Locadio's Apprentice Short Guide

Locadio's Apprentice by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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Overview

Locadio's Apprentice is a gentle, appealing historical novel which is also a straightforward and easily accessible example of what is known as a bildungsrotnan, meaning a novel of education or personal development. The book relates how the dedicated apprentice Enecus is gradually transformed from an idealistic youngster into a seasoned but humane physician. This transformation is effected in part by the gruff and demanding Locadio, Enecus's teacher, and in part by the terror of Mount Vesuvius's eruption.

This eruption, which occurred in A.D.

79, buried in its entirety the city of Pompeii, the city where Enecus and his family live. By placing the novel within the context of Pompeii's destruction, Yarbro effectively complements Enecus's own personal history—his struggle against the common and personal horrors of nature, such as accident, disease, and death—with the cataclysmic horrors of history. This combination not only helps animate and make more humanly real the distant past; it also serves to intensify and make more concrete Enecus's own individual growing process.

About the Author

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro was born on September 15, 1942, in Berkeley, California, to a cartographer and an artist. After attending San Francisco State College for three years, she became a cartographer in the family business in 1963, where she worked until the business failed in 1970. She then dedicated herself to writing, to occult interests (such as providing professional tarot and Ouija board readings), and to composing musical works. Her pursuit of matters occult and metaphysical has led to the production of several nonfiction works—Messages from Michael on the Nature of the Evolution of the Human Soul (1979), More Messages from Michael (1986), and Michael's People (1988)—as well as such musical compositions as "Stabat Mater," "Alpha and Omega," and "Mythologies."

Yarbro is chiefly known for her adult fiction, especially the best-selling "Saint-Germain" series, which recounts the adventures of the immortal yet humanly sympathetic vampire, Count Ragoczy de Saint-Germain. Each of the five novels in this series—Hotel Transylvania (1978), The Palace (1979), Blood Games (1980), Path of the Eclipse (1981), and Tempting Fate (1982)—relates the count's romances and suffering during a particular historical period; these periods range all the way from the time of ancient Rome to the middle of the twentieth century. Fantasy, gothic horror, and meticulously researched history combine in these and other works by Yarbro to produce unique examples of intelligent and well-crafted contemporary popular fiction. Horror and science fiction are the two genres Yarbro seems to favor in her works for adult audiences, just as she prefers historical fiction in her writing for young adults. Indeed, she has contributed to such diverse collections as Carl Mason's Anthropology Through Science Fiction (1974) and Bernard Hollister's textbook, You and Science Fiction (1976), as well as to several of the horror series (Shadows, Horrors, and Ghouls! for example) edited by Charles L. Grant. In 1973 her novelette, "The Ghosts at Iron River," was placed on the Mystery Writers of America scroll, as was Floating Illusions in 1986. In addition, several of her pieces—two novels, The Palace (1979) and Ariosto (1980), and two short stories, "Cabin 33" (1980) and "Do I Dare to Eat a Peach?" (1987)—received the honor of being nominated for the World Fantasy Award. Locadio's Apprentice was her first venture into the field of fiction for younger readers; this effort was soon followed by two other works—Four Horses for Tishtry and Floating Illusions—aimed specifically at this same audience.

Setting

The novel begins in Pompeii, a prosperous port town spread at the foot of majestic Mount Vesuvius in southern Italy. Vesuvius, then an active if theretofore relatively quiet volcano, broods in the background of the story, until its eruption takes center stage in the book's final chapters. However, it is not the dramatic landscape of the city which is especially attractive but rather the full-bodied texture of daily life unfolding in a small port town of the mighty and far-flung Roman Empire.

The reader is exposed to the sounds and smells of Pompeiian life among the insulae (apartment houses) and fora (town squares) of the city while Yarbro effectively yet unobtrusively establishes the larger historical and political background of her novel. Part of this background is made up of information readers may remember from history classes in school, such as the civil unrest and succession of Emperors during the first century A.D. Yarbro subtly connects political reality to geographic reality, and makes of the latter a metaphor for the former: just as governmental troubles affected the stability of the Empire, so Vesuvius threatened the security of Pompeii. In addition to political references such as these, Yarbro also sprinkles her text with fundamental Latin terms and references to common Roman laws and customs, both of which she uses to communicate the distinctive character of the period.

