

Memory Short Guide

Memory by Margaret Mahy

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Memory Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Overview..... | 3 |
| About the Author..... | 4 |
| Setting..... | 6 |
| Social Sensitivity..... | 7 |
| Literary Qualities..... | 9 |
| Themes and Characters..... | 11 |
| Topics for Discussion..... | 12 |
| Ideas for Reports and Papers..... | 14 |
| For Further Reference..... | 15 |
| Related Titles..... | 16 |
| Copyright Information..... | 17 |



Overview

Memory is a coming-of-age story set in contemporary New Zealand. At its heart are the questions: What is reality? What is memory? How do we integrate the two in our lives? The main characters, nineteen-year-old Jonny Dart and ancient Sophie West, have trouble with these questions. Jonny, tormented by his sister Janine's tragic death for which he feels responsible, is unable to distinguish what he remembers from what happened on the day of the accident. Sophie, a victim of Alzheimer's Disease, has forsaken reality and lives in a world confused by her past. When we first meet Jonny, he is drunk; and when he follows Sophie home and becomes part of her dirty, cat-infested household, he appears to be opting out of a normal life. Mahy thus draws on the archetypal idea that salvation lies in the inward journey of the hero to confront evil, in Jonny's case Nev, Spike, and the truth about his sister's death. Thus Jonny seeks out the past in order to lay his memories to rest and move into healthy adulthood.

The contemporary story line is peopled with vivid characters. Jonny is a child of today with his Walkman, whose music speaks to him more clearly than his parents, and Sophie is typical of many of the street people in our cities. The story is further enhanced by direct references to current political and social problems in New Zealand dealing with the Maori and disaffected youth.

About the Author

Margaret Mahy (pronounced MARhee), New Zealand's most acclaimed writer for children, was born March 21, 1936, in the small town of Whakatane, New Zealand. The oldest of five children of a bridge builder/building contractor and a teacher, Mahy has been involved with books since childhood. She remembers that her mother read the children English classics including the works of Charles Dickens, Beatrix Potter, and A. A. Milne and her father read them Rider Haggard, Marryat, and Ballantyne.

From the age of seven she published poems and wrote stories.

Educated at the University of Auckland, Mahy received a B.A. in 1957 and a Diploma of Librarianship in 1958.

From 1958-1959 she was assistant librarian at the Petone Public Library, and she was librarian, School Library Service, Christchurch 1967-1976. After serving as children's librarian at Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch, from 1976-1980, she was writer in residence at Canterbury University, 1984, and Western Australian College of Advanced Education, 1985. Now Mahy writes full time and lives in a house she designed, overlooking Governor's Bay.

Mahy's first stories were published in the School Journal, a magazine issued by the Department of Education. Then her work was noticed by an American editor at a printing exhibition in New York, and that led to the publication in the United States by Franklin Watts, Inc. in 1969 of *A Lion in the Meadow*, a picture book based on a tale her father had made up and told to his five children. The book received the Esther Glen Medal of the New Zealand Library Association and was chosen by School Library Journal as one of the best books of 1969. Other picture books followed rapidly: *A Dragon of an Ordinary Family* (1969), *Pillycock's Shop* (1969), *The Procession* (1969), *Mrs. Discombobulous* (1969), *The Little Witch* (1970), *Sailor Jack and the Twenty Orphans* (1970), *The Princess and the Clown* (1971), *The Railway Engine and the Hairy Brigands* (1972), *17 Kings and 42 Elephants* (1972), a book of verse, and *The First Margaret Mahy Story Book: Stories and Poems* (1972). For the last book she was again awarded the Esther Glen Medal, the first author to be so honored twice.

Mahy has gone on to publish more than one hundred picture books, books of juvenile fiction, young adult novels, readers, and collections. She has also received numerous awards, among them many for her young adult novels.

She received the Carnegie Medal, British Library Association, in 1982 for *The Haunting* (which also was the winner of the 1983 Esther Glen Medal), in 1986 for *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance*, and in 1987 for *Memory*. *The Changeover* also received the Honor List citation, Horn Book, 1985; the Notable Children's Book citation, Association for Library Service to Children; Children's Book of the Year citation; and Best Books for Young Adults award, American Library Association, 1986.

The Catalogue of the Universe was awarded the Honor List citation, Horn Book, 1987. The Tricksters received the Best Books of 1987 citation, American Library Association Young Adult Services Division, and Memory was honored with the same award in 1989, having previously received the Society of School Libraries International Book award and the Boston Globe/Horn Book award in 1988. Mahy was also named May Hill Arbuthnot Lecturer, Association for Library Service to Children, in 1989.



