A Map of Nowhere Short Guide

A Map of Nowhere by Gillian Cross

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".

Contents

Overview

A Map of Nowhere presents an honest, provocative look at questions of growing up in today's difficult world, choosing friends, and distinguishing right from wrong. Cross treats these questions in a suspenseful story that involves a fascinating pastime. Her major character, Nick Miller, has a passion for fantasy games that involve role-playing with orcs, dragons, quests, and maps of dungeons. Nick is a believable character with typical longings for exciting adventures and for a friend who shares his game-playing interest. At the root of the story is the absorbing problem that Nick cannot seem to have an adventure and a friend as well. In order to explore Nick's situation, Cross blends the workings of a fantasy game with a morally challenging real-life adventure.

A new friend named Joseph Fisher brings Nick the opportunity to play a fantasy game. At the same time, Nick is coaxed by his older brother Terry's gang of bikers to play the exciting game of spy in his friend Joseph's 4780 A Map of Nowhere household. The bikers want information that will help them rob the Fisher family's humble shop. To complicate Nick's problem, Joseph's fantasy game is played by rules that require dedication to the Fisher family's strong moral values. Nick vacillates between loyalties until criminal involvement forces him to make a tough choice. He is the only one who knows the truth.

As a backdrop to Nick's quest for a mature sense of right and wrong, Cross scrutinizes contemporary issues of teenage crime, affluence without values, and the plight of the honest poor.

About the Author

Gillian Cross was born December 24, 1945, in London, England. She grew up in a household rich in books and storytelling. Her father, a scientist and musician, read and recorded stories on tape. Her mother, an English teacher, made up stories to tell her children. Cross invented stories as a child, and begged for birthday presents of paper to write them down.

Besides amusing her younger brother and sister with stories, she created serialized, "fast fiction" to entertain friends during their long train ride to school. Cross always thought of her stories as "private writing"; she later felt inhibited by their clumsiness in comparison to the "official writing" she studied in literature classes.

Cross received her B.A. in English with first-class honors from Somerville College, Oxford, and completed her M.A. degree in 1972 and her doctorate in 1974 at the University of Sussex. The completion of her formal education brought Cross a sense of freedom and control over her fictional efforts. Married by this time and making up stories for her own children, she started a children's book group, began to write in earnest, and seriously tried to publish her fiction.

After five completed stories and numerous rejections, Cross had two manuscripts accepted simultaneously.

Since then she has written over twenty books, and a number have received awards or other recognition. These include The Dark Behind the Curtain (1982), On the Edge (1985), and Chartbreaker (1986; see separate entry, Vol. 9). Cross has noted that, although writing became her major interest and activity, it is not all she has done. Her work experiences include assisting a village baker, aiding a member of Parliament, teaching, and serving as a clerical assistant.

As a writer, Cross perceives children and young adults as a distinctive group. She argues that children read differently from adults, identify more easily with characters, respond to a writer's excited imagination and should be allowed the privacy to get the most out of their reading. Cross believes that writing for this younger audience frees her from the cynical approach often required to write adult fiction. She can underscore the importance and power of ordinary people, while exploring significant themes of human emotions, virtues and vices.

Cross advocates writing that illumines life's darker aspects, including dramatic events and difficult choices that most cruelly stir the emotions. Reviewers expecially praise her suspenseful, positive treatments of disturbing situations and moral questions.

Setting

A Map of Nowhere tells a story of contemporary England that, except for its distinctive fen landscape, takes place in locations resembling anywhere people live, work, and go to school. As the story opens, Nick finds a wallet in his bag after school football practice and opens it to see Joseph Fisher's name. Nick learns when he returns home that the wallet was planted at the instigation of his brother's gang of bikers, who pressure him to return it and "get on good terms" with Joseph. Nick is reluctant to visit someone he hardly knows and considers "boring," but he sets out for a place he thinks only a "maniac" would go.

Joseph resides at Holney Seas End, a village "out on the Marsh." The distance is unspecified except by the long amount of time spent battling the icy wind off the sea, slippery fen footing, and vanishing light. The Marsh is an important setting geographically and symbolically in the novel. It is a "wild and lonely" place of unbroken fields, small clusters of distant lighted houses, and low fenlands without landmarks. Nick gets lost there more than once seeking a residence as remote from his own as Joseph's moral values seem to him.