Social Sensitivity

Yarbro's novel is remarkable for its unpretentious, low-keyed humanity.

Locadio's Apprentice contains no villains and, in a sense, no heroes—the heroism of the characters is considered such a normal part of their own nature or the nature of their profession that it is made almost unremarkable. For example, whenever a patient expresses profound gratitude to Enecus, the young man is embarrassed: after all, saving lives and alleviating suffering is what a doctor does; that is his or her job. This interpretation of heroism avoids the high drama and self-involved egotism associated with more traditional versions of heroism, especially those depicting destructive warrior heroes or self-destructive martyr types; it therefore widens the reader's perception of what constitutes heroic being and action, and offers a more democratic and accessible model to the average person.

The author brings a similarly humble perspective to her depiction of various historical realities as well. For example, although she never makes of it a major issue, she alludes frequently to the cultural and racial diversity which constituted ancient Roman civilization.

Enecus's family is itself multicultural, for the father, Amalius, is a man whose family originally came from Gallia or Gaul (roughly equivalent to modernday France), while his wife, Rhea, is a Greek. Their two children are, however, thoroughly Roman, an idea Yarbro highlights by having Pyralis tell Enecus of her desire to change the name of the family business from "Gallus Rubeus" (which actually means Red Cockerel, but which, through punning, is converted to a reference to Amalius's ethnicity) to "Flaminia's," in order to, as Pyralis says, "sound more Roman."

Yet another example of Yarbro's sensitive, subtle handling of historical reality is her treatment of slavery and of polytheistic religion, two important belief systems formally institutionalized in ancient Rome but now condemned by Western culture. Yarbro makes no value judgments about either, and she presents both as simply part of the period depicted in the novel. This neutrality effectively disarms any objections which could be made, and the dignity with which she infuses references to either religion or slavery provides a welcome springboard for further discussion of these institutions and their social, ethical, and historical implications. The evenhandedness Yarbro displays in depicting historical and cultural diversity extends to her portrayal of the sexes as well: Rhea and Pyralis are industrious, intelligent, ambitious, and independent women leading fulfilling lives, just as Locadio, Enecus, and Salvius are sensitive, supportive, and conscientious men who place equal value on their professional and personal relationships. This affirmation of freedom in identifying roles and characteristics of the sexes does not seem to be Yarbro's main intent, however, for she never preaches about gender equality or mutual understanding; rather, her nonsexist depiction seems to be motivated by, and dependent on, the larger issue of identifying and asserting the common values we all share as human beings, regardless of our sex, race, religion, or beliefs.

Literary Qualities

The idea of history itself is very important to Yarbro. Although Locadio's Apprentice is a historical novel, it is not concerned with the epic scope conventionally attributed to works of this genre, such as, say, Edward BulwerLytton's famous The Last Days of Pompeii, published in 1834 and translated into film some one hundred years later.

Instead, Yarbro perceives ancient history not as something to escape to, study, or visit as one would a museum; rather she sees it as a particular way of living, feeling, and acting which happened to exist a long time ago. Thus she envisions history as made up not so much of grand, important events and personalities (a traditional attitude she acknowledges by her understated allusions to Rome's political unrest and instability at the time), but rather as something composed of all the insignificant individuals and mundane actions or concerns which constituted human life at the time—just the same as they basically do even now. Indeed, Yarbro's sense of history as constituted primarily by the unremarkable and commonplace is expressed above all in her choice of characters, none of whom are especially rich, powerful, or important.

Yarbro's prose is as clear and straightforward as her characters and her vision of history. As she commented in an interview in Contemporary Authors, "The reader should not be aware of how the words are on the page, or with what pyrotechnics the language is thrown around. Language is not an end in itself, but a means." In the novel the only place where the reader may have any difficulty with her otherwise "transparent" language is her use of Latin terms, a usage which is logical, since the novel is set in ancient Rome. Yarbro is sensitive to the reader's likely unfamiliarity with this language and so she includes at the end of her novel a glossary of Latin terms. She also appends a glossary on Roman medicine, which is very helpful to those who want to check their knowledge or powers of deduction: Whenever symptoms, diseases, and treatments are presented in the novel, they are described in terms consonant with ancient medical practice. The reader must therefore indulge in a bit of mental detective work to translate those descriptions into contemporary terms, and his or her own conclusions can be verified by consulting the terms in the "Roman Medicine" section of the glossary. The medical mystery/guessing game aspect of the novel provides an additional dimension of entertainment and education, especially since Yarbro frequently compares Roman medical practices to modern day ones.

