the Third Forge are twenty to twenty-five in number and about the same size as men, but they have a face that is "a long, very long, maybe three-foot-long point, a hard cone, a needle, like an anteater who'd evolved to hunt for ants inside of concrete. Resting above, at the back of the needle were two eyes, enormous, blue-irised within dark red." Their bodies are bent so that their snouts are over their clawed feet, and they have four arms, "two brawny arms at mid-arc, two smaller, delicate arms jutting out just below the eyes." Had David described them, he might have assessed how dangerous they were.

But Christopher, after being frightened, perceives something other than threat in them, even letting one take his axe. It turns out that these weird creatures are master metallurgists and are far more interested in trade and commerce than war.

In addition to giving a close-up look at the Coo-Hatch, *Land of Loss* introduces a new figure who foreshadows the introduction of a new mythology into the "Everworld" series—and with that mythology new complications to the mystery of Everworld. Christopher discovers a man rummaging about near the sleeping figure of Huitzilopoctli, who remarks about the sleeping god and gods in general that "the gods of war usually are rather dull." He is old but self-possessed and seemingly not concerned about the bloodthirsty god; he tells Christopher, "Call me Merlin." Merlin is a figure from the stories of King Arthur and the Round Table, leading the reader to believe that the arrival of a dragon is imminent.



Topics for Discussion

1. How trustworthy is Christopher? Do you trust everything he says in Land of Loss? Why or why not?
2. What are the sources of Christopher's insecurity?
3. Christopher cannot defy Senna's influence over him. Why not?
4. Why would Christopher be miserable in Everworld even while David is enjoying the adventure?
5. Why does Christopher hand his axe to Estett when Estett asks for it?
6. Is Christopher likable? Does it matter for the enjoyment of the story? Why?
7. Why does April put men down as childish? How might Senna exploit April's attitude towards the boys and toward men in general?
8. Is Senna a villain or a heroine in Land of Loss? Explain why you think she is or is not.
9. How does Christopher's attitude towards his companions affect what he says about them?
10. Why does Christopher handle his fear in a different way than David?
11. Why does Christopher dare to approach the resting Huitzilopoctli?
12. What does Merlin's presence in Land of Loss suggest about what will come in later novels in the "Everworld" series?
13. Is the ending of Land of Loss a good cliffhanger?
14. What does Christopher bring to his narrative that makes a special contribution to understanding the events in Everworld?
15. What do the Coo-Hatch contribute to the development of the plot in Land of Loss?
16. The Vikings do not make much of an effort to escape at the start of Land of Loss. Why not? What is the difference between them and Christopher, David, and Jalil that leads the boys to attempt escaping?
17. At one point in Land of Loss, Christopher admits that "at the moment logic was a tiny, faraway voice way, way back in my head." If he has moments like this, how can we trust him to tell the story as it actually happened?
18. What are dreamlike passages in Land of Loss?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How accurate is the representation of Aztec culture in *Land of Loss*?
2. What was the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice that was like the one in *Land of Loss*? Why did they practice this ritual?

Did they have other rituals of human sacrifice?

3. What did Viking raiders do when they invaded a town or city? What would they be doing to New Tenochtitlan in *Land of Loss*?
4. What was the layout for the city Tenochtitlan? How is this layout reflected in the descriptions in *Search for Senna* and *Land of Loss*?
5. What figure in Aztec mythology does Huitzilopochtli represent? How did Aztecs expect him to behave?
6. What is fatalism? Why would Applegate attribute it to the Vikings?
7. Who is Merlin? In what ancient stories is he found? Based on the stories about him, how may he be expected to behave in *Everworld*?
8. What would the temple in *Land of Loss* look like in Tenochtitlan? Where would the altar be? Where would the god be?

In what room would Merlin have been discovered? You could draw a picture of the temple and label the places Christopher would have seen in *Land of Loss*.

9. Christopher suggests to April that "Political Correctness" is inappropriate for *Everworld*. What is political correctness, and why would Christopher think that put-downs of men would be considered politically correct? What ideas are introduced in *Land of Loss* by Christopher's remarks?
10. Compare the narratives of *Land of Loss* and *Search for Senna*. Are there notable differences in how the stories are told?

Are there notable similarities? What does this tell you about Applegate's artistic achievement in *Land of Loss*?

11. What is Thor's hammer called? What is the Norse myth about how Thor acquired his hammer? What do Norse myths say about the hammer's power?

Could it do what it does in *Land of Loss*?

For Further Reference

Authors and Artists for Young Adults, vol. 37.

Detroit: Gale, 2000. A biographical essay with comments on Applegate's life and work.

"NYC Radio Station Celebrates the Season." Publishers Weekly (January 17, 2000): 26. Mentions the marketing of the "Everworld" series.

Publishers Weekly (June 21, 1999): 69. In this review of *Search for Senna*, the reviewer says, "With her blend of accessible story and mythological cast of characters, Applegate is sure to attract a host of new fans."

"Scholastic's Animorphs Series Has Legs," Publishers Weekly 244, 45 (November 3, 1997): 36-37.

Land of Loss 239 Something about the Author, vol. 109. Detroit: Gale, 2000. An essay that includes biographical information about Applegate and information about her writing.



Related Titles

Applegate likes to experiment, and her novels tend to be lively exercises in ideas and techniques. In the case of *Everworld*, she creates a place where the world's ancient mythologies coexist, and she has fun creating adventures that involve mixing the mythologies. For the *Everworld* series, she creates four adventurers who are snatched from fairly ordinary teenaged American lives, although Jalil's psychological problems are somewhat out of the ordinary.

Through these characters she experiments with techniques of narration by having each one narrate novels: first David for *Search for Senna*, then Christopher for *Land of Loss*, then April for *Enter the Enchanted*, then Jalil for *Realm of the Reaper*, and then repeating the cycle through the subsequent novels.

This can be disconcerting at first. David is a very engaging narrator, and losing his storytelling voice for *Land of Loss* is disappointing, although Christopher manages to make *Land of Loss* his own novel. Once the reader gets used to the rhythm of the shifting narrators, Applegate's experimentation becomes fun. The personality of each narrator shows through in the telling of each book. *Everworld* is described through David's love of action and interest in logistics, through Christopher's acidic humor and tendency to see below the surface of events to find what is really going on, through April's good sense and practicality, and through Jalil's analytical mind that finds the logic linking events.

The novels also continue to introduce mythologies, and in the process, Applegate creates a new mythology of her own, in which human endeavors are placed in a vast cosmic scheme in which everyone is important, even though in any individual novel they may seem like pawns. Once the youngsters meet Merlin in *Land of Loss*, the grand contest of universe-shaking powers begins to reveal itself, and dreams really do seem more real than real life. Combine the heroic scope of the ambition for the *Everworld* series with exceptional characterizations and vividly realized scenes of action, and it is no wonder that Applegate's audience loves these books.



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