Mercy Short Short Guide

Mercy Short by Norma Farber

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Overview

"Brand Pluck'D Out of the Burning, Being an Account of Mercy Short, who was supposed to Suffer by Bewitchment." Norma Farber uses the words written by the Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, about an actual happening in late seventeenth-century colonial Boston to weave an engrossing historical novel. Through the medium of a journal, Farber has the seventeen-year-old Mercy Short relate what happens to her during the winter months of 1692-1693.

So that he can learn more about how to best battle the devil, Mather directs Mercy to pick up the quill and write all the details of her bewitchment. Since she respects the renowned minister and thinks of him as a beloved, elder cousin who will save her, Mercy does as he has directed and makes her first entry on December 6. Between encounters with the Demons, Mercy relives, through flashbacks, the last three years of her life. She tells of the Tawny Indian attack that resulted in the death of her parents and two siblings. Mercy was marched mercilessly through the Canadian wilderness to Quebec where she was held captive for three years.

Ransomed by the members of Mather's church, Mercy begins a new life as an indentured servant in Boston. While attending church, Mercy is overtaken by seizures that are diagnosed as demonic possession.

Under the care of her mistress, Mercy is confined to a house near North Church so that Mather could begin the process of exorcising the Fiends from her. He spends much time praying over Mercy and questioning her about all the facets of the Demons.

During the early days of her confinement, she suffers hallucinations in which she is visited by Hellish Creatures that she terms Imps, Fiends, Demons, and Dark Devils. They often take on the faces and voices of her former captors. This leads to her recalling and writing of her experiences during captivity as well as of the happy times in Salmon Falls with her family.

In the December 10 journal entry, the black slave, Negra, who becomes Mercy's only true friend, is introduced. It is to her that Mercy tells of giving birth to a Tawny Indian baby with silver-gray eyes. Although her infant son lived but a short time, she dearly loved him. In her writings, she begins to be ambivalent about the Indians, hating them for what they did, as well as liking them. The times with the Tawny children who showed her the wonders of nature and who were sweet to play with were particularly fond memories.

She comes to admire the male Indian skills with the bow and arrow and their bronze bodies which she thought were as beautiful as statues. Mercy goes into detail about the foods they ate and their customs, some of which were comforting. She longs for the smell of the smoke from the peace pipe. Mather ignores these writings as having no importance in her rescue from Bewitchment and presses her to note only those things that bear on Christian conduct.

Mercy's feelings about Mather begin to change. Although she still respects him, she is not so much in awe. She begins to question certain tenets and to argue with him more and more. One time she sees the Fiend with the face of Mather. He becomes more the antagonist as her admiration of the Indian life increases. In comparing the free Indian life with the strict Puritan mode in Boston, she realizes that the "Place is too strait for me, give room that I may dwell." She admits that she misses a life lived close to the earth and under the endless sky.

One day, she escapes from the house and goes to the wharf. Overtaken by restlessness and the desire to take a voyage, she comes to view her captivity by the Indians as a great adventure in freedom.

After Christmas, she finds that her Specters have finally left. Mather is proud that he has helped her. As the year ends, she begins to resume her life before the seizures. Mercy also takes an interest in a young man who sings in the choir.

After six weeks, the Demons return.

Once again Mather wants an accurate account of what Satan is planning so he can deal with the Devil, point by point.

Whenever Mercy deviates, he reminds her it is only the Devil that he is concerned about. Mercy is getting tired of putting down thoughts of Demons; she wants to have thoughts of hope, "golden hope." She decides to write down her true thoughts so that she can reread and reflect upon them. Mather is told that she will write no more and she keeps her journal writing a secret.

The people in Boston have changed their attitude about witchcraft and have turned against the persecutions in Salem. Innocent people may have been hung on the evidence of hysterical girls. Mercy's Fiends torment her no longer. She feels that Mather and the church members will lose interest in her, so she invents tales of harassment.

This practice does not last, for she is getting tired of being confined and of continuing this sham. She tells Mather that she has triumphed over the Fiends.

In the last entry on March eleventh, Mercy writes that this is the happiest time, for she is to marry Joseph Marshall and the dark years are behind her. No longer mourning and dwelling on morbid memories, she comes to judge the tribesmen fairly and forgives them. Mercy now can say farewell to the past and welcome to a new life. So ends Mercy Short's journal.

An addendum to this story is a notation by Cotton Mather that Mercy Marshall whom he had rescued from the Hand of evil Angels had been found guilty of adultery and was excommunicated in 1698.

About the Author

A noted, award-winning poet, concert soprano, and author of children's books, Norma Farber was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1909. The daughter of Augustus and Augusta Holzman, she graduated with a B.A.

from Wellesley College in 1931, where she was awarded the Phi Beta Kappa Key. The following year, she received an M.A. from Radcliffe College. In 1928 she married Sidney Farber and they had four children. Norma Farber died in 1984.