Themes and Characters

Locadio's Apprentice focuses on two characters—the older physician, Locadio Priscus, and his young assistant, Enecus Cano—and the strong professional and personal bonds which develop between them. Enecus is almost fourteen when the novel begins. In Roman culture, this is the age at which a person was formally recognized as an adult; Enecus is thus—quite significantly—entering manhood just as he commences his apprenticeship with the aged Locadio. By having the two events occur simultaneously, the author is able to introduce an interesting and important variation on the book's theme, that of coming of age. One of the most critical aspects of this theme deals with the difference between physical and emotional maturity. For example, although Enecus is "officially" a man at fourteen, his sometimes frightening and often frustrating experiences at Locadio's infirmary make him realize that there is much more to adulthood than just physical age or cultural custom. His important realization is reflected—and thus reinforced—in a similar process which his best friend, Salvius, undergoes.

Salvius, who comes from a merchant family which is financially better off than Enecus's, is obliged to make a career in his family's business: Although he dreams of leading a romantic, adventurous life in the army, he becomes a cloth merchant. His family's wishes (and needs, for even personal matters were dictated by social and economic necessity, more so than they may be today in our own society) also oblige Salvius to marry at a very young age. Although Salvius realizes that he is in no way prepared for the many commitments and responsibilities marriage requires, he understands that he will have to learn to cope with and fulfill them to the best of his ability anyway.

Like most young people, Salvius and Enecus are very idealistic when the novel begins; that is, they have vague and glorious visions of what their life as adults will be like. Although Salvius can envision nothing more grand and adventuresome than "facing a host of enemies in golden armor with battle hammers and archers," and nothing more dull than being a cloth merchant, he soon discovers that the reality of his career is nothing like what he had expected. Enecus, too, finds the reality of being a physician is contrary to what he had imagined. As the apprentice doctor tells his friend in the fifth chapter, which is dedicated to the boys' assessment of their own maturation, "It's harder and it's less certain than I assumed. . . .There is so much that even the best physician cannot do."

Their observations reveal a second theme of the novel which is intimately related to the first: that of the deceptiveness of appearances or our mental image of things. The seeming inactivity of Mount Vesuvius, the supposed monotony of a cloth merchant's life, the presumed ability of a doctor to cure human ills—all illustrate how one's perceptions, assumptions, or expectations may be distant from the reality of situations or events. Of course, such misjudgment may also occur with people as well. In the eleventh chapter, right after Enecus saves some of Salvius's slaves injured in a warehouse accident, Salvius admits that, until now, he had always been ashamed of his best friend: "I thought he wanted a safe life. . . .I thought I was the clever one, the fortunate one, the courageous one because I go all over the Empire buying cloth and trading for goods. I

thought that made me better and wiser." It is only after he has witnessed Enecus in action and has thus experienced vicariously his friend's reality that Salvius finally perceives the bravery, nobility, and heroism of his friend.

If Salvius's characteristic attitude is one of underestimation, Enecus's is clearly the opposite, for he overestimates both himself and his profession.

Young and idealistic, he believes that desire and skill should be able to overcome everything, even fatal disease.

Thus he feels not only sorrow and anger when one of Locadio's patients dies, but, more importantly, he experiences shame as well. This shame is not directed at Locadio's abilities or his own aptitude, but rather at human limitations in general. It is this idea which forms yet another important theme of the novel. Yarbro develops this theme using two different means. The first concerns the action of the novel itself: In depicting the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the author uses the age-old device of pitting humankind against the elements to illustrate the paradox of human strength and weakness in such a confrontation. The second involves the character of Locadio himself. Enecus' mentor is a rather gruff and unyielding person who once served as a doctor in the military. His many years of experience ministering to people of diverse temperaments and from all stations of life have given him a certain cynicism regarding human ability. When, for example, Enecus hurriedly treats a patient who ends up worsening because of his misdiagnosis, Enecus is so shamed and appalled by even this relatively minor mistake that he desires to leave Locadio and join the Roman army, where, he remarks, "there would be no room for error, or excuse for it." Locadio's response to this idea—and to Enecus's impossible standards of perfection—is sharp but humane: "You made a mistake, and you finally understand the ramifications of mistakes. . .that is why you are an apprentice still. You are learning how to make mistakes properly." Because of Locadio's experience as a physician, he has learned that much is out of human control, and that what little is within our control often remains a mystery, like the inexplicable obstinacy of patients who refuse or neglect to follow their doctor's instructions.

