Lyddie Short Guide

Lyddie by Katherine Paterson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Lyddie grew out of Paterson's participation in the Women's History Project, which was part of Vermont's bicentennial in 1991. The book, which is wellresearched, focuses on one woman who goes to work in a nineteenth-century factory. Through Lyddie's experiences, the reader is presented with the stories of a variety of factory workers. The story is literate, believable, and gives the reader a strong sense of time and place, focusing on a young protagonist who overcomes great difficulties. In the novel's first chapter, Lyddie must confront a bear. Later she is separated from her family, must walk most of the way to Concord, is injured in a factory accident, must face the death of her mother, is attacked by her boss, and is fired from two different jobs. Despite her problems, she still hopes for a better life and tries to educate herself.

In the end, Lyddie is able to break down the barriers she puts up between her and other people, learning to care for others again. The book also treats other topics of great interest to young adults, such as Lyddie's attempts to become a part of society, to become successful in her profession, to break past barriers imposed on women, to learn to read and write, and to gain an education. Ultimately, Lyddie becomes an even stronger person, giving up her own obsession with money and security to help an Irish factory worker, Brigid.

About the Author

Katherine Paterson was born October 31, 1932, in Qing Jiang, China to George Raymond and Mary Goetchius Womeldorf, Presbyterian missionaries. As a child, Paterson was often read to by her mother and she taught herself how to read before she entered school. During the next few years, Paterson moved fifteen times to places such as Shanghai, China; Richmond, Virginia; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Because she moved around so much, Paterson often felt like an outsider, much like the children who appear in many of her novels.

Paterson attended King College in Bristol, Tennessee where she received an A.B. in English Literature. After college, Paterson taught briefly in an elementary school in Lovettsville, Virginia, before returning to Richmond, Virginia, where she earned a masters degree from the Presbyterian School for Christian Education. Upon graduation, Paterson became a missionary in Japan, working there from 1957 to 1961. She met and married John Barstow Paterson, a Presbyterian minister, in 1962 while on a fellowship to Union Theological Seminary, where she eventually received a second master's degree. The Patersons have two sons, John Jr. and David Lord, and two adopted daughters, Elizabeth Po Lin and Mary Katherine.

In 1964, Paterson began writing curriculum and other materials for her church. In 1974, her first novel, The Sign of the Chrysanthemum, a historical novel about feudal Japan which she began writing in an adult-education class, was published. Her next two novels, Of Nightingales That Weep (1974) and The Master Puppeteer (1976), also take place in Japan. Her fourth novel, the Newbery Medal-winning Bridge to Terabithia (1977), is set in contemporary America and was written in response to the death of her son David's best friend. Her other books include The Great Gilly Hopkins (1978), about a girl who has spent her whole life in foster homes; Angels and Other Stories (1979), a collection of Christmas stories;Jacob Have I Loved (1980), a study of sibling rivalry; Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom (1983), a historical novel set in China; Come Sing, Jimmy Jo (1985), which treats a boy who is part of a family of country singers; Park's Quest (1988), in which a boy searches for clues about his dead father, Lyddie (1991), and FlipFlop Girl (1994), whose protagonist also comes to terms with death and loneliness.

Paterson has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award for The Master Puppeteer; the Newbery Medal for Bridge to Terabithia and Jacob Have I Loved; the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and Janusz Korcazk Medal for Bridge to Terabithia; and the Christopher Award, National Book Award, and Newbery Honor Award for The Great Gilly Hopkins. Paterson has continued to write for both children and young adults, becoming one of the most important contemporary writers in her field. She and her husband now live in Vermont, the setting of Lyddie.

Setting

As is often the case with historical novels, setting is extremely important in Lyddie. Much of the book is devoted to recreating the lives of the young women who worked in American factories during the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel, which begins in 1843, is set both in rural Vermont and industrial Massachusetts.

The protagonist, Lyddie Worthen, has been raised in a cabin surrounded by pastures dotted with sugar bush. Isolated from society and providing little shelter against wild animals and the harsh weather, the cabin becomes a prison for Lyddie and her younger brother, Charlie, who must spend a winter there alone. Later, it becomes a temporary hideout for the runaway slave, Ezekial Abernathy.

