Lorna Doone Short Guide

Lorna Doone by R. D. Blackmore

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Overview

One of the great works of its kind, Lorna Doone is a romance that compellingly presents a strong, courageous hero and a pure, languishing heroine.

Blackmore evokes the landscape of Exmoor with descriptions of natural beauty that rank among the finest in nineteenth-century English literature.

His eye is almost as good as William Wordsworth's, and he misses few significant details of plant and animal life in the region. Blackmore also renders effective adventure scenes as John Ridd confronts the outlawed Doone family and fights its most powerful member, Carver. Blackmore's writing provides pleasure for readers seeking thrills as well as for those who enjoy moving descriptions of nature.

About the Author

Richard Doddridge Blackmore was born at Longworth, Berkshire, England, on June 7, 1825. He was the third son of the Reverend John Blackmore and Anne Basset Knight Blackmore, the daughter of a distinguished vicar. His mother died of typhus a few months after Blackmore's birth, and he and his older brother, Henry, lived with relatives during much of their childhood. The Blackmore family had originated in western Devonshire, and the author spent many of his formative years in the west country, the setting of Lorna Doone. Like his hero, John Ridd, Blackmore attended Blundell's School, Tiverton. He entered Exeter College, Oxford, in 1843 and received his degree four years later. While in college, Blackmore met and fell in love with Lucy Macguire.

Both the Blackmore and the Knight families produced several clergymen, but despite family tradition Blackmore decided against the church as a career and decided to go into the law instead.

He was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1849, and after being called to the bar in 1852, he worked as a conveyancer, or preparer of legal documents. An epileptic, Blackmore wished to avoid actually appearing in court because of the possibility of suffering an attack there. He married Lucy Macguire secretly on November 8, 1853; the secrecy was probably the result of Blackmore's fears that his family, with its strong Anglican roots, would oppose his marriage to a Catholic woman, especially one who lacked financial resources. Blackmore himself was making little money at the time, and Lucy brought little if any money to the marriage. Blackmore aspired to become a poet and in 1854 anonymously published two small volumes of verse, Poems by Melanter and Eupullia. Critics for the most part ignored the books, and the few who did review the poetry judged it unsatisfactory. A third volume of poems, The Bugle of the Black Sea (1855), also failed. Written during the Crimean War, these poems matched the patriotic fervor of the times but still won Blackmore few readers.

In 1855 Blackmore became a master of classics at Wellesley House Grammar School, Twickenham. That same year he published a translation of the ancient Greek poet Theocritus and began work on his first novel, Clara Vaughan, which was published nine years later. He continued working as a conveyancer while teaching at Wellesley House, but his income remained meager. The death of a bachelor uncle, the Reverend Henry Hey Knight, in September 1857, provided Blackmore with a legacy that enabled him to give up both teaching and the law, and to buy a sixteen-acre plot in the village of Teddington, a short distance up the Thames River from London. He inherited some more money upon his father's death in 1858, built a new house on his land, and planted orchards and gardens, hoping to make fruit-growing his career. In 1862 he anonymously published his translation of the first two books of Virgil's Georgics.

He considered his translations of Theocritus and Virgil—he published a complete version of the Georgics in 1871—his best literary work. On occasion Blackmore wrote his own Latin poetry, such as "Carmen Britannicum" (1897) in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

An unsuccessful farmer, Blackmore lost money almost every year because of drought, blight, or low prices, but he persisted all of his life in his efforts to make his small farm pay. He wrote romances to compensate for his losses as a fruit grower, working on them evenings and during the winter months.

The critics panned his first two novels, Clara Vaughan (1864) and Cradock Nowell (1866). Nor did his masterpiece, Lorna Doone, have a promising beginning. No magazine accepted it for serialization, and eighteen publishing houses refused it. When finally published in the spring of 1869 by the firm of Sampson, Low, Son and Marston, the book sold so slowly that two or three hundred copies of the original five hundred were sent to Australia.

Originally published in a three-volume edition, standard at the time for novels, Lorna Doone began to sell after it was reissued in 1871 in a cheaper singlevolume edition. The year 1871 also saw the announcement of the Marquis of Lome's engagement to the Princess Louise, fourth daughter of Queen Victoria, and it is rumored that a newspaper mistakenly identified the marquis's family with that of Blackmore's heroine. The British and later the American public, curious as usual about members of the royal family, rushed to buy the book to learn more about the husband of the princess.

