

The Lone Sentinel Short Guide

The Lone Sentinel by Jo Dereske

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Overview

The underlying subject of *The Lone Sentinel* is the balance between conformity and individualism. Until his father is killed in a fall from the tower, Erik has never deviated from the rules set out in the Trust Control Manual.

Just as he has modelled his speech on the patterns of the Say It Right videos supplied by Trust Control, Erik has unquestioningly adopted the code of civilized, responsible behavior followed by his father and grandfather, both of whom were "caremen." His father's death poses a dilemma for Erik, however, because he is unwilling to leave his lifelong home and he doubts that either he or his dog Thursday will be comfortable in the urban setting of New Province. As a result, he breaks two major rules: He fails to report his father's death, and he attempts to maintain the sentinel alone.

Erik believes that his conformity to procedural details may partially compensate for these lapses, but he knows that really his actions are wrong, and he comes to regard his disobedience as an underlying cause of the later problems at Lone Sentinel.

Erik also faces the universal problem of distinguishing between unthinking adherence to traditions which may have lost their meaning and faithful obedience to important rules—even those which appear impractical or unreasonable. Because of his youth and inexperience, Erik is slow to suspect that the renegade alien Maag is evil, and he rebukes Augusta, the runaway who appears at his doorstep with her twin sister, for questioning the actions and motives of a Helgatite. Already exceptionally responsible beyond his years, Erik must learn to think for himself and to get along with other people.

One part of his social education is to develop the ability to detect deceit and treachery in others.

Just as Erik needs to develop individualism, Augusta needs to learn conformity. She is extremely impatient, reluctant to observe the established practice of the careman's one-year "detachment" from the news, and willing to disregard any rule which prevents her from immediately achieving what she desires. To her, the story of the Helgatites' saving her people is "ancient history", and she does not feel obligated to acknowledge their innate superiority or to treat them with any special respect. Where Erik tries to map out strategy as carefully as in a chess game, she acts impulsively—e.g., in fleeing New Province, in insisting that Maag cure Willa, Augusta's twin sister, and in decoying the Duvian pod away from the supplier's shack. Further, as a result of her experience with foster families in New Province, Augusta has become cynical and defensive; she distrusts everyone, believing she can rely only upon herself and her twin sister. As a result, she pushes Erik to recognize that if Maag's explanations seem unreasonable, they may be false, and if customary procedure does not work, it may be time for unconventional action.

For Erik and Augusta, stable family life is merely a memory. Significantly, both are orphans, but the loss of their parents has affected them somewhat differently. Erik has



become more cautious and more meticulous about detail; Augusta has become more reckless and more independent. Each clings, however, to remaining family ties. Augusta is determined that she and Willa will not be separated; regardless of the rules she must break and the dangers she must face, she will not allow anyone to take Willa away. Erik displays a similar fierce loyalty to his dog Thursday and to his home at Lone Sentinel.

In both cases that loyalty is rewarded: Augusta and Willa are not separated, and Thursday accompanies Erik for his sojourn, presumably brief, in New Province.

Everyone returns to some type of conformity at the novel's end. Willa has been cured. She and Augusta are happily returning to New Province to live with their uncle. Erik, too, is going to New Province to stay with this family, and he is accompanied by a stoutly leashed Thursday. Wayne Burdick has assumed parental responsibility for his nieces and for Erik. In short, the Helgaites have corrected all ills. Even the Trust Control has become less rigidly authoritarian, calling Erik by his name and acknowledging that some improvements in their procedures are possible and probably desirable.

About the Author

One of a family of readers, Jo Dereske was born October 1, 1947, in Ludington, Michigan, and grew up in the small town of Walhalla, Michigan.

Her parents were so interested in books that their kitchen cupboards were used as bookcases, and early in her childhood Jo realized that she could visit other planets by writing stories of fantasy and science fiction.

After earning her B.A. and M.L.S. from Western Michigan University, Dereske was librarian at Western Washington University and owner of Corridor Information Services. She now lives with her husband, two children, and their various pets on the shores of Bellingham Bay in the northwest corner of Washington State. Always interested in outdoor activities, she spends as much time as possible outdoors, pursuing her hobby of studying insects.

Dereske's novel *Glom, Gloom* was nominated for the William Allen White Children's Book Award (1985), and *The Lone Sentinel* received the South Carolina Children's Book Award (1991-1992) and a nomination for the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Award (1989).