When Lyddie is finally forced to leave the farm, she journeys to an industrialized world, first working in Cutler's Tavern, which is three times the size of the Worthen Cabin. Lyddie eventually goes to Lowell, Massachusetts, where she takes a job with the Concord Manufacturing Company, working in the weaving room. Like the Worthen cabin, the mill also imprisons Lyddie. At first, the factory seems like a nightmare with gigantic looms that have come to life and noise which sounds like "a hundred stagecoaches all inside one's skull, banging their wheels against the bone." The weaving room is also prisonlike, with locked windows and closed doors. While the wages Lyddie earns at the factory seem her only hope for buying the Worthen farm, she and her co-workers are soon exploited, the victims of poor working conditions, greedy bosses, and sexual harassment. Lyddie comes to feel she is not much different than the slave she has helped escape. While Lyddie ultimately is able to leave and head for college, the factory ruins the health and reputations of many of her friends, casting out those who become weak or who seek social reform.

Social Sensitivity

The novel sensitively handles a number of social issues which grow out of the lives of the women who worked at the Lowell factories. Both Lyddie and Brigid are victims of sexual harassment and, while Lyddie stands up for her rights, she loses her job as a result.

Lyddie's mentor and co-worker, Diana Goss, spearheads an attempt to better working conditions for the factory girls, dramatizing the conflicts that have sometimes arisen between labor and management. She leaves the factory, however, because she is pregnant, not because of her crusade for social reform. While the book effectively depicts the often dehumanizing conditions of factory work, it is equally critical of the conditions Lyddie encounters while working in a tavern and on the Worthen farm.

At times the novel questions extreme and fanatical religious fundamentalism, particularly when Lyddie's mother is convinced that the world is about to end. Quaker Stevens and his family, however, are treated more sympathetically and it is hinted that someday Lyddie may marry Luke Stevens. The novel does suggest that nineteenth-century women, particularly those who were poor, were often treated as second-class citizens. Paterson dramatizes the attempts of a few who worked towards gaining freedom and independence, attempting to create better lives for themselves. In general, Paterson balances abusive bosses, religious fanatics, and pious snobs with characters like Quaker Stevens, Triphena, and Diana Goss, who are unselfish and ultimately look out for Lyddie.

Literary Qualities

While at first glance Lyddie may appear to be little more than a reworking of the diaries kept by factory workers in Concord, Massachusetts, it is a complex book which can be read on several levels. On one level, it is an adventure-accomplishment romance, a sort of realistic hero tale about a poor girl who rescues herself with hard work and the aid of various "godmothers."

Like heroes of myths and legend, Lyddie struggles against monsters (bears and giant mechanical shuttles), aided by her courage and intelligence, as well as various mentors. The book is also an effective historical novel, a believable story which communicates the nature of factory life through interesting characters.

Lyddie is also a consciously literary work, using symbols and literary allusions to help develop its ideas. The book clearly parallels Dickens's Oliver Twist, one of the books Lyddie reads.

The protagonists of both books are orphaned and find themselves working in unbearable situations from which they escape to big cities on foot. They both subsequently become part of new groups of young people (of their same gender) from which they ultimately must be rescued. It is because her life is so similar to that of Oliver Twist that his story appeals so strongly to Lyddie.

Later in Lyddie, life at the factory is contrasted to Dickens' depiction of it in American Notes.

Lyddie is also encouraged by a number of symbolic images and phrases which help her make sense of her life.

For example, the bear which first attacks the Worthen family comes to represent all of the obstacles thrown in her path. The frog in the milk pail reminds her to keep struggling; the song, "I Will Not Be a Slave," helps her reassess her situation at the factory. Most importantly, her mother's misspelled phrase, "we can still hop," represents the hopes that sustain Lyddie throughout the novel. In telling Lyddie's story, Paterson, much like Dickens, also uses symbolic names. Among others, the Biblical "Lydia" and the Roman deities "Diana" and "Mars" all bear similarities to their counterparts, Lyddie Worthen, Diana Goss, and Mr. Marsden.

Themes and Characters

The novel focuses on Lydia (Lyddie) Worthen, an independent young woman who has lived most of her life in a small cabin in Vermont. Her general philosophy of life is established early in the first chapter. She is fiercely independent, proud, and is "not going to be beholden to the neighbors for anything so trivial as her own comfort." She dreads charity and, as a result, constantly tries to save money.

