

Lost Boys Short Guide

Lost Boys by Orson Scott Card

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Contents

Lost Boys Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

Although Stevie plays a large part in the plot of *Lost Boys*, the only fully drawn characters are Step and DeAnne.

Step and DeAnne are religious Mormons, married less than 10 years but already the parents of three children with another on the way. Both of them are committed parents and spouses.

Step is a hands-on father who has vowed to do any parenting job including changing diapers and cleaning up vomit. He has kept that promise, and the opening chapter of the book shows him cleaning up after a car-sick child and consciously monitoring his behavior so the older children will see him behave well under pressure — no swearing or display of temper. He is solicitous of his wife's well-being as she is of his. They manage to keep their pacts with each other: to present a united front to the children, to discuss problems and arrive at a mutually satisfying decision, to share responsibility equally, and to support one another emotionally. DeAnne is a stay-at-home mother by her own choice, not by default because she cannot hold a job.

She is a skilled typist and can get work anytime at any place she chooses. DeAnne also has a bachelor's degree in humanities that she got, at least in part, so she could provide an educational environment for her future family. But DeAnne's career is her ministry. One of her friends tells her, "Your career is the Church." And DeAnne realizes that her friend is right — and she loves her career because it allows her to have a family life. Neither Step nor DeAnne is perfect, however. The marriage depicted is a strong one, but not without the occasional argument, harsh word, or feelings of resentment by one partner.

Social Concerns

Lost Boys examines the effects of the demands of the corporate world on the family and the problems of parenting in a dangerous world. Step Fletcher, newly minted Ph.D., has been forced to take a job at a software company. Previously, Step had worked at home and lived on the proceeds of Hacker Snack, a best-selling computer game he had designed almost as a hobby. But in the ever-changing world of computers, his game had become old news and sales had dropped precipitously. In order to support his pregnant wife and three children, Step takes a job at Eight Bits, Inc. writing technical manuals because it pays well.

The first conflict comes when he must move his family from Vigor, Indiana to Steuben, North Carolina. Step feels optimistic about the job, but sorry to uproot his family. In Steuben, he immediately runs into another job-family conflict when his oldest child, Stevie, asks Step to accompany him on his first day at a new school. Previously, this would not have been a problem since Step worked for himself. Now, however, Step must reluctantly and guiltily send Stevie to school unaccompanied because the school's starting time conflicts with Eight Bits' hours. Step also finds out that the company wants him to sign an agreement that would effectively turn over to Eight Bits all profits from any adaptation of Hacker Snack.

Step must wrestle with the decision because not to sign endangers his job while signing means giving away potential security for his family. Ultimately, much to Step's relief, he is asked to sign a much less encompassing agreement. But he gets sucked into the corporate life: working long hours, arriving home after the children are in bed, no longer eating meals with his wife or children, and bringing home his stress to snap at his wife and children. Moreover, Step does not have time to work on the Hacker Snack upgrade that would free him from the corporate rat race. Ironically, all Step's attempts to do the right thing by the corporation do not get him salary, recognition, or security. Meanwhile, DeAnne, his wife, is left to cope alone with all the problems that had previously been handled jointly. Although she has decided that her fulfillment in life can and should come from her family and her faith, DeAnne wants to be part of a team. She needs Step's input and support in her family life and her religious commitment.

Techniques

Lost Boys is told by a straightforward third person narrator who has access to the thoughts of the main characters Step and DeAnne, but not the other characters. The result is that the reader understands DeAnne's and Step's judgements of other people while having no privileged information. This causes the reader to empathize with Step and DeAnne's having to make important decisions without being utterly sure that they are doing the right thing. For instance, Step discovers his job is not what he thought it would be, that there are currents and politics in the office that he does not understand, and yet he must decide to go or stay based on the little information he does have. If he guesses wrong, his family will suffer. He wants to protect his family but is not sure which way is best.



Themes

The two major themes of *Lost Boys* dovetail: The corporate world has a deleterious effect on family life, separating the corporate parent from family life in a world where two parent families are not only an ideal but a necessity. Religious faith is also a necessity in building a stable family life. DeAnne and Step Fletcher are conscientious parents, aware of their children's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs.