Setting

The Lone Sentinel is set in an unspecified future after "the last war" on Earth, when earthlings have settled the planet Azure and attempted to recreate conditions on Earth, with which they have lost all contact and which is probably extinct. Endangered by the hostile conditions on Azure, for which they have been ill prepared, the earthlings owe their survival to the Helgatites, space aliens whom they repay by cultivating biosote (a coral-like substance needed by the Helgatites, but in short supply on their planet). Now, several generations later, a Helgatite spaceship continues to orbit Azure to protect the planet, descending only at ten-year intervals to harvest the biosote. Thus, although Azure's inhabitants know there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, their's is a "closed" planet; their only contacts are with the Helgatites, and then only through Trust Control, the somewhat authoritarian governing body established by the original earthlings in cooperation with the Helgatites.

The most isolated inhabitants of Azure are the caremen of the six sentinels.

Lone Sentinel compound—where the novel's action takes place—is the most remote of these steel towers whose beams protect the biosote fields from the birdlike struckies and the molelike borers. This sentinel, bounded by the Green Grass Ridge on the south and the wilderness on the north, is hundreds of miles from the settled area of New Province, the city from which come only occasional visitors, most notably Chad the Supplier and Wayne Burdick, the hunter and guide. Lone Sentinel's principal links with civilization are daily radio reports to Trust Control and year-old newspapers and videos which Chad the Supplier brings from New Province.



Social Sensitivity

The major social concern in *The Lone Sentinel* is the way one treats others who are different from oneself. Erik treats everyone with courtesy—the visiting hunters, the space aliens, the two strange girls who appear at his door. Augusta is angry at the foster families who have feared Willa because she is different, and Dereske suggests that the insensitivity of these families and of government authorities have been the major force compelling the two girls to run away from the city and hide in the wilderness. Nevertheless, Augusta herself displays insensitivity toward Erik, ridiculing him for his naivete and his lack of social skills; and she is openly curious about Maag and his ship. Only Erik's insistence upon maintaining the social proprieties prevents outright rudeness.

Wayne Burdick's treatment of Augusta and Willa raises the issue of parental neglect. Although apparently their only living relative, he has been busy with his work as a hunting guide, and he has left the care of his family to the government authorities. The girls' flight apparently causes him to reassess his own priorities, and the novel concludes with him committed to providing a permanent home for his nieces and at least a temporary home for Erik.

Dereske's treatment of gender differences is also quite sensitive. Augusta is shown to be more impetuous, but quicker to think and act, and fully as brave as Erik. Erik, on the other hand, is a better chess player and logician, but he lacks Augusta's instinctive ability to assess character. Augusta and Erik's joy at their eventual reunion may be—but probably need not be—read as suggesting a future romance between the two.

The Lone Sentinel deals sensitively with the issue of violence in fiction for young adults. While Maag is shown to be a dangerous and unscrupulous adversary who must be destroyed, his death is not gory, but in fact surprisingly tame. When Thursday rips his suit and exposes him to Azure's atmosphere, Maag disintegrates with a "bubbling, high-pitched squeal"—leaving no body, only a "stench like rotting garbage." Perhaps Dereske intends to suggest that Maag's own corruption (rottenness) was the primary cause of his destruction. Other potential violence is equally muted: Maag merely stuns Thursday; Augusta is not fatally injured when her vehicle is wrecked; and no physical harm befalls Erik, Willa, or the Helgatites. The Duveans are killed when their spaceship is blown up, but the explosion occurs at a distance, removed from Erik's range of vision, and only after the Duveans have rejected the chance to surrender.

Literary Qualities

The Lone Sentinel deals with a theme which deeply concerns teen-agers: establishing one's identity as an individual person. Dereske clearly demonstrates that neither Erik's rigid conformity nor Augusta's irreverent individualism provides a satisfactory model for governing one's behavior. When these two extremists compromise and cooperate, they not only rout the alien invaders, but take a large step toward personal maturity.