Lyddie has not been educated, but is both brave and intelligent. She is also devoted to her family, particularly her younger brother, Charlie.

Lyddie has the ability to take charge in difficult situations, as when the bear breaks into her cabin in the first chapter and when the coach breaks down on the way to Concord. Initially, Lyddie is intolerant of other people's stupidity or lack of common sense. Indeed, when she is asked to help Brigid learn how to run the loom at the factory, she has absolutely no patience.

Ultimately, Lyddie is a survivor. She withstands setback after setback and is deserted by nearly everyone that matters to her. Along the way, however, she begins to care for others, giving up some of her dreams to help them. Indeed, Lyddie becomes quite generous.

She takes in her sister, Rachel, after her mother's death and then is willing to give her up so that Rachel can have a better life. She gives her life savings to a runaway slave, Ezekial Abernathy, provides Brigid money for; a doctor, and is eventually fired because she protects Brigid from the overseer. In the end, she determines to become educated and does not immediately accept Luke Stevens' marriage proposal, although that might be the easiest thing to do. While the novel implies that she may eventually return to Luke, she will do it on her own terms.

Despite Lyddie's independence, she encounters a number of people who become her mentors or helpers. The Stevens family offers her help, paying a substantial sum for the calf she wants to sell. They also look after the Worthen farm in her absence. Luke Stevens, in particular, cares a great deal for Lyddie and eventually asks to marry her. From Ezekial Abernathy, a slave she helps, she learns about the concept of slavery and determines to become independent herself. When Lyddie takes her first job at Cutler's Tavern, the cook Triphena allows her to return to the Worthen farm to check up on things. Then, when Lyddie is fired for making the trip, Triphena gives her money and shoes for her journey to Concord. In Concord, Mrs. Bedlow, who runs the boarding house, takes pity on Lyddie and even bends the rules when Rachel comes to stay with her.

Perhaps Lyddie's most important mentor is Diana Goss, who teaches her how to run the looms and to question her treatment at the factory. Diana is viewed as a radical because she fights for labor reform, yet she never forces her ideas on Lyddie. Diana, who is an orphan, thinks of the factory girls as her family and treats Lyddie as a sister.

She sees that Lyddie has postage and paper to write to her family and finds a doctor to care for Lyddie when she is injured. Ultimately, Diana leaves the mill because she becomes pregnant, not because of her participation in the Female Labor Reform Association. Significantly, Lyddie seeks Diana out when she also leaves the factory.

In Concord, Lyddie becomes close to several other young women who also work at the factory. Together these girls represent the diversity that could be found among nineteenth-century factory workers. Her roommates include the aristocratic and delicate Amelia Cate, who teaches Lyddie the rules she is supposed to live by. According to Lyddie, Amelia is "always instructing her to be grateful about things that Lyddie, try as she might, could not summon the least whiff of gratitude over." Amelia criticizes Lyddie's speech and is shocked when Lyddie shows little inclination to go to church. Amelia also feels that reading novels is a waste of time.

Like Lyddie, Prudence Allen is from Vermont. Prudence has a suitor who wants her to give up factory work, which she does when she becomes ill.

It is Lyddie's third roommate Betsy, who interests her in reading and education. Lyddie survives the first few months in the factory largely because Betsy reads to her from Oliver Twist. It is Betsy who teaches Lyddie the song, "I Will Not Be a Slave," and who suggests that Lyddie may want to go to college. Eventually, Betsy's own dreams are frustrated; like Prudence she becomes ill, losing her savings and her health. In the end, Betsy's uncle comes for her and takes her back to Maine. As Lyddie's roommates leave, the factory begins to hire Irish immigrants, such as Brigid, whom she must train.

The weaving room where Lyddie works is run by an overseer, Mr. Marsden, who notices Lyddie because she is clearly the best worker in the mill. He eventually is attracted to Lyddie, putting his arm on her sleeve whenever he passes by her, then finally trying to take advantage of her. Lyddie, however, repulses him by stomping on his foot. Later, Mr. Marsden also threatens Brigid and sees to it that Lyddie is fired after she comes to Brigid's rescue.