Besides imparting his knowledge to his apprentice, Locadio more importantly shares his hard-won wisdom.

His major lesson to Enecus is thus not one involving diagnoses, techniques, or cures; it is rather one which drives home the fact that, even after extensive education, training, and practice, "you will have many doubts. . . .I have never met a physician worthy of the name who did not have them." Of course Locadio knows that with self-doubt will come self-recrimination, whether justified, as in the case of a mistaken diagnosis or an ill-prepared medication, or unjustified, as in the vague, depressing feeling that more could have been done for the patient. It is this last feeling—what psychologists today would perhaps call survivor's syndrome—which threatens to engulf Enecus after his heroic efforts during Vesuvius's eruption have drained his physical and emotional strength. When Locadio, speaking both as doctor and as friend, observes that Enecus's experience has, in its own way, injured him as much as Vesuvius injured his patients, Enecus responds despondently, "But I am alive and my skin is whole," to which Locadio

can only answer, "And you must forgive yourself for that." The teacher's words thus offer a gentle reminder of the pupil's earlier, somewhat naive affirmation that, "it is better to do [the little we can], and do it with all the skill possible, than to do nothing."

The somber sentiment expressed here alludes not only to the Hippocratic Oath taken by many physician's even today, but also to the broadest theme of the novel: The overwhelming importance of the various bonds linking one human being to another. The respectful, supportive relationship Enecus enjoys with Locadio is mirrored in the microcosm of the Cano nuclear family, and is especially evident in Enecus's rapport with his precocious sister, Pyralis, a young lady as ambitious and adept in her chosen profession of managing the family business as Enecus is in his. The care and dignity evident in this familial relationship is replicated in Enecus's professional relationship with Locadio's clients and his own patients, the rich merchant Hyppolytys Niceta in particular. Indeed, Enecus's attentive care of Hyppolytys leads him to save the merchant's life, an action which in turn permits the young physician to save the lives of the anonymous masses caught in the fury of Vesuvius' eruption, for a grateful Hyppolytys repays Enecus's kindness by converting his villa into an emergency hospital.

The importance of human community and the treating of others in a considerate, dignified fashion is thus to be regarded not just a civilized nicety, but as a necessity for survival. Just as the interdependence of mind and body—a common leitmotif or repeated pattern in Locadio's conversations with his apprentice—is central to the survival of the individual person, so is that person's mutual interdependence with others. The holistic quality evident in both of these examples constitutes an important aspect of Yarbro's interpretation of ancient Roman medicine, as well as her social and ethical vision of the period.

Topics for Discussion

1. In describing some of the places or items used in her story, Yarbro often uses their proper Latin names, such as toga or thermopolium. Do you consider this a positive or a negative aspect of the novel? How does her use of these terms affect the reader's understanding of the story? Of the period?

2. Since the book is about a doctor and his assistant, the author talks a great deal about ancient medical practices. What diseases are depicted, and how are they treated? What similarities and differences do you perceive between ancient and modern medical practice?

3. In several of their conversations about treating patients, Locadio emphasizes to Enecus the importance of the mind's influence over how well or poorly the patient does physically. Do you agree with Locadio's perception?

Why or why not?

4. In speaking to one of his patients, Locadio says of the hawthorn tree that "it is a plant of mixed blessing. If you do not respect it, you will suffer for it" (Chapter 8). Are there other aspects of the novel to which this observation can be applied? Does seeing them in this way help you to understand other parts of the book differently?

5. During the scene where Enecus is confronted with his misdiagnosis of a patient (Chapter 9), Locadio expresses the judgment that experience outweighs both aptitude and good intentions. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Can you find other instances in the novel where this judgment is supported or contradicted?

6. One of the main lessons Locadio seeks to teach Enecus is that people must accept their own limitations, and that they must learn to accept the mistakes they have made. How does this philosophy relate to Locadio's profession, and do you think that is a good attitude for a doctor to have? Why or why not?

