Lost Girls Short Guide

Lost Girls by Jane Yolen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

One needs to be careful when reading a story by Jane Yolen because sometimes what appears to be a lighthearted adventure actually contains some serious business. "Lost Girls" is such a story. Yolen says in "Running in Place" in her Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast that she had a daughter who "whined" constantly about everything being unfair, and Darla reminded her of her daughter. She also included names from family and friends in the novelette, including her daughter Heidi, whose name is given to one of the lost girls.

In "Lost Girls," Darla has a very strong sense of fairness, and she objects to Peter Pan because she thinks it is unfair to have girls do the housework while the boys do the exciting stuff. "Your argument is with Mr. Barrie, the author, and he's long dead," Mom says to Darla. Yet Darla's argument is actually with more than just James Barrie whose 1904 play Peter Pan became a classic of children's literature. Her parents' divorce hurts her; her mother does not seem like the cheerful woman Darla remembers from before the divorce; she has trouble accepting her father's new wife, as well as his twin sons, her half-brothers. It is into this darkness of resentment that she sinks as she goes to sleep, only to awaken in a tree near a pushy boy named Peter.

About the Author

Born on February 11,1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, Pirates in Petticoats (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Many years later, in 1999, Smith College gave Yolen its Remarkable Women Award. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become an esteemed U.S. expert on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two boys. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies. One of these fantasies, included in Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast, is "Lost Girls," which received the Nebula Award (given by the Science Fiction Writers of America) in 1998 for best novelette.

Setting

Darla's parents are divorced, which she very much resents, but she has a comfortable bedroom and a mother who reads to her at bedtime. Although her feelings for her father's new wife are vague, she still loves her father, and, as she notes, she still likes him. The twin sons he and his new wife have had can be vexing, but she concedes that they are adorable so long as she does not have to live with them. The other girls in Neverland have not been so fortunate.

They have been abandoned, beaten, and otherwise abused by their parents or guardians, and they have been transported (how is not explained) to Neverland because of their desire to escape their awful lives. That Darla is also transported to Neverland seems odd because she is not truly miserable, but she has gone to sleep while thinking unhappy, discontented thoughts about her parents and half-brothers. Perhaps these thoughts are her entry into Neverland.

"Welcome to Neverland," Peter Pan says to Darla, but it is an unwelcoming place.

Peter tries to kiss her, which she refuses, and then he lies about it, saying to all assembled that she had kissed him. Darla is perfectly willing to call him a liar, and her independent attitude is a matter of consternation for the "lost girls." Neverland may be a fantastic setting for adventure in the play Peter Pan, but in "Lost Girls" the setting is primarily the dining room and the kitchen, the only places the girls are allowed to go. They cannot go outside like the boys do, because of "him" (Captain Hook), who would kidnap the girls. Thus, for the lost girls, Neverland is a life of drudgery, which means cooking, feeding the boys, cleaning up after the boys, and living in the kitchen. They have tried to make the kitchen homey with some crude dolls and decorations, but it seems a miserable place: "a cheerless, windowless room they [the girls] had obviously tried to make homey." In it are two chairs, one for Wendy and one for Peter. When Darla sits in Peter's chair, the girls are worried, but Darla's refusing to get out of the chair is a harbinger of events to come.

The girls turn out to be courageous when they finally escape the great tree in which they and the boys live, but Neverland turns out not to be nearly so frightful as Peter had insisted. The pirates are led by two people, Mr. and Mrs. Hook, and on their ship women and men are equals, and they are co-captains. Good food (pizza!) and sharing chores makes the ship a much happier place than Peter's lair. The girls have not aged in their years in Neverland, and all except Darla have no home to return to; their parents, indeed their historical eras, no longer exist.

The "democratic" ship seems a good place for them to live. Darla has not shown a sense of humor, but her seriousness does not prevent her from having a great heart, so having the youngest lost girl, Lizzy, come home with her seems natural. Besides, Lizzy's presence in Darla's bed at the end of "Lost Girls" emphasizes that Darla has not just been dreaming but has done a good deed in the interests of fairness in a real place.