Setting

Jonny Dart's coming of age begins on the fifth anniversary of his sister's death as he attempts to find her best friend, Bonny Benedicta, the only other witness to Janine's fall from the cliff overlooking the sea at Seacliff Heights Reserve. The next sixteen chapters trace Jonny's journey back to Colville, a decaying neighborhood he had lived in with Janine. Here in a period of three days he becomes involved with Sophie West, who confuses him with her former lover; he confronts his childhood nemesis, Nev; he locates Bonny; and he begins to come to terms with the tragedy of Janine's death.

The last chapter opens on the traffic island on which Jonny had awakened from a drunken stupor six weeks earlier. Dressed the same in his striped blazer and bandit hat, Jonny, still carrying his Walkman, returns to Sophie and Bonny for a final confrontation with the unanswered question which has nagged him since Janine's death and which has led to his drinking, his unemployment, his loneliness, and his alienation from life. Once this question is answered, Jonny is freed from the past and is able to give up the demon role which had protected him from pain. In relinquishing this role, Jonny assumes a new role of responsibility which bodes well for his adult life.



Social Sensitivity

The most obvious social issue dealt with in *Memory* is the treatment of the elderly, especially those with debilitating illnesses, in this case Alzheimer's disease. When Jonny first encounters Sophie in the parking lot, she is the all-too-familiar bag lady, although she declares that she is the angel of wisdom. The details of the revolting smell of her house, the dirt that gives Sophie an olive complexion, the cheese used for soap, the incredible number of cats, Sophie's confusion about who Jonny is, all give a realistic picture of Sophie's disease. But Mahy does not flinch from presenting more unsettling manifestations of the disease such as Sophie's scurrying around on all fours, naked except for a sweater and a tea cosy on her head, or her appearance at Jonny's bedside in the middle of the night, naked and longing for her lost love, Alva.

Once Jonny contacts the authorities for help with Sophie, he is confronted with the reality of the overstressed resources available from society: a waiting list at a nursing home or a mental hospital.

Related to the problems raised by Sophie's disease are the responsibilities Jonny takes on. In *Jonny, Mahy* presents a hero who steps out of the traditional macho, male mold into the role of caretaker. Jonny's acceptance of responsibility for Sophie, whom he has just met, and Bonny's admission that she has lived beside Sophie for a year without doing one thing to help, are in sharp contrast and suggest that nurturing is not a role limited to females.

A controversial element in the novel is the supernatural imagery that Mahy uses to describe Jonny's quest for identity. For example, Mahy writes, In the beginning of his quest, swollen with apparitions, he had stalked through the city, and it had given in to him—had offered Bonny and Nev, to match up with the ghosts of memory. Exorcising these ghosts, he was set free of them at last. . . . being haunted had had a seductive glamour about it.

These references to the supernatural are reinforced by allusions to Bonny as the Pythoness and Sophie as an oracle.

Even more objectionable to some may be the use of the wolf image, which links Jonny with werewolves. At points, traditional religious allusions are also used, such as the description of Jonny's rebirth through his own death dissolved in his blood. Although some readers may object to these uses of the religious and supernatural, they give the story a mythic dimension suitable for a quest tale.

Another controversial topic in the novel is Jonny's problem with alcoholism. Adults may object to the realistic description of his drunken state at the beginning of the novel. However, those who read the entire novel will see that the description is not sensational and serves as a gauge of how far Jonny has progressed at the end of the novel.



Teen-age readers will be especially interested in the questions of sibling relationships raised in *Memory*. Foremost, is the issue of sibling rivalry which echoes the Biblical Cain and Abel story. Jonny, who has never felt he was Janine's equal, believes that his parents and others feel the wrong child died. Furthermore, at the heart of his quest for identity is the unanswered question of what role he played in Janine's death. Sibling relationships and the motives for and problems associated with adoption are also touched on by Bonny when she recounts what has happened to her sister Samantha.

Bonny's sister, who has returned to her Maori roots, taking a new name, Hinerangi Hotene, and a new identity as an activist, brings into the novel the question of Maori rights. Although only a minor theme, its introduction gives the reader a sense of social issues in New Zealand.



Literary Qualities

Margaret Mahy is not only a writer but a poet, and her prose in this novel is one of its most outstanding qualities.

