A Memory of Dragons Short Guide

A Memory of Dragons by Annabel Johnson and Edgar Johnson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

A Memory of Dragons tells an exciting story of spying, danger, and rescue in the high country of Colorado. It shows how a few twists of fate could turn present-day issues like the environment into a worldwide crisis. It also follows a young man who must deal with this crisis while fighting his own battles to regain his memories and to learn whom he can trust. The novel mixes action and futuristic speculation into an exciting tale where the suspense never lets up.

About the Author

Annabel and Edgar Johnson have written many books together for young adults. They spent twelve years traveling the American West in a small camp-trailer, where they identified ideas and material for books in the back roads and deserted towns of the Rockies. At first their books featured people and events from lost history, but in later years they began to set books in contemporary times or, like A Memory of Dragons, in a near-future setting which allowed them to treat contemporary subjects along with concerns about inner knowledge and selfworth.

Edgar Johnson was born in a Montana mining town. As a young man he tried many different occupations, including railroad hand, baseball player, and musician. In the 1940s he went to New York City to study art. He presented some exhibits there of ceramics, woodcarving, and jewelry. In New York he met Annabel, who had grown up in St. Louis. She also had come to the city with hopes of starting a different career, writing. In the meantime, she worked for publishers and in a variety of other office jobs. Drawn together by their interest in the Old West, they married and set out on the travels which were to lead to a long, shared career in writing for young people. Edgar Johnson died in 1990. Annabel Johnson continues to live in Denver, the setting for this novel.

Setting

A Memory of Dragons takes place in Colorado. The exact year is unspecified, but it is presumably a time in the middle to late 1990s. Paul, the novel's hero, works as a technician at MARJOMAC, a huge defense-industry complex twenty miles south of Denver. Hightech weaponry and space probes are not the only things MARJOMAC produces. Hidden within its labs and offices a shadowy game is being played which puts the whole nation's future in jeopardy.

Both sides try to recruit Paul. As they draw him willy-nilly into their web of intrigue, the young man's inner horizons expand. The setting also expands. In his search for information Paul travels into the rugged mountains on a desperate rescue mission. And he "travels" in time as well, visiting his childhood and the life of a Civil Warera ancestor, as he seeks help for his memory gaps.

Much of the social background is familiar. Paul likes Burger King Whoppers and Pepsi, and he upstages an obnoxious paramilitary type with a quick win at billiards. His cloak-anddagger stumbling takes him to such Colorado landmarks as the Cinderella City shopping mall and the Red Rocks amphitheater. But in other ways his world is subtly but definitely different from the "real" world we live in today.

Gas and heavy metals are in short supply. Consequently Paul rides an old bike he calls the Bucket of Bolts, instead of owning a car. The Army Corps of Engineers is carving up the Rocky Mountains in a search for ores. And economic dislocations have built suspicion between the eastern and western parts of the U.S., a mood that certain groups are ready to exploit by any means up to and including international or civil war.

By using these "facts" as central to the plot, the authors create a story and setting which has already been overtaken by events. This is a risk run by science fiction writers when they write any near-future story, of course. If the ideas and imagery and other literary values are powerful enough, it may not matter that the "predictions" are incorrect. One thinks of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), for example, and perhaps such books as Norman Spinrad's Russian Spring (1991) and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1986). However, some young readers may have trouble suspending their disbelief when other features of the setting are so familiar. It might help to remind them that this story takes place in "alternate history" or an "alternate universe," just as certain Star Trek episodes do.

Social Sensitivity

Paul finds the key to his lost memory late in the novel. In a flashback, he remembers that he did indeed kill his father during a desperate fight. The fight started when Paul happened upon his father while the father was sexually abusing Paul's sister. Paul himself had often been severely beaten by this seemingly mild-mannered man, but seeing his sister's pain was more than he could stand.

Teachers should be aware of this story strand before assigning the book.