Blackmore often repeated this story, which research has failed to either confirm or disprove. Whatever the cause of its popularity, the book became Blackmore's only best seller and has remained popular ever since it was reissued. In time it brought its author 1000 pounds every year and by 1914 had sold 800,000 copies. No other book by Blackmore came even close to matching its success.

Blackmore wrote eleven more novels celebrating various parts of the southern British Isles. Springhaven is set in a fishing village on the Sussex coast, Alice Lorraine in the Sussex Downs and Kent; The Maid of Sker begins in Glamorganshire, South Wales, which Blackmore visited often while a boy; and Christowell (1880) and Perlycross (1894) examine village life in South Devon.

Blackmore died in Teddington, England, on January 20, 1900, the same day as the great art critic, John Ruskin. His later novels, though praised by the likes of novelist Robert Louis Stevenson and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, never gained the recognition Blackmore felt they deserved.

Setting

Exmoor is a large region of moorland, mountains, and forests shared by Devonshire and Somersetshire in southwestern England. The best-selling Lorna Doone gave the Exmoor region a new source of income—tourists. Some complained that the mountains and forests of the region were not as spectacular as Blackmore had led them to believe, but most loved the area. The region remains popular with tourists. Blackmore set Lorna Doone in the heightened Exmoor of his imagination, a fitting place for giants such as John Ridd and Carver Doone.

The novel begins on November 29, 1673, John Ridd's twelfth birthday and his last day at Blundell's School, Tiverton, Devon. Because of his father's murder, John must return home to Plover's Barrows, in Oare, Somerset. This farm, together with the surrounding moorland, is the principal setting for the novel. The outlaw clan, the Doones of Bagworthy, occupy a part of Exmoor called the Doone Glen, where Lorna, the novel's heroine, has lived since her abduction as a child. John spends two brief periods of a few months each in London, but is happy only when in his native region.

Social Sensitivity

In John Ridd, Blackmore presents a man of unusual strength and strong conscience. A devout Christian who feels he is closely in touch with the world God has created, Ridd loves the countryside of Exmoor and its people with their conservative ways. As he jokingly remarks "many of us still looked upon wheels (though mentioned in the Bible) as the invention of the evil one, and Pharoah's especial property." Certain that God has a purpose for everyone, he muses on God's ways throughout the novel. Despite his exhaustion after his great struggle with Carver Doone, he tries to assist his helpless opponent out of the Wizard's Slough. He has grown since the years of his teens, when revenge was his main purpose in life.

Some readers consider Ridd one of the more outstanding male chauvinists in literature. He thinks that all women, with the exceptions of his beloved Lorna and his sister Anne, are liars. He has little patience with his bookish sister, Eliza, and wishes she had been given more feminine instincts. Ridd becomes somewhat more tolerant of Eliza when she draws on her reading and explains how to make snowshoes, enabling him to visit the Doone Valley and find out how Lorna is faring during the terrible winter. But in general Ridd expects little more of women than cooking skills and constant tears. Blackmore's women weep regularly; it never occurs to Ridd that seventeenth-century society allows them few outlets other than tears and deceptions.

The Exmoor that Blackmore knew as a child had changed little since the seventeenth century, the time period in which his novel is set. In the later nineteenth century, however, it was changing, and not for the better. Out of nostalgia Blackmore presents country life in a much too idyllic fashion, glossing over the fact that wages and standards of living had always been low for English farm laborers. For the most part, though, Lorna Doone gives an authentic picture of a way of life that has long since vanished.

Literary Qualities

Unlike novelists such as Gustave Flaubert or Henry James, who exercised complete control over the materials that went into their fiction, Blackmore let his books develop as he wrote them. As a result, most of his novels, including Lorna Doone, are loosely structured.