While little detail is given about the Miller home, Nick obviously enjoys an affluence unknown to Joseph and his family. The reader knows that Nick is used to his father's impeccable manner of dress, long sessions in front of the television, and lavish barbecue parties. Joseph's parents, by contrast, dress in shabby clothes that Nick's parents "wouldn't have been seen dead in." Nick rides a ten-gear, superspeed racing bike, while Joseph's bike looks like a "heap of old scrap-iron."

The Fishers have a "run-down, depressing" house, and a "sad and dingy" shop among the dozens of dwellings of Holney Seas End.

A crack in the concrete runs against the back wall and through the foundations of the house so that "one day it will fall, as the ground shifts." The crack prevents the honest Fishers from selling their house as a means to improve their financial situation. Their kitchen reflects their present impoverishment by containing battered-looking cupboards that sometimes yield only tiny rations of baked beans. Another room, a "lounge" in British terms, is furnished with "saggy old armchairs, dusty carpet and no television." The same room holds religious books that are unfamiliar to Nick, but in the Fisher household these are regarded as riches.

Social Sensitivity

Cross handles her moral theme with great tact and respect for the differing sensibilities of readers. While characters of strong religious inclination are crucial in the novel, they never preach specific doctrine. Rather, through discussions between Nick and Joseph, moral values are explored in terms of social good and responsibility for one's own actions. In addition, the novel suggests the equal worth of male and female capabilities. The strong, perceptive character Ruth holds a pivotal moral role of Game Master. In The Company of Terry's bikers, "firebug" Donna holds her own.

Social problems do receive treatment in the novel, and these involve gang activity, robbery, arson, and trouble with the police. Cross believes that younger readers need to be warned that real adult life is serious as well as joyful, that it can be violent, dramatic, and marked by danger and irrevocable choices. She also believes that a writer must take care to depict such events without doing harm. In A Map of Nowhere, the emphasis, even throughout the most graphic scene of robbery and arson, is on moral introspection. Cross makes it clear that antisocial behavior is not child's play and that criminal acts bring consequences.

Cross also believes in the necessity of credibility, and although she dislikes writing swear words the novel does contain an infrequent instance of tough talk or profanity. References to "dirty pictures" occur as well, although content is never graphically depicted. Beer is a preferred drink for characters who are obviously fashioned to convey a frivolous, irresponsible approach to life. Nick's parents serve beer at their parties but he shows no interest in alcoholic beverages, a trait shared by his morally upright, closest friend Joseph. Overall themes are designed to promote wholesome values, and the novel underscores Nick's eventual acceptance of them.

Literary Qualities

A Map of Nowhere is tightly crafted, well paced, and ingeniously devised around shifts between a fantasy game and real life. Nick moves between the dual roles of Joseph's friend and The Company's spy. In his fantasy role of weak and good Zephaniah, Nick must think in terms that oppose his gameplaying approach to life. The game concept resonates in Mr. and Mrs. Miller, who play their real-life fantasy of the perfect household. Members of The Company play a game of imagined loyalty to each other. Real-life contemporary problems are at the root of the novel, however, and characters remain believable while they evoke different types of values.

Gripping human qualities underlie Nick's playful questing, Joseph's moral downfall and remorse, Ruth's unhappiness and fierce stand for truth. Lesser characters like Livingstone and Parker, baby Susie and Thomas, are also deftly drawn with realistic motivations and behavior.

Relationships among characters have a realistic basis. Joseph and Nick, for example, are like many people who truly like each other even while they argue. In addition, individual characters are helpfully "tagged" to further define them. For example, the honest Fishers own religious books. Shallow Livingstone possesses a bundle of dirty pictures. Ruth has piercing eyes that reflect her curious, relentlessly probing nature.