However, it is handled with great sensitivity and indirection. In fact some young readers may read right through the passage without realizing what was going on. Paul's killing of his father is another possibly touchy issue. Given the circumstances, most people would feel him completely innocent or at least justified, but Paul's own conscience has not let him off so easily. Similar events are often covered in tabloid journalism, and are reported in local newscasts. A novel like The Memory of Dragons can deepen readers' understanding by showing the suffering that may be hidden behind the headlines.

Besides these tragic events, the book contains some other problematic points. For instance, a threatened secession by the Western states is central to the plot. The authors stack the deck somewhat on this issue by having the secessionists use terrorism to further their aims. In a real-life situation so grave, both sides would be likely to use force and covert operations.

Thoughtful readers may ponder whether breaking up a nation is ever justified, whether and how it can be accomplished peacefully, and if the answers to these questions might be different for the United States than for some other countries. (The mid-1990s offer several examples for discussion, from the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia to the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia.) Among the Western states' complaints is the destruction of their environment for short-term energy and industrial needs. Although the book does not explore it very far, the image of strip-mining the mighty Rockies may well provoke strong reactions.

Paul's discovery that Zeno formerly worked for the PLO is a turning point in sorting out which side he will take.

At the time the book was written, "PLO" (Palestinian Liberation Organization) probably translated as "terrorist" to most Americans. In the years since, the PLO has gained credence and respectability. This plot point offers a chance to discuss how we distinguish acceptable political protest from terrorism. Also, teachers should take care that the passage does not convey a negative view of Palestinians or Arabs per se.

Finally, the near-absence of Paul's sister Carole in the narrative raises some disturbing questions, even though the book is Paul's story, not hers. Apparently she went to live with another family during their teen-age years, and the two lost touch with each other. A few years later, Paul heard that she had killed herself. One wonders if things would

have turned out differently if brother and sister could have stayed in contact, and her fate may inadvertently convey a grim message to young victims of sexual abuse, who need reassurance that they can survive and lead happy, normal lives.

Literary Qualities

A Memory of Dragons is narrated by Paul Killian in the form of a diary stored in his computer files. As Paul is a skilled technician who works constantly with computers, he finds it natural to record his extraordinary experiences this way. In a short preface he issues a sort of challenge to the opposing faction: Here is the information you wanted. It has been here all along; you just did not know where to look. It is the type of trick a bright computer jockey delights in pulling off, so from the opening paragraph on the reader knows something about his character.

His diary, moreover, is far from a mere record. Paul uses slang, summarizing bothersome characters in a few quick words, such as "the pudge " and "a sergeant at arms with pale, foxy eyes." He recounts conversations and exciting action so vividly that in the midst of them, the reader has no impression of a retelling, but rather feels that he or she is right there with Paul, taking part in events. Historical facts and actual, specific places and agencies are also referred to, giving the story another level of realism. All these effects are doubly needed, since the real political world has gone in a different direction from that portrayed in the story. In sum, the authors are very successful in telling an exciting story and evoking the "suspension of disbelief" necessary for its enjoyment.

The book resembles many traditional coming-of-age novels in having a young protagonist, living for the most part in an adult world, but still naive enough to be disappointed or baffled by its complexities. Paul Killian is more successful than most such characters in coping with a complex world.

While many young men—or more rarely, young women—merely hover on the fringes of events, Paul's actions take him into the very center of a nationwide plot. His place in the story—"for a few moments the future of the world rests in Paul Killian's hands" as the jacket blurb says—marks him as a hero in the mode of another well-established form, the science fiction action adventure novel.

In accordance with that structure, the final fourth of the book combines action, danger, romance, and spectacular physical phenomena (in this case a sudden wall of wind followed by a ride through the rapids of a flooding canyon). Having proven his bravery and prowess, Paul becomes free to explore his gentler side. He realizes he loves Thea; he protects obnoxious little Lloyd from his own stupidity; and he comes to terms with the violence he feels is another, unwelcome part of his genetic heritage.

