Melusine: A Mystery Short Guide

Melusine: A Mystery by Lynne Reid Banks

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Overview

Melusine is, as its subtitle suggests, a "mystery," and each of its short chapters raises questions that keep the reader wondering what will happen next or how a bizarre occurrence will be explained. Melusine is also a bit of a fantasy in that a number of unlikely events occur. Despite this, Banks deals with several serious subjects in her book.

Essentially, Melusine is the story of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old English boy's two-week-long vacation at a mysterious decaying chateau about an hour's drive inland from the city of La Rochelle on southwestern France's Atlantic coast. Visiting with his father, mother, and twin younger sisters, the boy, Roger, becomes increasingly curious about Melusine, the strange and sometimes secretive daughter of the estate's impoverished owner, Monsieur Serpe. As he and Melusine become friends, Roger finds more and more to be curious about. Why is she so afraid of her father? What has happened to her older sister? What takes place in the various chateau rooms whose doors remain locked? What is hidden in the building's ancient but inaccessible tower? What explanation lies behind Melusine's cold skin, snakelike eyes, and uncanny physical abilities (at one point, she dives into a canal to save one of Roger's sisters from drowning—without getting her clothes wet!)?

As Roger becomes increasingly involved in Melusine's life, he becomes increasingly involved in the various moral questions surrounding that life —most especially questions about her unsettling relationship with her gruff, ogre-like father.

About the Author

L ynne Reid Banks, an English writer, was born in 1929, the daughter of a Scottish doctor and an Irish actress. Her richly varied life has included a stay in Canada during World War II, studies at the Queen's Secretarial College in London as well as at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, several years working as an actress, three years as a television news reporter and scriptwriter, nine years living (and working as a high school English teacher) on a Kibbutz in Israel with her husband, sculptor Chaim Stephenson (they have three sons), and (back in London) a continuing career as a writer of adult and children's books.

Lynn Reid Banks has written more than thirty plays and books—fiction and nonfiction—for young and old. In America, her best-known work is probably The Indian in the Cupboard (1982), written for children. Like Melusine, The Indian in the Cupboard and its sequels, Return of the Indian (1986), and The Secret of the Indian (1989) combine fantasy and serious social and psychological issues. Banks has also written an award-winning study of the Brontes, whose childhood love for half-realistic, half-fantastical worlds is like Banks's own.

Although she enjoys writing (despite the fact that it is often "the hardest, loneliest work in the world"), Lynn Reid Banks also appreciates the rich life she has lived and has worked much of it into her novels. "Nothing one ever experiences or feels is wasted," she has written. "Even the bad things, the negative emotions, that most people try to push away and forget: anger, bitterness, humiliation, failure, shock, grief . . . one day you may need [each such emotion]. Not to write it down just as it happened to you . . . , but to transmute it into the stuff of fiction, to feed it into your characters so that what moved you can move them, and in the end, move the readers."

A self-described "practicing atheist," Banks says that she believes not in God, but in "the potential of human beings." Her writings are filled with strong moral purpose, and a book like Melusine is clearly directed at making its readers more keenly aware of their human potential—especially for greater sensitivity regarding the delicate and frequently hurt-filled world around them.

Setting

Nothing fits a spooky mystery better than a decaying old estate filled with dark, secret passages, strange sounds, uncanny occurrences, unopened rooms, unanswered questions, and a ghoulish, threatening monster. The Serpe chateau is all these things, with its owner, the ominous Monsieur Serpe, playing the part of the monster. Once the grand eighteenth-century home of French aristocrats, the chateau and its owners, the Serpe family, have fallen on hard times. The building itself is close to ruin, and the family that owns it has grown so poor that they are reduced to renting out its few decent rooms to summer vacationers like Roger's family.