Symbolism is important in the novel, and imagery related to mapmaking is used to help define characters and relationships. Joseph, as game mapmaker, draws in a way that reflects his moral certainty: "neat little black lines, clear and sharp and sure of themselves." Nick's mapmaking reflects his moral confusion: "jumbled scribbles with the wrong measurements and the writing all tangled together." When Nick first meets Ruth on the Marsh, she draws on his hand an "invisible map" to guide him to the Fisher house.

The act foreshadows her role in helping him find an unseen moral system.

When Joseph draws a map by which to get home even in the dark, the act suggests his guiding role in Nick's spiritual darkness. At one point Nick rejects Joseph's explanation that morality is like drawing tidy paths, and clear boundaries. "Life— real life—is chaos and what you're making is just a map of nowhere!"

The Marsh setting that requires the maps is used effectively in a symbolic, thematic context. The unsettled, shifting ground evokes the vacillations of Nick's moral journey. The treacherous ground reflects as well the sort of moral footing the bikers stand on when they rob the Fishers. The point is reinforced when Nick opens the Fisher shop door to let in the bikers, and a church bell sounds "distant and lonely" across the dark Marsh. Light and dark images define the landscape and accompany events, suggesting the way good contrasts with evil, right with wrong, fantasy with reality. The burning shop shoots red flames into the night sky, and the colorful image recurs to suggest moral implications.

When accused by Nick, Joseph stares as if he sees "flames leaping up from the pit and the devils prancing around with pitchforks."

Fantasy-game figures are employed symbolically to heighten dramatic effect as the novel builds to a powerful climax. When police arrive to arrest Terry, Nick thinks of them as "orcs" to be resisted by the "heroes, the adventurers." Later, when Ruth conducts her "Jezebel" game at the Miller house, she invents a situation involving orcs. As the real-life police appear ready to do, Ruth's imaginary orcs capture Jethro (Joseph) and Zephaniah (Nick) to obtain from each his secret truth. The Star Warrior, the playing piece Nick uses in every game, lends poignancy to Ruth's challenge to tell the truth.

Ruth stands the figure at the center of the table: "All on his own." She leaves Nick alone to make his decision.

Images of the Marsh, of light and dark, recur to illumine Nick's decision-making process. "It was like being out on the Marsh in a thick fog, with shapes looming and disappearing." As Nick weighs one choice, another presents itself. "Signposts and houses and hedges dissolving as he tried to reach them." Nick can grasp nothing solid. "And the ground underfoot shifting treacherously so that everything moved and cracked and slid . . . Nowhereland." Nick places in front of the Star Warrior the teaspoons he and Joseph have used, to stretch "like two shining silver paths, one going right and one going left." As Nick positions his head next to the Star Warrior to view the paths, he thinks in Zephaniah's trusting terms.

He sees them all—Joseph, Ruth, Terry, Leo, Donna, Bill: "Faces in the torchlight, shadowed and stern, trusting each other because that was the only way to survive."

Nick slips the Star Warrior into his pocket, a symbolic signal that he has "come to the end of playing games."

He sees Joseph and Ruth walking ahead "with the pale winter sun on their hair," while he feels as if he is "walking into the entrance of a tunnel." The tunnel signifies his mental darkness, his ignorance of little except that he is drawing spiritually closer to Joseph and Ruth. The two wait for Nick "with the sunlight full on their faces." The light implies their enlightened grasp of truth and Nick's newfound understanding of the bright, life-giving value of its brightness.

Themes and Characters

A Map of Nowhere centers on Nick Miller's uneasy relationships with groups of friends and family members who represent different moral choices.

Nick is the most intriguing character because he changes radically by the end of the novel. At the outset Nick is not concerned with morality at all. He is not evil in character as much as he is immature, morally undisciplined, and adrift. Nick feels left out because his school's fantasy-game club is shut down and his brother Terry's bikers usually pay him no attention. Returning Joseph Fisher's wallet opens up exciting prospects for Nick. He notices that it contains a metal fantasy figure and the notes for a strange adventure game.

Although Nick and Joseph think alike when it comes to a choice of pastime, they initially have little else in common. Joseph is sincere, polite and serious, and he is teased repeatedly at school for his strong religious values.