All the time Lyddie is at the factory, she is concerned about her family, which has been split up. Lyddie's brother, Charlie, who spent one winter with her alone in the cabin, has gone to work in a mill. While Lyddie views herself and Charlie as nearly the same person, Charlie finds a new family and grows increasingly distant towards her.

Lyddie's mother, Mattie, has become fanatically religious and has shucked off the family "like corn husks to follow her craziness." Lyddie's Uncle Judah finally puts Mattie in an asylum in Brattleboro where she dies. Toward the end of the book, Lyddie is reintroduced to her younger sister, Rachel.

For a time, Lyddie becomes Rachel's surrogate mother and begins teaching her to read. Yet, when the Phinneys, the family that has adopted Charlie, want to raise Rachel as well, Lyddie permits her to leave.

As is the case with most of Paterson's books, Lyddie is concerned with standing up to adversity, developing friendships, resisting restrictive gender roles, and discovering the

value of literacy. In Chapter four, Triphena tells Lyddie a story about a frog who falls into a pail of milk and kicks so hard that he makes butter before he dies.

The image of this frog who futilely struggles against great odds becomes important to Lyddie who struggles her whole life. Lyddie is also torn between a desire to isolate herself from others and the need for friendship and her duty to her family. She is also determined to achieve her goals regardless of restrictions supposedly imposed on women.

Lyddie also validates the importance of reading, particularly novels. Lyddie is herself a storyteller; she stores up stories to tell Charlie later. She also finds that hearing stories like Oliver Twist give her a reason to live. She counters Amelia's attacks on books by arguing that reading Oliver Twist was not silly, it "was life or death." Later, after teaching herself to read, Lyddie also devours Dickens's American Notes for Public Circulation, the Narrative ofthe Life of Frederick Douglass, and the Bible.

When Rachel comes to stay at Lowell, Lyddie in turn introduces her to books, reading her nursery rhymes and the Psalms. When Lyddie finally leaves the factory, the one present she gives to the illiterate Brigid is a copy of Oliver Twist.

Topics for Discussion

1. Early in the novel, Lyddie receives a letter in which her nearly illiterate mother writes, "But we can stil hop" [sic]. This misspelled phrase becomes a refrain throughout the novel. How does Lyddie manage to keep hoping?

What does she hope for and how do her hopes sustain her?

2. In Chapter One, Lyddie is confronted by a bear. As the book unfolds, Lyddie thinks about that bear again and again. For example, in Chapter 22, Lyddie decides that the bear has "stolen her home, her family, her work, her good name." What does the bear come to represent for Lyddie?

3. According to Amelia, Lyddie and Betsy should not waste their time reading novels. What effect does reading have on Lyddie? What benefits does it provide?

4. Why does Lyddie feel so close to her brother, Charlie? Does he feel the same way? What role does he have in the later events of the book?

5. Why is Lyddie so stubborn and independent? Does she change as the novel progresses? How do her feelings change about Diana Goss? Brigid? Her sister, Rachel?

6. Why does Lyddie finally decide to sign Diana's petition? Why does Lyddie seek out Diana after they have both left Lowell?

7. Are there any hints about Mr. Marsden's true character when Lyddie first meets him? Why does he pretend that nothing has happened after he attacks Lyddie? Why does he finally see to it that Lyddie is fired?

8. Diana Goss and her friends are fighting for better conditions in the factory. Are the conditions in the factory really that bad? What, in particular, does Diana oppose and what changes does she try to bring about?

9. Lyddie does not begin working at the Concord Manufacturing Corporation until Chapter Seven. Since the rest of the novel takes place there, why does Paterson include so much seemingly unrelated material, such as Lyddie's stint working at the tavern and the winter she and Charlie spend at the cabin?

10. Compare and contrast the personalities of Lyddie's roommates, Betsy, Amelia, and Prudence. How do these girls differ in their social background and attitudes towards the factory? In what ways do these girls serve as a contrast to Lyddie?

11. Diana Goss was "orphaned young." She tells Lyddie, "I suppose this mill is as much home as I can claim." Both Diana and Lyddie eventually try to create new families for themselves out of their co-workers or others that need them. How successful are their attempts? What obstacles are thrust in their way?

12. Discuss the various mentors or benefactors who help Lyddie. Why do they befriend her? How does she react to the help she receives?