The dragons of the title have no direct presence in the story. The title phrase refers to an idea of Thea's. Since cultures all over the world have folk tales and traditions about battles with dragons, she explains, perhaps they reflect a racial memory of a time when dragons and humans actually coexisted. Paul does not really believe her theory, but he admires the enthusiasm and divergent thinking that makes her want to pursue it. It also functions as a metaphor for the dangerous memories that haunt Paul's own subconscious.

Finally, it combines with his belief in his heritage of violence, and his role in experiencing Simon's memories, to suggest that memories can be inherited.

Thea's idea about the dragons is possibly derived from Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Another literary use of genetically-inherited memories can be found among the Neanderthals in Jean Auel's The Clan of the Cave Bear (1980).

Themes and Characters

Who and what can be trusted is a central theme in A Memory of Dragons.

From the opening scene of the book, men and groups with hidden agendas seek out Paul Killian, a young electronics genius. Their respectable masks are plausible enough to fool corporate officials. Paul, made wary by traumatic childhood events but basically a goodhearted young man, is batted back and forth by the various "cover stories" he hears. When both sides in a national political plot want his help as an inside agent, he truly does not know where his loyalties lie.

Paul does not fall for either story immediately. He tries to sort out the facts while he accumulates information.

His quest for information and truth is counterpointed by his emotions as he stumbles into his first serious relationship with a girl. He finally realizes that what is going on is not only an environmental movement and a secessionist effort by the Western states, but also terrorism to force the issue.

Closely related to the theme of trust is the question of memory. Paul has lost the memory of a crucial few minutes in his past—crucial because, when he came to, his father was dead. Paul was evaluated at a mental hospital, and then spent his high school years with foster parents, so that his childhood seems disconnected with his later life.

Now it seems that these lost memories may be a key to other things that are happening in his life as well. Was he offered his job straight out of high school not just as a stroke of luck or because he was brilliant, but because whatever happened then makes him vulnerable to blackmail? Does his lost memory explain why he is a loner? If he cannot trust himself or his own memories, how can he trust other people?

He desperately wants to recover his memory of those few minutes. This quest takes him to the office of Justin Tyrone, a young doctor who is experimenting with a memory-recovery drug.

Justin has memories of his own that have haunted his life. Growing up in Northern Ireland, surrounded by civil strife, he saw his brother blown to bits by a bomb. He reluctantly agrees to supervise Paul in a few trials of the drug. But as events unfold, their meetings are not confined to doctor-patient sessions. Justin too has "inside" political allegiances, which Paul distrusts at the same time as he needs the doctor's help and goodwill. And, as a quid pro quo of these connections, Paul and Justin end up double-dating the two daughters of General Sanderson, MARJOMAC's CEO. Almost imperceptibly, this leads to real friendship between them, an almost brotherly relationship made the stronger for the losses each of them has suffered in their real families.

The subtle thread of brothers-by-bond leads to the third major theme of the book: the horrors of war, and especially of civil war—for the anti-amnesia drug Justin gives Paul does not work as they expected. Instead, Paul starts having peculiar flashbacks. He finds himself in the body and mind of a Civil War soldier from New Jersey, Simon Appling, suffering through forced marches and skirmishes and the loss of comrades in the Peninsula campaign of 1861. Paul cannot tell if he is merely having vivid dreams, if he is time-traveling, or if he is receiving memories transmitted through time and space.

In many ways Simon is the least-distinct of the book's large cast of charac ters. His reactions resemble Paul's, and his scenes serve mainly to emphasize the horrors of civil war. His mirror-image personality makes more sense when they finally figure out that Simon is Paul's great-great-grandfather. And his presence in the story ties together the ideas of memory and civil war, as well as muted thematic elements of family continuity and of the possibility of genetically-transmitted memories.