Nick's schoolmates Livingstone and Parker call him "Holy Fisher" or "Saint Joseph Fisher," and he will have nothing to do with them. Livingstone and Parker are loud, jeering types whose interests are food, sports, and smutty pictures. They represent a kind of selfindulgent, immature behavior that dissatisfies Nick the more he gets to know Joseph. Livingstone's complaint that "Miller's busy growing up" is a concise statement of the novel's major theme.

Joseph is a crucial figure in Nick's growing-up process. He is mature and responsible, which he demonstrates by providing kind care to his baby sister Susie and four-year-old brother Thomas. This care includes moral teaching, which Nick finds very strange. During Nick's first visit Joseph prevents Thomas from taking toffees that belong to their sister Ruth, because that would be stealing. "Talk about nit-picking," Nick thinks, and takes a toffee when Joseph is out of the room. Although genuine friendship develops, it is marred by Nick's challenges to Joseph about questions of right and wrong, good and bad.

Joseph's arguments address the important theme of social responsibility as an integral part of mature selfidentity. Joseph insists upon doing "what's right" no matter what other people think. Reasoning from his role as mapmaker for his fantasy game, he explains that moral rules are "a system, like a map, to help you find your way through things." Joseph's older sister Ruth reinforces the theme. Ruth is stern, unsmiling, and interested in Nick as a challenge. She is curious to know what people will do when forced to make tough moral decisions.

Ruth herself is unhappy but resigned to life on the Marsh: "Being here is tearing our family to bits." Nick aggravates her by his half-serious suggestion that the Fishers escape the Marsh by dropping a bomb down the cracked foundation in order to collect the insurance money. "Someone like you always has an easy way out," Ruth says. "It would be stealing from the insurance company."

As Game Master for the fantasy adventure, Ruth forces Nick to confront moral standards by conducting the game along biblical lines. In the role of "Jezebel," she constructs situations that require demonstrations of truthfulness, meekness, and trust rather than the customary warriorlike qualities dear to Nick. In order to play the game at all, Nick must obey his rolls of the dice and cast himself in the part of a character he hates, the good and faithful "Zephaniah." When he and Joseph, who plays as "Jethro," think as one and make compassionate, nonviolent choices, they succeed with Ruth and enjoy each other's company.

At the same time, the game heightens Nick's argumentative approach to Joseph. Nick feels the tension of acting as a double agent, a friend and a secret gatherer of information for Terry's thieving bikers.

The four bikers, known as "The Company," continually undermine the thoughtful qualities that knowing Joseph can inspire in Nick. Members of The Company—Terry, Bill, Leo, Donna—address thematic concepts of peer pressure, false loyalty, and alienation. Terry, though secretly uneasy about the gang, coaxes Nick to cooperate by appealing to his game-playing passion. He and Leo make spying seem a game, a real-life heroic "quest."

Inspired by the notion, Nick even exploits innocent little Thomas by staging a "burglar game" so that the child will reveal the Fisher household's lock and alarm system. The child's enthusiasm invites comparison with Nick's thrill at being with The Company. Nick can convince himself at times that he is no more responsible than a child for what others do with the information he supplies. "As though Good and Bad—those two old bogeymen—had vanished like fairy tales."

Bill and Donna, Livingtone's sister, especially expose the dangerous side of Nick's reasoning. Donna has a police record for arson, and Bill pressures Nick by subtle threats. Bill exposes the false nature of The Company's rule: "we're all in it together."

When Nick rides along to rob the Fishers, Bill abandons Nick in the shop and roars away. The real fear shown afterward by Terry confirms not just his brotherly concern for Nick but the extent to which he has let the gang subdue his better judgment. As alienated youths together, the bikers suggest an important connection between family relations and antisocial group behavior. The bikers agree that their parents are boring, even "dead."

Donna stresses her need to feel "alive," to confront danger because it is real.

"That's when you get really close to people," Bill says.

Terry is unusual because he hides his misgivings about what they do, but he too discusses his parents as people who never really talk to each other or enjoy life. Mr. Miller holds lavish parties because he is "just showing off, proving that he can do things on a bigger scale than the neighbors."