It is from these decent rooms that Roger explores the rest of the chateau, sometimes accompanied by Melusine, whom he first encounters milking goats in a pen near the chateau. His explorations lead him to the filthy, fly-infested kitchen Monsieur Serpe seems to make his headquarters, to Melusine's threadbare room (just above his own), to the once-grand ballroom and its accompanying chambers, to a secret underground passage (probably built by the chateau's original owners so that they could escape the aristocrat hunters of the French Revolution), to the chateau's blocked-off central tower and its terrible secret.

The story is set in France, but Banks dwells very little on French customs or culture. Rather, she uses France as a place that is different and foreign, which makes Melusine (she and Roger only half understand one another's languages) and her father exotic, strange, and mysterious.

Social Sensitivity

On the other hand, anyone seriously on the lookout for controversial issues in Melusine should have no trouble finding them. Most obviously, the novel deals with sexual abuse, which, although never overtly described, clearly lies at the heart of the relationship between Melusine and her father.

Banks does attempt to put the whole problem of sexual abuse in some sort of perspective—largely through Roger's and his mother's intuitive sympathy for the abused Melusine and through the school psychologist's explanations toward the novel's end. Even the abuser, Monsieur Serpe, is looked on with a certain amount of pity in the final chapters.

In addition, those concerned with a work's taking a skeptical attitude toward the existence of a beneficent God might possibly object to the novel's Melusine:A Mystery underlying questioning of a God whose world is often filled with unpleasantness and suffering—especially as presented in the Chapter 16 discussion between Roger and his father. Those worried about mysticism and satanism might argue that Melusine's snake-inthe-Garden-of-Eden imagery and its heroine's magical transformations border on the unacceptable, although they would really have to go some distance to make a strong case.

Finally, the more literal-minded reader might object to some of the novel's rare instances of stronger language, although such language is commonplace enough among youngsters of Roger's and Melusine's age.

Despite such objections, however, one has to concede Melusine's ability to tackle and raise some important issues in an engaging and suspense-filled way. Were Banks more careful about being "politically correct," she might not be able to provoke her readers into thinking about some of the more serious and troubling issues of our day.

Literary Qualities

Banks writes in a clear, blunt style with little adornment. Her chapters are relatively short (eight to ten pages) and somewhat episodic and self-contained.

Nearly each has its mini-adventure, revelation, climax and new question to be answered. The abrupt, self-contained nature of Banks's chapters sometimes makes even the "realistic" portions of her story seem a trifle artificial. For example, the first chapter, which is filled with enough unsettling events to keep anyone awake, ends with Roger's entering what is clearly a "haunted" little room and calmly falling asleep to await the next day's adventures. Similarly, when, after Roger's family has decided to adopt Melusine and take her back to England with them, she suddenly disappears, the characters—especially Roger's parents—seem surprisingly unperturbed and, after only the most cursory kind of search, travel along to England without her. Thus, Banks's somewhat disconnected and episodic treatment of her material makes her story less believable than it might be.

As one might expect in a novel tracing the interaction of French speakers and English speakers, Melusine contains a number of French phrases, most of them spoken in pretty elementary classroom French, the sort that would make the novel additionally enjoyable for a first-year French student. Although Banks does not literally translate each phrase, the surrounding description and conversation make what is being said sufficiently clear so that the novel should pose no problem to the non-French-speaking reader.

Occasionally, when things grow particularly tense, Banks has Roger and his sisters revert to a kind of childhood language they refer to as "Woddy" (e.g.: "Dere wodden noddin in dere, Wodder. Wodder had a dwawful dwoom" translates as "There wasn't anything in there, Roger. Roger had an awful dream.") This language, the kind of baby talk parents sometimes revert to when they want to calm their children and recall the security of earlier years, is relatively rare and could be said to add to our sense of the relationship between Roger and the rest of his family.

Finally, Melusine contains a few English references and expressions that might briefly confuse an American reader: "chat up," for "make up to," "torch" for "flashlight," "there's sweet Fanny Adams I can do about it" for "there's not a whole lot I can do about it," and the like. However, these phrases are few and far between and should cause the American reader few serious problems.