7. The first time Salvius sees Enecus practicing his profession (Chapter 11), he feels the need to have an honest conversation with his friend about how their career choices and lives have turned out so far. What were Salvius's feelings about his friend's decision to become a doctor, and how and why did they change? Did Salvius's attitude towards his own career choice undergo a similar revision? What do changes like these tell you about the character?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Yarbro mentions several important aspects of Roman cultural practice, such as the rites surrounding a child's coming of age or the customs concerning the death of an emperor. How are these customs similar to or different from our own culture's practices? Can you find examples of Roman customs which have survived into the present day?

2. Locadio and Enecus usually prescribe opiates as part of their patients' treatment. Does this practice differ from modern medical procedure? If so, why? How do Salvius's comments about his brother-in-law's use of "hemp flowers" relate to the subject?

3. In discussing Yarbro's Saint-Germain books, critic Jeffrey Elliot mentions that "the horror stems from the history." Could this comment be applied to Locadio's Apprentice as well? If so, what are the situations or events you would identify as horrible or horrific, and why do you consider them to be so?

4. Locadio and Enecus come to mean more and more to each other as the novel progresses. How does the author communicate the changes in their relationship and what they signify? If one of these central characters had been female instead of male, do you think their relationship and its development would have been different?

5. Discuss Yarbro's depiction of the practice of slavery in the book. Do you think her portrayal is representative of actual practice in ancient Rome? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Cooper, Ilene. "Locadio's Apprentice."

Booklist 81 (December 15, 1984): 594.

Although pointing out that the novel has minimal plotting, Cooper nonetheless commends it for its deft characterizations, but also justly indicates that slavery is "shown in an unfortunately benign manner."

Elliot, Jeffrey. "Interview: Chelsea Quinn Yarbro." Fantasy Newsletter 4,12 (December 1981): 10-15, 30. Although this interview was conducted before Yarbro began writing young adult fiction, it is nonetheless significant for the light it sheds on her views of writing, history, and character.

Etienne, Robert. Pompeii: The Day a City Died. Translated by Caroline Palmer.

New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

This visually gorgeous and informative little book engagingly portrays Pompeii past and present through a variety of archeological, artistic, and documentary materials. It is recommended for readers who want to know more about Enecus's city and the Empire of which it was a part.

Lieberman, Jan, and Marilyn Kercher.

"Books for Adolescents." Journal of Reading 29 (November 1985): 174-179.

Both Locadio's Apprentice and Four Horses for Tishtry are discussed in this review of historical fiction for young adults, and they are singled out for the dynamic energy, accurate description, and vivid recreation of the times. Interesting summation and contextualization of the novels.

Wilms, Denise M. "Four Horses for Tishtry." Booklist 81 (June 15, 1985): 1463-1464. This brief review indicates Yarbro's growth as a writer for young adults, for it discusses the novel's riveting blend of a dramatic, welldeveloped plot, convincing characters, and historical setting. The reviewer also comments on the increased realism in the author's depiction of slavery.

Wiloch, Thomas. "Chelsea Quinn Yarbro." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series. Vol. 25. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 499-502. This entry reveals the varied and prolific nature of Yarbro's creative output. Although it focuses exclusively on her adult works, it does contain a brief interview and excerpts from sources (such as the Fantasy Newsletter and Science Fiction Review) to which readers might not otherwise have ready access.

Related Titles

Like Locadio's Apprentice, Yarbro's second novel for young adults is also a historical novel set in the Roman Empire during the first century; it too is about a young person's coming of age.

In Four Horses for Tishtry, the main character is a young slave girl (the Tishtry of the book's title) from Armenia, who, through her spectacular stunt riding in the Roman arenas, hopes to buy freedom for herself and her family.

This female protagonist is portrayed as a vigorous, ambitious, and proud young woman whose spirit and ability should appeal to readers both young and old. In addition to being of interest to those who like historical fiction, the book should also appeal to devotees of the horse story, for Yarbro, as usual, offers a mix of genres in her fiction, just as she does in two other novels for young adults: Floating Illusions, a mystery-adventure set during the turn of the century which also features a young female protagonist, and The Law in Charity, a philosophical Western.

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