Mrs. Miller fears that Terry's friends are criminals, but she calls them "such nice boys." Even when it is clear that Nick is involved with Terry's gang and needs help, both parents avoid the subject. "They didn't want anything to disturb the bright, shiny image they'd made. The perfect family in the perfect house." Miller family life addresses the emptiness of affluence without values and honest talk between parents and young adults.

By contrast, moral teaching is highly valued in the Fisher home. Mr. Fisher kindly disciplines little Thomas when the child steals a set of keys.

"The most important thing of all," Mr. Fisher tells Thomas, "is for you to be good and honest and truthful." Again Joseph must explain to Nick, who objects that Thomas is "only a kid" and should be expected to lie. "Dad took the trouble to tell him off because he cares about him." The Fisher parents welcome Nick, trust him, treat him as someone special. Initially he responds according to his game-playing mentality. "I'm on a quest and they're enemy aliens."

Nick respects the Fishers later as people who can understand the moral choice he must make when the police arrest the bikers for robbery and arson. Ruth and Joseph, not the Millers, have the key roles. Nick sees that Joseph suffers moral anguish for secretly trying to complete Donna's botched attempt to burn down the Fisher shop. Part of the appeal and believability of Joseph as a character lies in his very human capacity to yield to temptation, and to admit a mistake. Arson may bring insurance money to the Fishers, but Joseph knows that loving his family demands honest relations with society as well.

His remorse raises the thematic question of redemption.

Nick ultimately plays the pivotal role in redemption because he helps Ruth conduct the game that forces Joseph to confess a secret moral lapse.

Unlike Terry who corrupts Nick, unlike Donna who uses her brother Livingstone to plant the wallet in Nick's bag, Ruth seeks the truth in order to save and uplift. "Truth is the only thing that can be accepted in exchange for life." When Ruth also uncovers the truth of the spying and challenges Nick, he enters the mature world of reality by joining Joseph in doing "what's right." Nick's decision to tell the police his criminal role reflects the thematic hope that even without a caring and upright family, a young person can still develop the identity and values that are essential if civilized society is to survive.

Adaptations

In 1994 Chivers Audio Books produced an unabridged, four-cassette edition, read by Frances Tomelty.

Topics for Discussion

1. At the beginning, Joseph is a new friend for Nick. How does he compare to Livingstone and Parker?

2. The dark, unsettled Marsh troubles Nick throughout the novel (Chapters 1 and 2, for example). How is the Marsh described in the novel? How do these descriptions work to support themes?

3. What sort of character is Ruth?

Why does Ruth agree to let Nick play her game with Joseph?

4. Why is Nick disappointed when he finds out the character of Zephaniah (Chapter 6)?

5. How does Terry's note persuade Nick to get information about the Fishers for The Company (Chapter 6)?

What does this reveal about how grown-up Nick is at this point?

6. Nick plays a game with little Thomas to obtain secret information for The Company (Chapter 8). How does Nick justify doing this? Do you agree with Nick?

7. Why is Nick right to choose slingshots and trust the Nightwalker, according to the rules of Jezebel's game (Chapter 9)? What significance do these choices have for Nick's relationship with Joseph?

8. Donna says, "I can't stand boredom. You know where you are when you're in danger, because it's real.

And when you're going out to face it with your friends—" (Chapter 11). Bill agrees: "That's when you get really close to people." Why does Nick become envious? Does what Bill and Donna say make sense?

9. A conversation about the Nightwalker leads Nick to question Joseph about right and wrong, and Joseph draws a map (Chapter 12). How does the image of a map work to convey theme in the novel?

10. When little Thomas lies about the shop keys, what does Mr. Fisher do and why does he want Nick to leave (Chapter 13)? When Joseph explains Mr. Fisher's reasoning afterward, Nick becomes upset (Chapter 14)? Do you agree with Nick, or with Joseph and Mr. Fisher?

11. The Fishers refuse to do anything to get rid of their dangerously A Map of Nowhere flawed property, and Nick claims at one point that they are responsible for their own hardship and "too holy to live" (Chapter 15). Is Nick right?

12. Why does Nick show Livingstone's dirty pictures to Joseph after the shop fire (Chapter 18)? Since Nick has disagreed with Joseph all along on the question of right and wrong, why does Nick feel let down now?