Social Sensitivity

"Lost Girls" is a complex examination not only of a girl coping with the confusing relationship of her parents but of how boys and girls interact and how they divide responsibilities by gender. The novelette is also about fairness, about how a social group should treat all of its members fairly. The pirate ship is an example of how fairness may be achieved, with everyone sharing the chores and men and women having equal stature within their community. "A pirate ship is a very democratic place," Mrs. Hook says to the girls.

Achieving equality and fairness is difficult business, and in "Lost Girls" it involves the oppressed group, the lost girls, asserting themselves by defying authority.

Before Darla's arrival, the girls had been serving the boys for hundreds of years.

Little Lizzy, a four-year-old in size and temperament, has herself been serving in Wendy's kitchen for over a hundred years.

None of the girls has known what to do about their servitude, and only a couple such as Jo Anne have ever really considered rebelling. This represents a historical reality—meaning that girls have not necessarily had the training or the social tools to enable them to consider doing anything but woman's work, that is cook, feed, and do chores.

There is another level to this. When Darla arrives, she finds that she and all the other Lost Girls 249 girls are "Wendy"; this serves to dehumanize them, to deny their individuality. For an American sensibility in particular, this is insidious because white culture puts a high value on individualism. But this naming is reminiscent of how slaves in the United States were given the name of their owner.

Moreover, it reflects the cultural politics of children, in which "they're only girls" or "they're just boys" is too often heard. Darla brings a passion for individualism and for fairness into the dehumanizing tyranny of Neverland.

It requires a modern reality, a modern sensibility, to bring change, and Darla comes from a modern reality in which her mother is a lawyer for labor groups and her father is a loving parent. Where the other girls see confusion, Darla brings knowledge of how to effect social change. She knows about labor strikes, picket lines, picket signs, and slogans, and she is a leader whose experiences with her parents have left her with self-confidence and empathy for those who have been wronged. In her modern world, there are labor unions, there are liberated women, and many little girls like her are brought up to believe that they have civil rights. Her introduction into Peter and Wendy's sad world is revolutionary in the sense that she disrupts the received narrative of the familiar story of Peter Pan. Then, too, on a dramatic level, she refuses to accept second-class status. Important to her success is the awareness her parents have given her, in spite of their divorce, and she cites her father as well as her mother when she refuses to accept tyranny. Darla is a product of her parents and this link to them is echoed in her name, a

shortened version of Darling, the parents' last name in the original Peter Pan story. All this makes Peter's remark, "Don't worry. There are always more Wendys where they came from," ironic. It sounds menacing, but if girls are being raised like Darla, then he and the lost boys may not have new recruits who will simply obey Wendy.

Literary Qualities

In "Lost Girls," Yolen takes the popular literary work Peter Pan and changes its tone from one of adventure and fun to one of menace and misery. Her premise for the novelette is the treatment of girls in the play. In the play, Wendy becomes like a mother to the lost boys, including keeping house. To Darla, this seems unfair, and she thinks it very unfair once she has witnessed first hand how the lost girls are treated.

Complicating matters is fact that Wendy herself is part of the problem. Darla calls her "Miss Management" because she has sided with Peter and serves to keep the other girls in line. It may be a weakness in "Lost Girls" that her behavior does seem particularly motivated, yet its contrast to what Darla thought was unfair in Peter Pan makes it a significant part of events in the novelette. Darla sees darkness in Wendy's eyes similar to the darkness she sees in Peter's eyes, so perhaps there is an unmentioned spiritual bond between Wendy and Peter, or perhaps Wendy just happens to like bossing around other girls.