The themes of trust, of memory, and of family continuity come together to say some interesting things about selfknowledge and self-acceptance. The lines of connection are tentative and provocative. Rather than counting selfknowledge as a separate theme, it might more accurately be described as an additional, subtle motif with special appeal to many teen-agers.

The book includes other memorable characters: Zeno, Paul's red-haired, laid-back boss with a hidden past; Willy Pomeroy, the unctuous but bumbling personnel man; Leslie Sanderman, the general's privileged daughter who is all silk and graciousness; her sister Thea who would rather dig up dinosaur bones than join the social swirl. All these characters are welldrawn, and they help complicate the intricate plot, but they do not contribute major thematic strands on their own.

Topics for Discussion

1. At first Paul agrees to be an undercover agent for both sides. Is this because he sees no graceful or safe way to refuse? Because he does not believe he will learn any secret information to report? Or for some other reason?

2. Real-world events have gone in a different direction than this book predicts for the 1990s. Does this make any difference to your enjoyment of the book? Why or why not?

3. Paul's lost memories come back as he is fighting to escape from the terrorists. Is this coincidence, or does something in the situation trigger his flashback? If the latter, what do you think it is?

4. Bratty little Lloyd Pomeroy irritates Paul every time he sees him. Paul even worries that the boy may drive him to violence. Yet when the two of them are being stalked in the flooded canyon, Paul keeps Lloyd out of harm's way. Why? What does that tell you about him?

5. Did the dreams where Paul relived his ancestor Simon Appling's Civil War struggles have any influence on Paul's decisions? Give reasons for your answer.

6. Once he is drawn into political intrigue, Paul has trouble trusting either side. At the same time there are people in both camps whom he likes and wants to trust. Is this a natural way to feel? Could Paul have done anything to keep things from coming to a crisis where he has to choose?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read another science fiction novel with an imagined near-future setting, such as Wolf and Iron by Gordon Dickson (1990). Compare its "world" with that of A Memory of Dragons. Show how each book's author(s) make you believe in the setting and events even if they are not factually accurate. (If these are not believable, try to explain why not.)

2. The secession movement fails in this story. The one time it was tried in American history, it ultimately failed too, albeit after a long and bloody Civil War. Suggest some reasons the United States has stayed together, while many other countries have broken up. Use research to back up your reasons.

3. Thea Sanderson believes that dragon legends reflect memories of a time when dinosaurs and people coexisted.

Can you think of another convincing theory to explain the near-universality of dragon stories? What about ghost stories, and tales of "little people," which are also found in many cultures?

Write a paper about the ways these entities are shown in folk tales around the world, and suggest explanations for them.

4. In the novel, the army is mining the Rockies for bauxite, cobalt, chromium, and tungsten ores. Give specific uses of these minerals, and explain why they are so important for industry and defense.

5. Suppose that you are Paul's attorney. What would you say in his defense if he is tried for murdering his father? Suppose you are his psychologist while he is still in high school.

What would you say he has going for him in his efforts to live a productive and normal life in the future?

For Further Reference

Blakely, Sherry. Review. Voice of Youth Advocates 10,1 (April 1987): 31. An appreciative review which sorts out most of the plot strands without revealing the surprises that unfold at the end of the book.

"Johnson, Annabel" and "Johnson, Edgar." In Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series. Vol. 33. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991: 253-256. The only recent widely-available article about this pair of authors. Contains brief biographies, along with a long list of the books they have written, awards won, and further sources of information. There is some discussion of the present novel in a summary of the Johnson's place among authors of young adult books.

Review. The English Journal 76,3 (March 1987): 105. A short review which emphasizes the role of the past in enabling Paul to deal with the present and future.

Related Titles

The Johnsons' novel Finders Keepers (1981) also has a near-future setting and a plot premise about energy supplies. In it, two teen-agers try to survive the blowup of a nuclear power plant. Most of the authors' books use a Western locale as integral to the rest of the story, as in the present book. A notable recent example is Cobblehill (1990), a mystery in a Navajo setting.

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