13. How does Joseph explain his moral lapse of throwing matches at the kerosene (Chapters 21, 22)? Why does he decide to confess?

14. Who really is responsible for the shop fire?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explore the rules of role-playing fantasy games. Compare the rules Nick recalls from playing with Benson to those invented by Joseph and Ruth.

What are the differences? How do these relate to the novel's message?

2. Cross presents two views of the family in A Map of Nowhere. Compare the Miller and Fisher households, paying particular attention to parentchild relationships in each. How do the attitudes and lifestyles of parents influence young adult behavior, according to Cross? In your answer, be sure to include comments about the discussion between Terry, Nick, and members of The Company on the subject of parents (Chapter 11).

3. Joseph talks often to Nick about his family's understanding of right and wrong (Chapters 12 and 22, for example). As Nick thinks about what he should do after the police arrest the gang, he also recalls Terry's rule for The Company: "We're all in this together." Explain how the different arguments of Joseph, Ruth, and The Company contribute to Nick's decision to go to the police station (Chapter 22). What does Nick finally realize about himself, Joseph and Ruth, Terry and members of The Company?

4. Symbolism plays a strong role in A Map of Nowhere. How do the Marsh landscape, torchlight and other kinds of light, Joseph's map, and Nick's Star Warrior work to support the novel's themes?

5. Read On the Edge, an award-winning novel by Cross, and compare it to A Map of Nowhere. What moral choices do characters face in each novel? How do they make their decisions? What parts do families play?

For Further Reference

Cross, Gillian [Autobiographical sketch]. In Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989: 66-67. Cross tells of growing up in a bookish household, her childhood efforts to create "fast fiction," and her adult grasp on elements of a story. "I realized—at last—that 'structure' and 'imagery' and 'characterization' were simply necessary tools in the struggle to tell that story properly."

. "Twenty Things I Don't Believe About Children's Books."

School Librarian 39 (May 1991): 44-46.

Cross provides an important statement of her approach to children's fiction. Among her many points she distinguishes between adult and children's fiction and comments on vocabulary, social effects of literature, violence, and the handling of realism. Cross indicates that the reader she keeps in mind when writing is "the practical, unliterary one who doesn't usually read, but who might—just might—pick up one of my books."

4788 A Map of Nowhere "Gillian (Clare) Cross." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series, volume 38. Edited by James G. Lesniak and Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993: 107-109. Cross speaks for herself in this interview entry, which includes a brief biography and list of her publications. She discusses the "great divide" she always felt between "official" writing for school classes and the "private" writing she liked to do. "What really made me into a writer was finishing my doctoral thesis." Cross comments as well on her reasons to write young people's fiction.

"Gillian (Clare, nee Arnold) Cross." In Twentieth-Century Children's Writers.

Third edition. Edited by Tracy Chevalier. Chicago: St. James, 1989: 247-248. The entry includes biographical details, list of publications, and a critical overview of major novels by Cross.

MacRae, Cathi. "Young Adult Perplex." Wilson Library Bulletin 64 (March 1990): 106-107 [especially], 134. A Map of Nowhere is reviewed second among three related young adult books. MacRae provides an excellent plot summary with brief, perceptive commentary about theme and technique. According to MacRae, Cross constructs "a maze of games, with each character playing on different levels."

Telgen, Diane. "Gillian (Clare) Cross."

In Something About the Author. Volume 71. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993: 53-55. Biographical details, lists of publications, honors and awards are provided with a brief summary of critical commentary.

"Reviewers have noted that Cross's willingness to deal with the harsh, even malevolent, side of life in her fiction accounts for much of her success."

Related Titles

Cross typically writes about disturbing situations. On the Edge is a thriller that involves moral choices, family relations, and identity. A teenager named Tug must struggle for his identity when he is captured by terrorists who make him treat them as his parents. A girl named Jinny chooses to become involved when she suspects what may be going on.

New World is a suspenseful novel constructed around the idea of playing a game. Two teenagers named Miriam and Stuart are selected to test a virtual-reality game before it is placed on the market. Along with a third teenager who enters the game, they discover that they are really being manipulated. The game's creators secretly intend to test the players' fears.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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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