Endings in particular proved difficult for him, and he freely admitted to his friends that knowing when to stop writing was a lifelong problem. In this manner he resembled the equally longwinded American writer Thomas Wolfe, but Wolfe had expert editorial assistance to help curb his excesses. Editors in the mid-Victorian period were more tolerant of what now would be considered unnecessarily long novels, and the three-volume novel was a standard length. Most reputable critics during the 1860s believed that novels should not leave their readers depressed, and Blackmore's own optimistic nature helped determine that his heroes and heroines met with happy endings.

Literary critics, including Northrop Frye and Max Keith Sutton, have seen Lorna's near-death experience and miraculous recovery as a reenactment of the Persephone myth of Greek mythology. The daughter of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and protector of marriage, Persephone was abducted by Pluto to be the queen of Hades but was allowed to spend six months a year above ground.

Lorna escapes from captivity and death in spring, and so she, like Persephone, is a goddess of the vernal season. Critics have also compared John Ridd to such mythological figures as Leander, who swam the Hellesport nightly to meet his beloved Hero, and Hercules, famed for his strength and physical exploits. Blackmore, with his strong background in the classics, instinctively invests his hero and heroine with the qualities and adventures of mythological figures.

Blackmore's strongly rhythmical prose and striking imagery raise passages almost to the level of poetry. A master at describing the life and scenery of the English countryside, Blackmore celebrates the beauties of each season, from the industry and promise of the spring planting to the elaborate pageant of rituals surrounding the autumn harvest. In passages that won the admiration of Victorian writers Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Hardy, Blackmore evokes the harsh beauty of a storm that deposits a mass of snow near the Ridds' home: "This great drift was rolling and curling beneath the violent blast, tufting and combing with rustling swirls, and carved (as in patterns of cornice) where the grooving chisel of the wind swept round." And later, when the storm subsides: "For when the sun burst forth at last upon that world of white, what he brought was neither warmth, nor cheer, nor hope of softening; only a clearer shaft of cold, from the violet depths of sky." Despite a tendency to overuse such descriptive passages, at his best Blackmore gains the right effects from his strong cadences, imagery, and near rhymes. Among his contemporaries, George Meredith comes closest to matching Blackmore's prose, and among twentieth-century American writers, similarities to Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner are evident.

Humor also characterizes Blackmore's writing. During Ridd's second stay in London, he leaves his lodgings with his face disfigured by bedbug bites. Ridd's landlord encourages him to stay on despite the bugs, saying that he expects, "in two days at the utmost, a very fresh young Irishman, for whom they would all forsake me." John Fry, a cowardly and transparent liar, serves as a good comic figure. The humor is often too broad for sophisticated tastes, but it frequently enlivens the narrative.

Max Keith Sutton has pointed out that Lorna Doone reads like an American western novel. Its hero and heroine are types that appear again and again in the writings of Owen Wister and Zane Grey, and the Doones can be seen as seventeenth-century predecessors of such famous western outlaws as "The Hole in the Wall Gang." A more obvious comparison is to Victorian novelists George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, who also wrote about rural England. Eliot and Hardy, of course, are major novelists, a status Blackmore never quite attained, but as Sutton says: "In depicting the intricate life of nature, Blackmore can stand comparison with any British novelist of his century." Lorna Doone, more than a hundred years after its publication, has proven to be ageless in its appeal.

Themes and Characters

Lorna Doone conforms to the reader's expectations of a romance in many ways, particularly in its idealized characterizations of women. Both Lorna Doone herself and John Ridd's older sister Anne have the unblemished purity and flawless beauty typical of Victorian-era romantic heroines. This is the way John Ridd sees them, and Ridd is both the central character and the narrator of the story.

On his final day at Blundell's School, John Ridd fights and defeats one of the school's strongest boys. Ridd realizes that something in him loves violence, but his conscience keeps questioning whether such violence is right. As a young man, he blinds his horse in one eye when the animal acts unruly, kills with a single blowa soldier who captures him, and thinks of nothing but revenge against his father's murderer . A grandfather at the time when he writes his autobiography, Ridd regrets some of these acts of violence triggered by a youthful temper. As he matures, he cures himself of vindictiveness. He becomes the champion wrestler in the region, his huge size and readiness to defend his title earning him the nickname "Girt John Ridd." He claims the rank of yeoman—a farmer who owns a small amount of land—and really wants no other title, although later in the novel King James II knights him. Honest, strong, and loyal, Ridd is a standard romantic hero who nonetheless possesses characteristics unusual for the type: a love of poetry, Shakespeare in particular, and an eye for the beauties of nature that makes his observations poetic in their own right.