"Lost Girls" seems to assume that its audience will be familiar with the story of Peter Pan and Neverland. For instance, the references to a menacing "him" are meant to recall the character Captain Hook, but one would have to know the story of Peter Pan to realize who is meant. Further complicating matters is that the Peter Pan of "Lost Girls" seems much different from the happy, generous boy of Barrie's original Peter Pan, and Wendy is cruel and controlling rather than bright and kind. These changes alter the spirit of Neverland from a safe haven for lost children to a dark place in which boys and girls are manipulated by Peter and Wendy, who seem more like forest deities demanding to be worshiped than children.

Themes and Characters

"'What we want...' Jo Anne interrupted, 'is to be equals.'" This is the unifying theme of "Lost Girls," which is about girls overcoming fear in order to assert their right to living fuller, more active lives than Peter Pan has allowed. In this tale of liberation, Darla is the main character. She has strong views about right and wrong, and she values what she has learned from her parents even though they have divorced and she lives apart from her father. "'My dad's a nutritionist. I'm only allowed healthy food," she declares to the lost boys, in a clear declaration of how she regards her father's influence on her. Her declaration is one of defiance, and it is grounded in what her father has taught her.

In fact, this helps her resist the insidious persuasions of Peter and Wendy. The other girls in Neverland have fled bad homes or even lives without any home; they accept their servitude in Neverland in part because they remember having unhappy lives before they were whisked away to Peter's home. Yet Darla comes to Neverland with a more progressive attitude; yes, she has reason to be unhappy, but she has learned that she does not have to be a victim—that she can assert herself. Thus, when challenged about her unhappiness, she remembers that she actually liked her dad, as well as loved him, despite the fact that he'd left her for his new wife, and despite the fact of the twins, who were actually adorable as long as she didn't have to live with them. The thought that she'd been caught in Neverland with no way to return was so awful, she couldn't help crying.

From these thoughts comes determination rather than surrender. After all, Darla thinks, her mother is a lawyer and from her she has learned that she has civil rights.

"Peter looked at [Darla], and there was nothing nice or laughing or young about his eyes. They were dark and cold and very very old." Darla looks at Peter's eyes and sees darkness that belies his gay smile and quick wit; she is unimpressed by his bravado. Furthermore, she quickly realizes that Peter Pan's happy land is only happy for boys. At the banquet, the boys "were shockingly noisy and all smelled like unwashed socks," but the girls who serve the banquet are quiet and orderly. While Peter tells wild tales, more lies than truth, the boys applaud, "But the girls, standing behind the boys like banquet waitresses, did not applaud. Rather they shifted from foot to foot, looking alternately apprehensive and bored."

In the kitchen with the girls, Darla, already asserting herself by sitting in the chair reserved for Peter, is told Peter "won't 'ike it": "'Well, I don't 'ike Peter!' Darla answered quickly. 'He's nothing but a longwinded bully.'" And he is too.

Wendy is a puzzle: The girls "were led by a tall, slender, pretty girl with brown hair that fell straight to her shoulders." This is Darla's first sight of the leader of the lost girls, and she makes a good impression. In addition, when "Wendy smiled, and it was a smile of such sweetness, Darla was immediately reminded of her mom, in the days before the divorce and her dad's new wife."

It is good that Darla has learned to look beyond appearances because Wendy appears to be beautiful and kind. Wendy is quick to point out the miseries the lost girls endured before coming to Neverland, but substituting one misery for another is doing no one a kindness, and Darla realizes it.

Wendy's eyes are darkened like Peter's, and Darla thinks Wendy "seemed as much of a bully as Peter, only in a softer, sneakier way." Her sweetness is as much a fraud as is Peter's high-spirited banter.

Having come from an American household in an era in which people have asserted their rights for fair treatment at home and in work places, Darla is emotionally prepared to stand up to Peter and Wendy, but the lost girls come from other eras and cultures, some of which offered little hope to them. As one girl puts it, her father "alias said life was a crapshoot and all usn's got was snake-eyes." This is a fatalistic attitude that other social activists have probably faced, but in the face of "oppression," Darla believes action must be taken: "'What [the girls] all need,' [Darla] said grimly, 'is a backbone transplant.'"