13. Discuss the names Paterson uses in the novel, such as Lyddie, Diana, and Marsden. Are there mythological or Biblical characters with these names? What do these names suggest about Paterson's characters?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare and contrast the plot and characters of Lyddie with Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist. Why does Dickens's book capture Lyddie Worthen's imagination?

2. Read the brief section in Charles Dickens's American Notes for General Circulation which describes Dickens's visit to a factory in Lowell. Compare Dickens's view of the factories with those presented in Lyddie. You might also research one of the books listed in the sources at the end of Lyddie, such as David Macaulay's Mill or Lucy Larcom's A New England Girlhood, and discuss how Paterson makes use of it.

3. Katherine Paterson's novels are generally realistic books, but often share similarities with folktales or myths. For example, Park's Quest retells Arthurian legends and Jacob Have I Loved makes use of the Biblical tale of Jacob and Esau. Discuss a folktale or myth which seems similar to Lyddie.

Does Lyddie contain any particular folk-motifs (i.e. a mentor, fairy godmother, or wise woman; a heroic quest or ordeal; a monster)? Can this book be viewed as a version of "Cinderella"?

4. Explore the novel's references to slavery. For example, what does Diana Goss mean when she says that it is "the nature of slavery to make the slave fear freedom"? Consider, too, why Paterson includes the subplot about the escaped slave, Ezekial Abernathy, and the song, "I Will Not Be a Slave," which Betsy sings.

5. At the end of the novel, it is not clear whether or not Lyddie will ever return to Vermont or if she will accept Luke Stevens' marriage proposal. Write an additional chapter which clears up the loose ends. Discuss your reasons for ending the novel as you do. Why does Paterson not make it clearer what will happen to Lyddie?

For Further Reference

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Odean, Kathleen. Review. School Library Journal 37 (February 1991): 82. A short, positive review which calls attention to the novel's interest in reading.

Paterson, Katherine. Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing for Children.

New York: Elsevier/Nelson, 1981. A collection of Paterson's essays and reviews which, among other things, reveal her philosophy of writing and her attitudes towards historical fiction.

—— . "Literature and Life." English Journal 80,5 (1991): 11. Paterson discusses the power of literature over children, one of the topics of Lyddie.

—— . "Katherine Paterson." Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults. Edited by Don Gallo. Urbana: NCTE, 1990: 159-161. A short, autobiographical statement by Paterson.

Sutherland, Zena. Review. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 44 (Fall 1991): 151. Sutherland praises the novel's focus and solid characterization.

Watson, Elizabeth. Review. Horn Book 64 (1991): 338-339. A review which praises the novel's plot, setting, and language.

Related Titles

Like many of Paterson's books, Lyddie is concerned with the importance of other books and celebrates the power of reading fiction. For example, in Bridge to Terabithia, the precocious Leslie Burke and her friend, Jess, create the imaginary world, Terabithia, out of the books they have read. In Jacob Have I Loved, Louise Bradshaw draws strength from reading works by Scott, Dickens, and Cooper. The main character of Come Sing, Jimmy Jo finds comfort in a book by Beverly Cleary, while Park of Park's Quest daydreams that he is one of King Arthur's knights searching for the Holy Grail. In Lyddie, Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist sparks Lyddie's interest in books. Not surprisingly, Lyddie itself has some similarities to Dickens's book, particularly since both Lyddie and Oliver travel to a big city and attempt to find a new life in a community of other children or young adults. The similarity between Oliver's workhouse and the factory where Lyddie works is close enough for Lyddie to identify with Oliver. Like Oliver, Lyddie has a few benefactors or mentors who help her see the way out of her sometimes miserable existence.

Lyddie also shares other similarities with the rest of Paterson's novels. Patersoh's earlier historical novels, The Sign of the Chrysanthemum (1973), Of Nightingales That Weep (1974), The Master Puppeteer (1976), and Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom (1983), are also about characters who face great difficulties, often encountering prejudice and sometimes becoming outsiders in a new culture. Lyddie herself shares some characteristics with both Gilly Hopkins from The Great Gilly Hopkins and Sara Louise Bradshaw from Jacob Have I Loved, young women who survive partly because of their strong wills, stubbornness, and dreams.

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