If development of theme is the novel's greatest strength, inadequate character development is its greatest weakness. The reader finds little more substance to the major characters than Erik can detect inside the Helgatites' spacesuits. There is virtually no physical description of Erik, and his reactions to incidents seem mechanical, motivated more by the demands of plot than by his personality. Despite the inclusion of some details concerning Augusta's appearance, her description too seems generic, and while her behavior generally is more consistent with her personality, there is little preparation for her transformation at the novel's end. If the major characters lack complexity, it is inevitable that the lesser characters will be one-dimensional; thus, Willa is distinguishable from Augusta primarily in her inability to comprehend abstract ideas and in her instinctive recognition of Maag as an evil intruder. The precise dimensions of Maag's evil nature remain ambiguous; as a traitor to his people, he serves to emphasize the loyalty of Augusta and Erik, but his underlying motives are decidedly unclear.

The plot contains some exciting sequences, but it too lacks depth. There are moments of suspense—e.g., the escape from the compound, the Duveans' pursuit, Augusta's attempt to divert them, Erik's various confrontations with Maag. Yet—with the exception of some early incidents which highlight his loneliness—Erik's emotions are named rather than revealed. Thus, even though three basic types of conflict (with the environment, with oneself, and with other characters) appear in the novel, the reader gains little sense of Erik's actual struggles. The storm leads to his father's death, but Erik displays little emotion when it happens. He must decide whether to obey Maag or to act upon the doubts Augusta has raised, but again Erik seems to contemplate his dilemma with almost unnatural detachment. Certainly his heroic acts of shutting down the beam and confronting Maag are described so briefly as to seem anticlimactic.

Themes and Characters

The Lone Sentinel is a novel about growing up. Like many teen-agers, both Erik and Augusta consider themselves adults—Erik because he is always careful to do his duty, and Augusta because she loyally protects her sister. To achieve true maturity, however, each must gain a more balanced perspective. Erik must learn to make judgments for himself and sometimes to break the rules. Augusta must learn that her responsibility extends beyond the well-being of her immediate family, that she also owes a duty to society as a whole.

A secondary theme is loneliness.

Until his father's death, Erik has never realized the extent of his isolation.

Alone in the compound, Erik imagines that he hears a voice calling his name, and when Thursday responds to the howling wolves, he faces the unendurable prospect of being completely alone. He both fears and welcomes the arrival of visitors. For example, he sees in Wayne Burdick, the hunting guide, the threat of exposure, but also a possible surrogate father who shares his love of the wilderness and of chess.

Perhaps Erik's need for a surrogate father is satisfied at the novel's close when Trust Control breaks with convention to address him by name, or when he becomes a part of Wayne Burdick's family.

In contrast, Augusta has been fully aware of her loneliness since she and Willa were orphaned at the age of eleven. Because of Willa's injury, Augusta has assumed responsibility for her, and only Willa's presence stands between her and total isolation in the various foster homes. She too finds a surrogate family in Wayne Burdick and Erik.

One cause of Erik's isolation from people is his physical isolation in the wilderness. In the contrast between Lone Sentinel and New Province, Jo Dereske develops the conventional opposites of the wilderness and the city. For the rebellious Augusta, the wilderness is at first only a temporary refuge from the problems she and Willa face in New Province, but later she observes that she feels more free at Lone Sentinel. Long ago Erik's parents chose the simple, primitive, pure life of the wilderness over the sophisticated, corrupting life of the city. Loyalty to his parents' values and reluctance to give up all that remains of his family's way of life are a major factor in Erik's failure to follow the Trust Control rules. Once he is assured that he can return to Lone Sentinel, Erik is content to live for a time in New Province.

Erik has had little contact with other people; he has never been outside the compound, and until Augusta and Willa arrive, he has never met a girl.

Since his mother's death, when he was ten, Erik has helped his father maintain Lone Sentinel; he knows the procedures outlined in the Trust Control Manual, and he follows



them to the letter. The greatest error he can envision is a careman's neglecting his duty to protect the biosote fields.

In his habits Erik resembles his father. He is cautious and meticulous about details; he is nearly as accomplished as his father at chess. Living alone after his father's death, he maintains the discipline of his former life: keeping his room neat, setting the table for meals, and reading only one newspaper each day. On the radio, he even sounds like his father.

Because he has met only Chad the Supplier and occasional visitors like Wayne Burdick's hunting party, Erik is extremely naive. He can handle any situation covered in the Trust Control Manual—even his father's funeral—but situations requiring a judgment put him in a quandary. In the course of the novel, Erik grows up, learning to evaluate people and conditions, to plan a course of action, and to accept the consequences of his actions.