They are also good mates, respectful of one another's needs and views. Step wants desperately to provide a safe and comfortable life for his family. The catch is that to provide financial security, Step must absent himself from the family for long hours, missing important milestones as well as mealtimes.

This throws the burden of parenting three small children directly on DeAnne. Step sees his wife struggle through a difficult pregnancy while trying to maintain a home life for her family. Both DeAnne and Step also struggle to keep up commitments to their family's spiritual development in the Mormon religion. In addition to the other burdens, Stevie, the oldest child, is having problems adjusting to his new school and new second grade teacher. Step is conscience-stricken at his inability to do his share of the physical work and at his absence from the day-to-day household routine. He knows that a large part of his work could be done at home, but corporate policy demands his presence at the office from 8 to 5. When he attempts to take a lunch hour to coincide with a planned conference with his son's teacher, he is reprimanded. Step defies the boss's orders to stay at the office, but finds on his return that lunchbreak policy has been officially changed to remove any flexibility. Step says to DeAnne: "Things have to work out. They have to work out so I can come home, work at home. So we can get life back the way it's supposed to be. I feel so helpless, so cut off, my boy is having these problems, he's so angry at us, and I can't do a thing, I'm trapped."

Stevie's problems are more complicated than Step or DeAnne can possibly imagine, but they do their best.

Both Step and DeAnne confront the sadistic teacher, and she stops tormenting Stevie. However, when Stevie continues to play with imaginary friends, they reluctantly take him to a psychiatrist. This does not work, partly because the psychiatrist is suspicious of their religious faith. Step and DeAnne's faith is a major component of their life.

Both of them are active in their ward and especially committed to the teaching ministries. The children also participate, and there are major family discussions of ethics at a level the children can understand. Family life and ritual also revolve around a deep religious faith. In fact, Stevie's religious faith and sense of ethics are the cause of his "problem." His imaginary friends are, in fact, the real spirits of boys murdered by a serial killer. Because of Stevie's goodness and purity, he can see and talk to the boys. He attempts to help them stay in the world of the living to communicate with others to bring the killer to justice. But Stevie's sense of rightness leads him to confront the killer himself which leads to his death. However, the family is sustained by its faith, and at the

bitter sweet ending, they are allowed to say good-bye to Stevie and know that his death has saved other boys.

Key Questions

The overarching concern in Orson Scott Card's *Lost Boys* is the family.

Card has two concerns: how corporate commitment makes family life all but impossible and how religion makes family life stronger and better.

1. What changes does Step's job cause that weaken the fabric of the family relationships?
2. Do you think that Step or DeAnne could have prevented Stevie's death if they had been more focused on the family? Do you think they missed any clues, and if so, what are they?
3. What effect do you think baptizing your own child would have on your relationship with the child?
4. Explain how you think Step and DeAnne's relationship is dependent on their faith.
5. Card indicts the corporation for harming family life by demanding time away from home even when the job itself could be done elsewhere. Do you think it is fair for an employer to make such demands? How has corporate influence over workers changed with the "downsizing" of American industry?
6. The psychiatrist who treats Stevie cannot believe that religious faith is real. What conflicts between faith and science seem most plausible in our technological world?

Literary Precedents

In some ways, *Lost Boys* is a detective story. (Some bookstores shelve it under mystery/detective.) *Lost Boys* has much in common with the John Sandford "Prey" series: There is a serial killer who must be tracked down and stopped. There is the intuitive detective who realizes that rational explanations are sometimes lacking.

But *Lost Boys* is also a domestic drama.

Scenes of domestic life play a big role in the novel. The Fletchers are the all-American family without the nauseating cuteness of television's *The Brady Bunch* or *Leave It to Beaver*. They have human imperfections, and they make mistakes, and they know that there are no easy answers. But they do have genuine good will, and they do love one another. Because Orson Scott Card is known as a science fiction writer and because there are references to computer science, many bookstores classify *Lost Boys* as science fiction. And there is some logic to this. Step is a computer programmer, and his son Stevie apparently has found a way to use a computer to hold onto the spirits of the dead children until they have been able to identify their killer. But the "science" of this holding is never explained. So the story also has affinities with the old-fashioned ghost story about the spirit that cannot rest until its unfinished business is wrapped up.

In this case, the boys want to point out their killer and say good-bye to their parents.

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