Her descriptions are always succinct.

For example, she describes the drunk Jonny searching the telephone book for Bonny's name: The names darted around the page just ahead of where he was looking, like black wrigglers in a murky pond, but by narrowing his eyes and pinning the words down one at a time with his wavering finger he could hold them still long enough to read them.

But it is her poetic quality, perhaps best used in her descriptions of Janine's accident and her comments on memory, which puts her writing on a level with many of the finest writers for adults.

Another strength of the novel is that it works on several levels. Mahy draws on the archetypal idea that salvation lies in the inward journey of the hero to confront evil. Evil takes an outward form in Nev and Spike, but it is the inward evil which Jonny must confront that gives depth to the story. Mythological associations also enrich Jonny's adventures. The image of the Pythoness, the snake ring that Jonny carries on his quest and finally gives to Bonny, the use of the number three (Jonny spends three days with Sophie and attempts to leave three times), and the circular imagery that permeates the novel all add to the story. The folk image of the wolf who prowls during the full moon is also established early and used extensively throughout the novel to give a threatening edge to the story.

Mahy adds suspense with delayed storytelling and foreshadowing. We come to know just what happened to Janine through bits and pieces of Jonny's memory dispersed throughout the quest plot line. Our fears for Jonny and the final outcome of the novel are fueled by Mahy's skillful use of foreshadowing. The white van and the illusive Spike are some of the more obvious elements of foreshadowing, but there are also passages which raise our sense of foreboding such as Jonny's speech to Sophie's cat, "Right now, I don't think I'll ever get away—unless they carry me out feet first."

Yet in this serious book there are some wonderful comic turns. One is the description of the huge tap which gives Sophie's home its name, Tap House, and which serves as a clever link with Jonny's dancing.

A tone of compassion and gentle wisdom informs the story but never becomes didactic. For example, Jonny accepts his parents' disappointment with him and defends his father's behavior to him. Jonny also comes to see that even Nev's actions have been determined by memory, "the memory of Janine who had exercised power over him simply by ignoring him." Mahy's gentle wisdom is perhaps nowhere more evident than when Jonny realizes how isolating and seductive his old role as wolf/demon has been and how it has protected him from pain while at the same time removing him from life.



This is a message appropriate for teenagers and adults alike.

Themes and Characters

Even though *Memory* with its rites of passage theme has a strong plot line, perhaps its most outstanding literary quality is the portrayal of vivid characters. Jonny Dart, the troubled protagonist, is a well-developed character.

When he involuntarily breaks into dance at points in the novel, he recalls his past partnership with his sister in the television tap-dancing team advertising Chickenbits. The nervous energy that this dancing represents is an important part of Jonny's persona. It represents his dangerous side that has led to drinking and brawling, that leads to confrontations with Nev and later Spike, and that causes him to see sex with Bonny as a means of gaining control over the past. This is the dark, dangerous, self-destructive side of Jonny that he refers to as the demon or the wolf. On the other hand, as Jonny gradually assumes responsibility for Sophie, he also shows the sensitive, kind side that Bonny remembers from the past. It is this facet of Jonny's personality that is honed in his rites of passage.

Sophie, the other major character, is a finely drawn portrait of a victim of Alzheimer's Disease. At first her odor and the dirt and disorder of her home are repugnant. Her strange, layered, and mismatched outfits with a garter belt worn on top and a tea cosy for a hat are comic, but there is more to her than repulsion and comedy. There is a sweet gentility in her love of having tea, even if it is only make-believe tea and stale biscuits, and there is a dignity about her loyalty to her husband and his ideals, even though he was not her true love. Finally, she is a more complex individual than one might expect.

Even the minor characters, Nev and Bonny, are finely crafted. Nev emerges first as a shadowy figure in a white van, then as a hardened bully, and finally as another victim of the past and the decaying city in which the characters live. The magical Pythoness of Jonny's memory turns out to be only a mannequin while the real Bonny is a calmer, less dangerous antidote for Jonny's unhappiness.



Topics for Discussion

1. Early in the novel Mahy writes of Jonny, ". . . for Jonny, imaginary things, once properly imagined, could grow as powerful and lucid as if they were true. He had always been the victim of stories, not only other people's but his own as well" (Chapter 1). What are some of these stories that Jonny is a victim of?

2. The title of the novel is *Memory*, and Jonny is led by the events of the book to a new definition of memory.

What are some of the events that influence Jonny to revise his definition?