Lorna Doone, later revealed to be Lady Lorna Dugal by birth, has a bubbling sense of humor that frequently gives way to tears when she thinks about her situation as a captive of the Doones. The leaders of the outlaws, Sir Ensor and the Counsellor, have raised Lorna in a manner suitable to her rank, shielding her from encounters with the coarseness and violence that characterize their way of life. Blackmore endows Lorna with all the standard appeal of a beautiful lady in distress, one who seems unattainable to the young yeoman farmer who adores her.

The Doones occupy a den in a inaccessible mountain region. The founders of the clan were noblemen outlawed in the days of King Charles I, and Sir Ensor and the Counsellor retain traces of nobility. The Counsellor's son, Carver Doone, is the kind of villain common in Victorian melodrama; swarthy, sensual, and brutal, he lacks nobility of any sort.

John Ridd's opposite in both character and appearance, he is a formidable adversary whom Blackmore depicts as a demon, devoid of redeeming qualities. At the end of the novel Carver sinks into the Wizard's Slough, a bog that recalls the bottomless pit into which Satan falls in the Bible's book of Revelation.

While the novel's hero, heroine, and villain generally conform to type, Blackmore represents the common people of Exmoor very realistically. In all of his novels he reveals a good eye and ear for country manners and speech. Accurately portrayed but never idealized, the Ridds' employee, John Fry, their housekeeper, Betty, the merchant,

Reuben Huckaback, and the highwayman, Tom Faggus, are much more believable than the leading characters.

Their rough humor, raciness, and slyness lend an authentic note to a world of romance.

Although Blackmore insisted that Loma Doone was not a historical novel, it is populated by several historical characters and partially structured around historical events such as Monmouth's Rebellion and the Battle of Sedgemoor (1685). John Ridd meets Baron Jeffreys, the dreaded magistrate who presided over the Bloody Assizes, as the trials of the rebels were called. Although the two become friends of a sort, Ridd has no illusions about the character of the baron, who abuses his judicial position by demanding pay from prisoners for lenient sentences. John also meets John Churchill, the future Duke of Marlborough, and senses that there is something false about the general. A true Royalist, Ridd is not critical of the Catholic James II, even though he himself is a firm Protestant.

Blackmore was an archconservative, and the themes of Lorna Doone reflect the beliefs and biases of a man who distrusted changes that the Victorian era brought to England, particularly industrialization and democracy. England had once been agriculturally self-sufficient and Lorna Doone celebrates the values of a rural past. John Ridd is an idealized farmer, a member of the yeomanry that once formed the backbone of the nation. Blackmore's novel posits country life as preferable to life in town and displays a love of all things English—even the class system— throughout. Blackmore's optimistic faith in the triumph of good over evil makes the defeat of the Doones inevitable.

Topics for Discussion

1. Would John Ridd: Yeoman of Exmoor have been a better name for this novel?

Consider that Ridd, as narrator and hero, appears in many more scenes than Lorna does.

2. Some critics have compared John Ridd to Huckleberry Finn. Each tells his story in his own distinctive voice. Do you agree?

3. "Girt John Ridd" is a regional wrestling champion. Does Blackmore present this part of Ridd's character convincingly? How does Ridd's experience as a wrestler help him in his struggle against the Doones?

4. John Ridd is an attractive character.

How does he convince the reader of this without resorting to bragging, something he says he hates to hear men do?

5. Lorna Doone, later Lorna Dugal, is a noblewoman. Even though she has lived with the savage Doones for years, her speech and behavior point to her upper-class background before her true identity is known. Is she a believable heroine?

6. Carver Doone is John Ridd's counterpart in the novel. Does Blackmore present him as simply an evil individual, or as the personification of an evil force?

7. How do Ruth Huckaback and John's sister Eliza differ from John Ridd's stereotypical ideas about women?

8. Is Carver Doone's father, the Counsellor, really any worse than Lord Jeffreys, a historical character Blackmore presents in Lorna Doone?