Augusta and Willa are twins, virtually identical in appearance except for the difference in their eyes. Augusta's eyes snap as she quickly appraises people and situations, but Willa's steady gaze does not quite focus on people or objects. Willa's "softness of expression" is the opposite of Augusta's scowls and frowns. Both girls are slight of stature, with short, dark-brown hair which is longer on top and swept over their foreheads. Also identical are their narrow cheeks, high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and thin noses and lips.

Augusta is a rebel—impatient, skeptical, and quick to disregard any rule which prevents her from immediately achieving the what she wants. She embarrasses Erik when she questions Maag, insists that Maag cure Willa, and generally refuses to follow anyone's instructions. Augusta's judgments are valid, but they are not really logical, and her courage too is impulsive, the result more of desperation than of reason or strategy. Further, as a result of her experience with foster families in New Province, Augusta has become cynical and defensive. She distrusts everyone, and her only allegiance is to her twin sister; but her loyalty to Willa is fierce and unwavering—perhaps her most admirable quality.

The two girls could fool even their own parents until Willa, who was ten years old at the time, received a head injury in a fall from a tram bridge.

When she awakes from her coma, Willa is "different": She sees and knows what is happening to Augusta; she frequently hums a monotonous tune; she responds to tones of voice, more than to words' meanings; and she intuitively knows that Maag and the Duveans are evil intruders. Even after Willa is healed by the Helgatites, her expression is somewhat more gentle than Augusta's.

When Erik closely observes Maag, he learns little about this renegade Helgatite. Maag seems thinner than Erik, and like the other Helgatites, he tires quickly in the atmosphere of Azure.



His melodious voice, also like those of the other Helgatites, distinguishes him from the Duveans, whose voices are much harsher. Maag and the Duveans all wear the standard garb of Helgatites: suits of a silvery fabric, narrow bubbled helmets, and silver boots and gloves. Built into the glove is a weapon which Maag uses to stun Thursday.

The origin of Maag's treason is unclear, but apparently underestimation of the earthlings is one part of it. Since Maag bears some similarity to Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, perhaps his sins were ones of pride and ambition.

Thursday is the character who actually destroys Maag. Half dog and half Azure wolf, Thursday combines the instincts of a wild animal with the loyalty of a domesticated pet. Thus, he does not abandon Erik, although tempted to join the pack of roaming wolves. He instinctively knows that Maag is evil and attempts to attack this intruder long before Erik, or even Augusta, suspects him. This intuitive knowledge closely links Thursday to Willa.



Topics for Discussion

1. Augusta teases Erik for being too neat, too cautious, too precise in his speech, and too obedient to all the rules and procedures in the Trust Control Manual—in short, for being too good. Are her taunts at all justified?

What does Erik learn from her? Could the opposite criticism be made about Augusta? What does she learn from Erik? Do these same issues arise —although in somewhat different forms— in our everyday lives? How should we resolve these questions?

2. Does the Trust Control exert too much authority over the lives of individual citizens? What kind of government exists on the planet Azure? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this government?

3. Erik repeatedly thinks his father would have handled a situation more skillfully. Do we have any evidence that Erik's father was more or less competent than Erik? What do you think might have happened if Erik's father had been in charge at Lone Sentinel?

4. Even though her motives were good, was Augusta justified in running away from New Province as she did?

Which of her actions do you admire and which would you criticize? Was there any other way to handle Willa's problem?

5. Does it seem strange to you that, although the Helgatites have knowledge and healing power far beyond that of the people on Azure, the space aliens become weak when they land on the planet and can be destroyed by physical contact with the inhabitants or the atmosphere? Is Dereske suggesting that intellectual strength and physical strength are incompatible? Or is she showing her readers that everyone has a weakness of some type? Do the Helgatites' physical limitations make them seem more human and thus more likable?

6. Although the failure of his radio cuts Erik off from Trust Control, he is already isolated from other people.

How does the physical setting influence the novel's plot? Would Maag have attempted to sabotage a less isolated sentinel? How would the story have been different if Erik had lived on the outskirts of New Province?

7. Not only Erik, but eventually Augusta too seems to prefer Lone Sentinel to New Province. Why? Is their attitude similar to that of American frontiersmen such as Daniel Boone?

8. Augusta and Erik approach problems with very different attitudes and ways of thinking. Describe the two approaches. What do you admire about each? What would be the ideal way of dealing with problems such as theirs?