A recipient of prizes from the Poetry Society of America and the Golden Rose Award from the New England Poetry Club, Farber had her poetry published in several periodicals such as the Saturday Review, the New Yorker, and the Horn Book. Her first collection of poems, entitled Hatch, was published in 1955 and was followed by A Desperate Thing: Marriage Is A Desperate Thing (1973), Household Poems (1975), and Something Further: Poems (1979).

She also published a book of poetry geared for juvenile readers, Small Wonders: Poems (1979).

In the later years of her life, Farber began a successful career of writing varied types of children's books (alphabet, counting, and picture story books) in verse form. One of her eighteen works in this genre, As I Was Crossing Boston Common (1973) was awarded the National Book Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters as well as the Children's Book Showcase Award from the Children's Book Council. Other publications include: How the Hibernators Came to Bethlehem, 1966; Did You Know It Was the Narwhale? 1967; Where's Gomer? 1974; This Is the Ambulance Leaving the Zoo, 1975; A Ship In a Storm on the Way to Tarshish, 1977;Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: Stories & Poems, 1977; There Once Was a Woman Who Married a Man, 1978; How the Left-Behind Beasts Built Ararat, 1978; Three Wanderers from Wapping, 1978; Blanquette, 1979; Never Say Ugh! To a Bug, 1979; There Goes Feather Top! 1979; Up the Down Elevator, 1979; How to Ride a Tiger, 1983; All Those Mothers at the Manger, 1985. Mercy Short: A Winter Journal, North Boston, 1692-93 was Norma Farber's first venture into young adult fiction.

Setting

The time and place of this story is authentically depicted by the author.

She describes a unique period in American history. Although Mercy Short is confined to her room during her encounters with the demons, the journal provides an accurate, vivid word picture of her life and surroundings within two cultures between 1690 and 1693 in various locales in New England and Canada. Beginning with the Indian attack on the Short farmhouse in New Hampshire, the march to Quebec and her stay in the house next to the North Church in Boston, the setting becomes integral to the story. Through Mercy's writings, the author enlightens the reader with descriptions of the environment, speech, foods, clothing, religious rites, and customs of the seventeenth-century Puritans and Algonquin Indians. She always remains true to the era for these two diverse groups, detailing such specifics as the using of a colash, a low-wheeled carriage with a collapsible top, for transporting people and materials, the hanging of a dried toad around the neck to stop a bleeding nose, and the separating of women and men in Church, with only the latter allowed to sing.

Social Sensitivity

The story of Indian life is handled in an objective and not a sentimental manner. Despite this, the author presents a sensitive and moving portrayal of Indians as human beings with the same strengths and weaknesses as all other people. Unlike many motion pictures, this version presents a non-stereotypical view of the Indian tribe.

Literary Qualities

The author presents a well-written and historically accurate novel. The location, time, and events provide a credible background for the nature of the plot. Through the first person narrative, the reader is confronted with the conflict from the first page and the action keeps rising and building in intensity with each page of Mercy's journal. The author uses foreshadowing quite well, allowing the reader to feel some hope that the Fiends will not eventually win and Mercy will be emotionally and physically well once again.

Farber develops three types of conflict, which are intertwined throughout. Person-against-self is shown when Mercy struggles against her feelings about her former captors whom she should hate but finds she is unable to hate. She overcomes the guilt for having admired the same people who killed her family. Only by forgiving them can she truly resist the Fiends. Her sessions with the minister evolve into a person-versus-person conflict with Mather as the antagonist. By keeping Mercy writing and describing her Demons in a confined situation, he precludes Mercy from being able to face her past. Although he appears altruistic, he hides his true purpose, which is to bring fame to himself. As the days go by, Mercy becomes more aware of this and his other failings.

The strictures of Puritan life places Mercy into a person-versus-society conflict. She begins to view the Puritan culture from the perspective of the Indian life and finds the laws and rites of the former hypocritical and ridiculous. She chafes under these restrictions to her freedom of thought and action.

Farber is not didactic in establishing the tone of the book. The message of the story develops naturally out of Mercy's reflections in her journal. This helps to bring about an emotional response on the part of the reader in terms of the value of forgiveness.

The author's background as a poet is evident in the style of the book. Her use of figurative language stirs the reader's senses of sight and hearing.

Mercy's account of the colors, smells, tastes of the foods and sensuous dancing is vivid and moving. The inclusion of her poetry is apropos to the situation and complements the story.

Themes and Characters

Forgiveness is the underlying theme in the novel. Mercy Short comes to the realization that the one way to her salvation and sanity is to forgive not only her Tawny persecutors but also herself.

To do this, she had to release herself from her shroud of guilts, including such self-reproaches as being alive when family members were dead, recognizing that her captors could be, at times, not savage, but kind and caring, and accepting the fact that life with them was often filled with happy and contented times.