What is his new definition? Do you agree or disagree with the new definition? Why or why not?

3. Jonny and Bonny respond differently to Sophie. Jonny meets her and within three days feels responsible for her. Bonny has lived beside her for a year, dismissing her as weird. What do their reactions to Sophie reveal about them?

4. Jonny and Bonny have also reacted differently to Janine's death. What do their reactions reveal about them?

5. Jonny's Walkman seems to speak to him. Find some examples where the words of the radio echo what is going on in the story. Why is Jonny so susceptible to the words of the radio? Is he less susceptible as the story progresses? Why or why not?

6. What is at the root of the conflict between Jonny and Nev? What does Jonny finally realize about Nev? Having realized this, why is he drawn into the final confrontation with Nev and his friends?

7. At the beginning and end of the novel Sophie asks Jonny, "Are you the one?" What do you think she means by this? At the end of the book how does Jonny interpret the question?

8. When Jonny tells Bonny he has always imagined her wearing Pythoness clothes, she answers, "Eccentric clothes are too easy . . . You come to depend on them too much . . ." (Chapter 12). What does she mean?

9. On arrival, Jonny sees Sophie's house as representative of the "hidden machinery of life, . . . a crazy, stumbling contraption made up of strange things roughly fitted together" (Chapter 3). He contrasts this with the clean, orderly home he has known but chooses to stay anyway. At the end of the novel he realizes that people do not have to submit to natural anarchy.

What character traits does Jonny have that allow him to stay at Sophie's but not submit to the disintegration there?

10. Even though many of Sophie's habits are comical, she never degenerates into a comic figure. What characteristics does she have that allow her to retain some dignity?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jonny and Sophie are both victims of memory. Explain how their problems are alike and different.
2. In Chapter 1, Mahy explains in a footnote that The Treaty of Waitangi between the English government in New Zealand and the Maori people is currently being reassessed. Research this issue. What is it about? See if you can find information on the Waitangi Tribunal and the Mana Motuhake political party.
3. The Maori, the first people to settle in New Zealand, have rich cultural traditions. Find out as much as possible about these traditions.
4. Some readers might complain that there are too many references to sex, violence, and alcohol in the novel. Do you think these are included for sensational effect or are they necessary for the realism of the story? Explain.
5. Max Dainton diagnoses Sophie's symptoms as those of Alzheimer's disease. Do some research to find out more about the disease. Do you agree with Mr. Dainton's diagnosis? Why or why not?
6. Mahy received many honors for this novel. What are some of the qualities that made it a prize winner?
7. Supernatural references are used throughout the story. For example, at times Jonny appears to have become the wolf of power that Bonny predicted when they were children. If these supernatural elements were removed, would the novel suffer? If so, explain how these reference strengthen the novel.

For Further Reference

Anderson, Doug. "A Good Anger."

Times Literary Supplement, (October 30-November 5, 1987): 1205. This detailed review contrasts *Memory* with more traditional coming-of-age novels, examines its political contexts, and discusses Mahy's use of mature subject matter.

De Montreville, Doris, and Elizabeth Crawford, eds. *The Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. Includes a readable autobiographical sketch with brief biographical information.

Hutcheson, Barbara. Review. *School Library Journal* 34 (March 1988): 214.

This short review focuses on the theme of the novel.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. New York: St.

Martin's, 1983. This article has a list and analyses of Mahy's books for children, a brief comment by Mahy, and a short biography.

Leavitt, David. "Tap-Dancing on the Edge of a Cliff." *New York Times Book Review* (May 18, 1988): 24. A perceptive review which praises Mahy's characterizations, criticizes her failure to render the tragedy of Alzheimer's disease, and suggests that the ending is too optimistic.

Review. *Christian Science Monitor* (July 25, 1988): 22. A short review which compares *Memory* to others by Mahy and to other novels about Alzheimer's disease.

Review. *Horn Book* 64 (May/June 1988): 360. A brief review which consisely summarizes the plot.

Related Titles

Although *Memory* is not part of a series, readers who enjoy its theme of growing up and coming to terms with reality will probably also want to read *The Catalogue of the Universe*. This novel deals with Angela May's search for the truth about her father. As in *Memory*, there is also a romantic interest, Tycho Potter, Angela's childhood friend.

Those readers who delight in Mahy's strong characterizations and haunting prose will enjoy any of her other books for young adults.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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

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

Includes bibliographical references and index

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

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

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

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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