9. Although Augusta and Willa appear to like their Uncle Wayne, he seems to have been too busy to spend much time with them. Does he remind you of "workaholic" parents? Has he neglected his nieces? How has their relationship changed by the end of the novel? Has Uncle Wayne also become a substitute father for Erik?

10. Does the curing of Willa seem believable? Is Dereske indirectly suggesting that Willa can be accepted only when she becomes like everyone else?

Is this too easy a way of solving the problems of discrimination against people who are "different"?

11. Consider the irony that the tower and its beam can both protect and destroy. The beam protects the biosote, but it can destroy Maag's ship if it tries to take off or if the Helgatites' ship tries to land. Unless Erik can gain control of it and shut it off, it may have to be destroyed if the biosote is to be saved. What other objects have a similar dual nature?

12. What do you think Erik and Augusta learn from their experience?

What, if anything, do others (for example, Uncle Wayne and Trust Control) learn? What conclusions does Dereske intend the reader to draw?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Several characters in *The Lone Sentinel* rebel against authority in one way or another. Obviously, Maag is a rebel, but Augusta, Erik, and even Burdick break some of the rules. What do these rebels have in common? In what ways are they different? On what basis can you decide which rebels are good and which are not?

2. Writers and movie makers have long been fascinated with the subject of contact between humans and space aliens. Read a novel or watch a movie on this subject, such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Point out similarities and differences in setting, characters, and attitude toward visitors from space.

You may want to listen to a recording of Orson Welles's famous radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*.

3. Erik thinks casually about the extinction of Earth's societies. Choose one of the environmental problems about which scientists have warned us (e.g., water pollution, air pollution, acid rain, soil erosion, depletion of the ozone layer, or disposal of hazardous wastes). Report on the danger to our planet or on methods being used to lessen the threat.

4. Much has been written about manned and unmanned space exploration. Report on the procedures or findings of a space probe, a shuttle flight, a moon landing, or an orbiting space station. Show how current knowledge re-enforces or contradicts Dereske's accounts.

5. Maag is clever, deceptive, and evil. Compare him with another villain such as the wicked witch in a fairy tale or in *The Wizard of Oz*, Benedict Arnold in the history books, or Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. What similarities and differences do you see in the characters themselves and in their treacherous acts?

6. Erik names his dog Thursday because he was reading *Robinson Crusoe* (by Daniel Defoe) when Thursday was born. Read *Robinson Crusoe* and point out the similarities between Erik and Crusoe, especially in their isolation and loneliness. How does Dereske make you feel Erik's loneliness?

7. Erik, Augusta, Willa, and Thursday all exhibit different kinds of courage. Describe the courage of each and compare the types of courage. In what ways is each admirable? In what ways foolish? What other examples of courage do you find in the novel?

8. In the course of the novel, Erik must struggle against nature (his environment), other people, and himself.

Describe in detail each of these conflicts. Which do you think Erik found most difficult? Do most people face similar obstacles?



9. In some ways the Trust Control resembles the governments in *1984* (by George Orwell) and *Brave New World* (by Aldous Huxley). Read one of these novels, then compare and contrast its governing body with Trust Control.

What conclusions can you draw about the differences in attitude and theme that are revealed?

10. Throughout the novel, the reader shares Erik's experiences. Choose one episode in *The Lone Sentinel*, and retell the story as one of the other characters might tell it. How does the focus on Erik and his thoughts affect the way the events are interpreted?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Dereske, Jo." In *Something about the Author*. Vol. 72.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992: 44-45.

Brief biographical sketch and Dereske's comments about her writing.



Related Titles

The Lone Sentinel, like Glom, Gloom, began as a story to entertain Dereske's children. Both fantasy tales were directly inspired by features of the surrounding landscape: Glom, Gloom by a small Scottish forest near the little stone cottage where the family was living, and The Lone Sentinel by the tall steel towers Dereske and her children observed while driving through the Great Plains.

Dereske's debt to Robinson Crusoe is tacitly acknowledged when Erik names his dog Thursday, and the destruction of Maag seems related to that of the witch in The Wizard of Oz. Generally, The Lone Sentinel seems to observe the conventions of the speculative fiction (science fiction) genre and, like many other works of this type, to have been indirectly influenced by twentieth-century anti-utopian writers such as Orwell and Huxley.



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