9. Blackmore insists that Lorna Doone is a romance rather than a historical novel. Does he succeed in blending fiction and history in his treatment of the Battle of Sedgemoor?

10. Blackmore has been acclaimed for his presentation of natural scenes in his books. Cite examples in Lorna Doone that justify this reputation.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Monmouth's Rebellion forms part of the background in Lorna Doone. Who was James Scott, Duke of Monmouth?

Why did he lead a rebellion against his uncle, James II? Why did he fail?

2. When the novel begins, John Ridd has been at Blundell's School for four years. The opening chapters give some indication of the nature of life at a school like Blundell's. Blundell's and schools like it still educate many of England's leading citizens. How are they prepared for their roles in society? How have schools such as Blundell's changed since the seventeenth century?

3. John Ridd, when he is knighted by James II, is at once proud and bewildered. He says, "Sir, I am very much obliged. But what be I to do with it?" He is very conscious of class distinctions, and never aspires to be anything other than a farmer. At times he seems to defend class distinctions as a part of his English inheritance. Blackmore himself shared these ideas. Explain the class system as it existed in Ridd's and in Blackmore's times.

4. Lorna Doone, like all of Blackmore's books, celebrates the virtues of rural life.

George Eliot and Thomas Hardy also wrote novels featuring the country people of England. How do such books as Eliot's Adam Bede or Silas Marner, both set in rural Warwickshire, or Hardy's Under the Greenwood Tree or Farfrom the Madding Crowd, set in Dorsetshire, compare to Lorna Doone in their use of rustic backgrounds?

5. Tom Faggus was a legend in southwest England in the seventeenth century. Why has the highwayman so often been depicted as a romantic figure?

Macheath in John Gay's The Beggar's Opera (1728) and in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's The Threepenny Opera (1928) is also romantic despite the satiric tone of both musical dramas.

What were highwaymen actually like? Is Blackmore's portrayal of Faggus a good representation of this type of outlaw?

For Further Reference

Baker, Ernest A. The History of the English Novel. Vol. 9, The Day Before Yesterday. 1936. Reprint. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1951. Baker believes that Blackmore wasted his talents on romances and that he was capable of writing better novels.

Burns, Quincy Guy. Richard Doddridge Blackmore: His Life & Novels. 1930.

Reprint. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973. One of the few books devoted to Blackmore, this biography is particularly good on his relationship to other Victorian novelists and their works.

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Graham, Kenneth. English Criticism of the Novel, 1860-1900. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. Graham explains the criteria used by critics in Blackmore's day, most of whom found Blackmore's work poorly constructed.

Stevenson, Lionel. The English Novel.

London: Constable, 1960. Stevenson discusses Blackmore's contribution to the Victorian romance.

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Boston: Twayne, 1979. A complete study of Blackmore's novels, this book explains the use of myths in Lorna Doone.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Of Blackmore's other novels, The Maid of Sker, Alice Lorraine, and Springhaven are possibly the best. Blackmore's plots and characterization tend to resemble those in Lorna Doone, but his descriptions of nature and his accurate portraits of rural people make his later works worth reading. Finding these books may be difficult, but Springhaven has been reissued.

The Maid of Sker begins in a fishing village in Glamorganshire, Wales, but shifts to Devonshire, where an evil minister, Parson Chowne, dominates a small village. The plot of the novel, like that of Lorna Doone, involves an abduction. Alice Lorraine addresses another favorite theme, the misfortunes of an old family. Springhavenis considered by some critics to be one of the better historical novels of the late 1880s. Its young hero, driven from home by a tyrannical father, goes to the Battle of Waterloo.

The novel's strength lies in its portrayal of the Napoleonic Wars' effect on the lives of fishermen in a village on the English Channel.

Lorna Doone has been filmed three times, in 1922, 1934, and 1951. Of these, the silent film of 1922 is generally judged as best. Directed skillfully by Maurice Tourneur, this version remains quite faithful to the novel. The principal roles—Marge Bellamy as Lorna, John Bowers as John Ridd, and Donald MacDonald as Carver Doone—are well acted. Neither the 1934 nor the 1951 version is distinguished, and the lowbudget, color version of 1951 is particularly dull.

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