Much of the story of "Lost Girls" involves the girls discovering their backbones, and Darla is a facilitator—someone who helps them learn how to express themselves and how to take action. They make signs, the best of which may be that made by four-year-old Lizzy, the youngest of the girls: "WE AIN'T LOST, WE'RE JUST MIZPLAYST." As the girls progress toward activism, Lizzy and another, Jo Anne, begin to stand out. Lizzy becomes an enthusiastic activist herself, learning from Darla's example. In the case of Jo Anne, the spark of rebellion was already hotter in her than in most of the other girls. It is she who demonstrates that girls can be just as courageous as boys by charging out of the tree home, knife in hand, and battling the pirates, doing some damage before she is captured.

"Like it or not, Miss Management [Wendy], the Lost Girls are going out on strike," Darla announces, and the girls participate in what may be Neverland's first labor strike.

The lost girls are not the only ones who learn because Darla has learned, as well.

Her interaction with Peter, Wendy, and the girls has shown her that she has strengths she should use to better her own life. At the start of "Lost Girls," she is almost a whiner, declaiming, "It isn't fair!" to her mother about Peter Pan, but also thinking about the unfairness of her own life. When Wendy sarcastically says, "Who ever told you that life is fair? .. . Certainly not a navvy, nor an upstairs maid, nor a poor man trying to feed his family," she is inviting Darla into the fatalistic view that nothing can be done about unfairness. Yet Darla reacts by insisting that unfairness can be changed, an important insight which causes her to change from a complainer to someone with backbone. She realizes that change is possible, that fairness is something created, not just given.

Darla matures beyond being a sad little girl in another important way: She takes responsibility for the welfare of others. The lost girls need a leader, and she provides them with one—herself. But the girls need more because they have led emotionally impoverished lives, in some cases for hundreds of years. The crude dolls and

decorations of the kitchen show that they wish for more fulfilling lives in which they can find beauty and play. This parallels Darla's own desire for bedtime stories, which like dolls can enrich a child's life, and by the end of "Lost Girls" she has grown to the point that she can view matters from her mother's perspective and, like her mother, she can take action to protect and help a younger person. Thus, she takes Lizzy home with her: "[Darla] felt a lump at her feet, raised up, and saw Lizzy fast asleep under the covers at the foot of the bed." Darla has grown so much that she can understand her personal desire for fairness and can recognize the need for fairness in others, especially Lizzy, who treats Darla like a beloved older sister.

Topics for Discussion

1. What does Lizzy's presence in Darla's bed at the end of "Lost Girls" tell you about the events in the rest of the novelette?

2. How does having all the girls be called "Wendy" affect their individuality, and how is it used to keep them doing what Peter wants them to do?

3. How many years has Lizzy been in servitude? How might those years have affected her personality?

4. What is the point of noting that Peter's eyes are "very very old?"

5. Has Wendy betrayed the other girls? Base your opinion on cues in the book.

6. What does Lizzy's sign "WE AIN'T LOST, WE'RE JUST MIZ-PLAYST" reveal about her experience and maturity?

7. Why does Wendy not charge out to fight the pirates like the other girls do?

8. What are Darla's special qualities that enable her to do what the other girls have not been able to do, which is to resist Peter Pan and Wendy?

9. How does Darla's relationships with her parents and the twins affect her ability to resist Peter Pan and Wendy?

10. Why does Wendy support Peter Pan's "oppression" of the girls?

11. Will Lizzy start growing at a normal pace now that she is in Darla's world?

Base your answers on cues given in the book.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In the play Peter Pan, what does Wendy do for the Lost Boys? Why would Darla think it unfair?

2. Is Yolen taking advantage of Barrie's Peter Pan, making it seem to have attitudes toward women that it does not have? Does she treat the play fairly?

Base your answer on your reading of both works.

3. Write a story about how Darla and her mother deal with Lizzy. Do they give her a home? How do they explain her to other people?

4. What does the title "Lost Girls" imply about Yolen's intentions in the novelette? How does it compare to the term Lost Boys?