Themes and Characters

Like many writers of mysteries, Banks seems far more interested in her suspenseful plot and some of the moral and philosophical issues it raises than she is in developing truly rich characters. Although some of the characters suffer from internal conflicts (Roger, Melusine, Monsieur Serpe), Banks does not really draw the reader inside these characters so he or she is tempted to say, "Yes, I recognize that problem; I've been in that situation too." Her characters make decisions, take steps, encounter obstacles, but they do not really grow in ways that make us sympathize with them as humans—as people like us. Roger's mother, his two sisters, the psychologist Roger talks to at his school back home in England, even Roger's father are really quite flat as characters go. They provide bits of information, help move the plot along, and accompany Roger when he needs accompanying.

Even Roger himself is little more than the eyes through which we watch the mystery develop and follow events to their conclusion. He does things, he sees things, and he learns things, but he is really no different at the novel's end than he is at its beginning. He has had experiences, but he has not really grown. We do not ask ourselves what sort of man he will become; we have simply watched a spooky story through his eyes.

As characters, Melusine and her father, Monsieur Serpe, are potentially more interesting than any members of Roger's family. However, Melusine's supernatural qualities keep her from being fully human and thus distance her from the reader. Similarly, Monsieur Serpe, perhaps the book's most interesting character, is dehumanized both by Banks's portrayal of him as unremittingly odious and by the fact that he turns out to be mentally deranged and thus, like his daughter, not really the sort of human with whom a reader is likely to sympathize.

Banks does touch on a number of interesting thematic concerns, although often quite briefly. If Melusine has a single overriding theme, it is that we should not be too quick to judge our society's misfits, although Banks's reluctance to get inside her characters' minds seems to suggest that such misfits are more to be pitied than to be understood or sympathized with.

Banks is also interested in evil—both as an archetypal pattern and as something responded to by Christianity, a religion she, like Roger's father, a nonbelieving skeptic, seems to distrust.

Monsieur Serpe's name clearly suggests serpent, and this reminds one of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (the chateau and its grounds can be seen as a kind of decayed Eden). At the same time, the Serpe family's roots, as well as the name Melusine (the name of a cursed, but not necessarily evil mythological creature who is half woman, half snake) go back to the dim medieval past. If the serpent of the Christian story is evil, must the serpent of French folklore also be so? If the Satan-serpent of Eden were to have a child and treat that child cruelly, should we revile that child because of its heritage? "Can something," as Roger at one point asks, be at once the embodiment or

"incarnation of evil and at the same time the instrument of God?" And further: What sort of God is it that makes so many people suffer to achieve some ultimate good that most of us will never understand? Roger's father says it is "human suffering" that keeps him from being a believer.

Although she goes no further than to raise such questions, they obviously play upon Banks's mind. Finally, Banks is intrigued by the archetypal pattern of the completed circle, the yin-andyang-like pattern reflected in the picture of a snake biting its own tail (such a pattern is worked into an inlaid table that figures prominently in Melusine).

We must go back to our beginnings if we are to understand ourselves fully and become what we were meant to be.

Thus, although she has a chance to escape the chateau of her heritage, Melusine chooses to stay there, and we last see her opening the doors to the chateau's ballroom —so as to let light flood in upon the once dark world of her grim past. Once again, however, Banks shows us this pattern from outside Melusine's character. We do not move into her mind and watch her grow toward the conclusion Banks shows her arriving at. Thus it is hard to really sympathize with Melusine in a way that makes her growth relevant to our own.

Topics for Discussion

1. In the best-known version of the Melusine story, out of the French Middle Ages, Melusine is the daughter of a fairy and the King of Albania. Because she shuts her father up in a mountain, she is condemned to spend every Saturday changed to a serpent from the waist down. When she marries Raymond of Poitiers, he promises never to look at her on Saturday, but eventually he breaks his promise, with the result that Melusine disappears. She is not seen again, but sometimes her wailing and lamenting can be heard within her castle—often as a harbinger of death or other evil coming to her descendants or to those who hear her cries. How has Banks used this story? In what ways is Banks's Melusine like and unlike the Melusine of the old legend?

2. What are some of the social issues Melusine raises? How does Banks feel they should be dealt with?

3. In Chapter 17, Roger and his family play a game called "Scruples," in which players have to answer difficult moral questions. What are some of the "difficult moral questions" characters in the novel have to answer?

4. In Chapter 12, Roger's father criticizes him for attacking his sisters when they seem to make fun of a newspaper picture of a badly disfigured boy. Who is more nearly right in this argument—Roger or his father? Where in our world do we see people "ready to hurt" others they look upon as strange or different? What are some of our society's more subtle ways of "hurting" people who are "different"?

5. Nearly every chapter in this book has its climactic moment. Name some.

Assuming that Chapter 20 represents the novel's central climax, what would be its other most important three or four climactic moments?

6. Break Melusine up into its four or five major sections.

7. Select a "most important sentences" or "most important paragraphs" list from central chapters of Melusine.

8. Frequently Melusine and, at the end of the book, her father, are looked upon with pity. Is pity a healthy way to deal with the disadvantaged? Is being pitied good for the person pitied?

9. Would it be possible to tell the story of Melusine from either Melusine's or Monsieur Serpe's point of view—especially in such a way that we sympathize with the teller?

10. Unlike many horror films, Melusine goes on for six chapters after the climactic Chapter 20. Why does Banks feel these final chapters are necessary?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Study the area of France (near Niort) in which Melusine is set. Find pictures of the countryside and accounts of local history.

2. Study old French chateaus; find pictures and learn the history of an important chateau or two. Are there any like the one in Melusine?

3. Write your own modern retelling of an old legend—preferably one involving the transformation of a human into animal shape.

4. Write a different ending to Melusine, starting from any point in the novel you choose.

5. Make a study of medieval legends like the Melusine legend.

6. There is considerable material available about Banks's life and attitudes. In the Sixth Bookof Junior Authors and Illustrators Banks writes of "transmuting" one's own experiences "into the stuff of fiction." Once you know more about her life, consider how she "transmuted" pieces of her life and the attitudes it taught her into Melusine.

7. If you do not speak French yourself, find a French speaker (or use a French dictionary) to translate the many French phrases in the novel into English. Does a literal understanding of these phrases change your sense of what goes on between Roger and Melusine to any extent? Try translating "Woddy" into understandable English as well.

For Further Reference

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Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. "Lynne Reid Banks." Sixth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989: 22-23. Gives an overview of her writing life.

Brief reviews of Mesuline: A Mystery have appeared in: Horn Book (September-October, 1989): 626.

Kirkus Review (July 15,1988): 1071-1072.

The New York Times Book Review (December 17, 1989): 29.

Publishers Weekly (July 14, 1989): 79.

Times Educational Supplement (November 4, 1988): 26.

Related Titles

Like Banks's The Indian in the Cupboard, Melusine belongs to the class of books generally referred to as "modern fantasy," of which there are numerous examples, including C. S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch, and The Wardrobe (1950).

More particularly, Melusine belongs to that category of stories (many of them myths and folk tales) that have to do with "transformations"—the changing of people into monsters or animals and vice versa. A few of the best known such stories are Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the familiar "Beauty and the Beast" (of which several films have been made), and the Grimm Brothers's "Rose Red and The Seven Swans." John Keats wrote a famous poem, "Lamia," about a young woman who is half serpent, and, although Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is not exactly a "transformation" story, it does depict a "monster" who, like Melusine and her father, must suffer from the prejudices of an unsympathetic world. In his A Dictionary of Symbols (second edition), J. E. Cirlot refers to the Melusine-figure as an instance of the "French viper-fairy" (pp. 297-298) and suggests its similarity to the "sirens" who threaten Odysseus in The Odyssey and to other mythical creatures. Finally, one of the more ghoulish "transformation" stories of modern times can be found in Alfred Hitchcock's 1961 film, Psycho which, like Melusine, requires an after-the-climax psychologist to explain its various bizarre occurrences.

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