5. How does Yolen's notion that the pirates are actually trying to liberate the girls contrast to the way they are depicted in Peter Pan?

6. "A pirate ship is a very democratic place," Mrs. Hook says to the girls.

How democratic were pirate ships in real life? How free were women pirates?

7. Would the girls who remain with the pirates help to liberate any new girls that Peter Pan captures? Write a short story about what they do and how they live after Darla and Lizzy leave.

8. What events happened in the second half of the twentieth century that contributed to creating a culture in which Darla would know how to organize women to demand their civil rights and would be motivated to do so?

9. Do a little research on the long-term popularity of Barrie's play Peter Pan to learn what made it so popular in 1904 and what elements may contribute to its popularity. What kind of values does Barrie's play reinforce?

10. What would life have been like for a four-year-old English girl like Lizzy in the era that she left behind when she went to Neverland? What in modern times would be most important for her to learn in order to survive?

For Further Reference

"Jane Yolen." Writer, vol. 114, no. 3 (March 2001): 66. Yolen says that she writes constantly, beginning from the moment she wakes up, no matter where she is, and she says that by having several works in progress at once she never has writer's block because when she is stuck on one project, she shifts to another for which she has ideas.

Sherman, Chris. Booklist, vol. 94, no. 5 (November 1,1997): 463. In a review of Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast, Sherman says, "Yolen consistently writes fresh, off-the-wall stories that even children who don't normally read fantasy will enjoy," and he notes that "in 'Lost Girls,' a Peter Pan takeoff, a new Wendy raises the consciousness of other lost girls and foments rebellion in Neverland."

Yolen, Jane. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies." Locus, vol. 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

"Yolen, Jane." In Something about the Author, vol. 75. Edited by Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 223-229. This entry provides a list of Yolen's publications with a short biography.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Yolen seems to like to rework old stories into new ones, with the original events viewed from a new angle. For example, her story "Great-Grandfather Dragon's Tale" (1986) features an old dragon telling his grandchildren about how the great-grandfather of all dragons made a compact with humans that saved dragons from extinction. It turns out to be a retelling of the story of Saint George slaying the dragon from the dragon's point of view. In Yolen's version of this tale, "Georgi" finds a way to make peace. Her retelling of old tales in new ways can be very ambitious, as it is in the trilogy of novellas Passenger (1996), Hobby (1996), and Merlin (1997). In these books, Yolen retells the childhood of the boy who would become Merlin, the wizard of King Arthur's court, including a clever explanation for how he came by his name. Like "Lost Girls," these novellas deal with harsh realities and how a youngster comes by the fortitude to survive them.

Themes found in "Lost Girls" appear in other writings by Yolen. For example, "The Face in the Cloth" (1985) tells of a mother's influence on her daughter and how a daughter may carry that influence with her. In "Lost Girls," the influence of Darla's mother is very important to her having the confidence to lead a labor strike in Neverland. In another example, "Lady Merion's Angel" (1996), the girl, Merion, must deal with a younger brother who has distracted her father's affections from her, somewhat as Darla's father's new wife and sons have divided Darla's father's affections. The theme of the liberation of women and culturally imposed gender roles appear in stories such as "An Infestation of Unicorns" (1994), which takes place in a medieval culture in which heroic knights are supposed to be men and women are not allowed on the grounds of a monastery, which make matters very awkward when the hero appears to be a man but is not, and she is the only person who can save a monastery from ruin. Yolen has crossed cultures in her exploration of traditional gender roles; for instance, "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" (1994) retells a Native American tale of a woman who was a slave but through fortitude regains her liberty. There are even examples of boys and girls working together to solve problems, as in the case of "Fallen Angel" (1996), in which youngsters pool their efforts to help a wounded angel regain its ability to fly.

Related Web Sites

http://www.janeyolen.com Accessed August 30, 2002. This is Jane Yolen's official Web site and includes a list of the author's works, a biography, and a list of awards.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996