Hypocrisy is a secondary theme inherent throughout the story. Much as there exists hypocrisy in many forms in the contemporary world, Farber describes the feigning of beliefs and virtues among the Puritans of Boston as exemplified by the character Cotton Mather. This is evident in his demeanor and dialogue with Mercy. Although decrying the gossip, he is secretly proud that the locals believe he is behaving indecorously with the seventeen-year-old. Mather professes love of his fellow man yet refuses to acknowledge Mercy's accounts of the good qualities of the Indians. Verbally affirming his commitment to Christian charity, Mather praises the sea captain for holding services on the Sabbath while turning a blind eye to the Captain's selling of slaves. Although he puts forth an altruistic interest in Mercy's troubles, he was actually using her to get more recognition and renown in his profession.

The character Mercy Short is portrayed so credibly and intensely that the reader can easily empathize with her throughout her torments and can rejoice with her over her freedom from the Fiends. Through the writings of her journal, one is provided insight to the facets of her personality and to her most secret thoughts, feelings, and conflicts. The journal writing becomes the catalyst leading to Mercy's self-questioning, her guilt, and her doubting of Mather's Puritan convictions and actions. The reader is made witness to this dynamic change that fills the character with "golden hope."

When the story begins, it appears that the well-developed character, Reverend Cotton Mather, is to assume the role of protagonist fighting against the Hellish Ones in a classic battle of good against evil. It becomes apparent that he is the antagonist forcing Mercy to tangle with her Demons long after she wants to. Mather is depicted as an ethereal and caring man. Yet through his actions and words, the reader can see beneath this facade. He is proud, willful and arrogant in his false humbleness. Mather manipulates Mercy for his own ends.

Although a well-rounded character, Negra, the archetype of the black slave, remains static. A slave is not afforded the right to change her life. She does play an active role in the recovery of Mercy Short. As confidante, comforter, and co-conspirator, she is the only one Mercy can trust in the restrictive Puritan environment.

The Mistress is a flat character typical of Puritan women of the period and place. These women went quietly and efficiently about their household duties adhering strictly to the demands of the men in their lives.

Topics for Discussion

1. With the Puritan restrictions on such pleasant activities as singing, dancing, and games, how do you think you would react if you were a teenager in 1692 in Boston? Would you have passively accepted or rebelled against the regulations?

2. Do you believe that most of Mercy's trials with the Fiends were just ways to get attention? Explain your answer.

3. Mercy is not surprised that some of the ransomed English captives, having spent time back in "civilized" society, returned to live with the Indians.

Discuss the reasons why they did so.

4. Based on her journal writings, what changes were brought about in Mercy and are there any clues as to what would have caused her to be excommunicated from North Church six years later?

5. Colonial Boston was noticeably a "man's world." Discuss the condition of women during this time that supports this statement.

6. Analyze the reasons why Mercy, despite her captivity, came to admire the Tawny Indians.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Farber dramatically describes the travails and anguish of someone who is supposedly bewitched. Read Patricia Clapp's Witches' Children: A Story of Salem (1982) and Elizabeth George Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond (1958) and compare and contrast their versions with the one presented by Farber.

2. Mercy Short relates the various Tawny Indian foods that she ate while a captive. Compile a list of these and other tribal foods of the colonial era.

Create a book based on these foods.

Add other details that may be relevant such as those foods that were eaten for medicinal purposes.

3. Review the foods noted in (2) as to the feasibility of preparing them using contemporary foods and methods.

Choose one or two foods and prepare them. Evaluate the results. Compare your view with Mercy's assessment.

4. Investigate the Indian customs noted in the book and determine which ones were adapted by the colonists and are still being practiced today.

5. Journal writing was a general practice in colonial times. For a period, keep a personal journal of your thoughts and feelings. Reread and decide if this writing experience helps you come to a better understanding of yourself.

For Further Reference

Hanley, Karen Strang. Review.School Library Journal 29,2 (October 1982): 60. In her review, Hanley remarks upon the in-depth research undertaken by the author in utilizing a primary, seventeenth-century source (Cotton Mather's work) and fictionalizing it into an intriguing, readable novel. By remaining true to the language and style of the period, which Hanley calls "eloquent and evocative," the reviewer deems this novel to be, despite its brevity, "historical fiction of the highest order."

Review. Center for Children's Books Bulletin 36,2 (January 1983): 87. Norma Farber, according to the review, has provided an insightful portrayal of Mercy's ambivalent feelings concerning the hate-love relationship toward her Indian captors. The author has ingeniously internalized Mercy's affective journey to self-identity while vividly depicting for the reader the dour and ritualistic theology of colonial Bostonians under the aegis of Cotton Mather.

Twichell, Ethel R. Review. Horn Book 58,6 (December 1982): 655656. Emphasizing Farber's skill in formulating character development by interweaving Mercy's past and present through a backdrop of the life and language of the times, Twichell points out that this work calls for not only sensitivity to literary style but also the full attention of the reader. The reviewer notes that the final quotation from Mather's diary concerning Mercy's excommunication results in the reader's being "baffled yet hoping for further explanation in a sequel."

Related Titles

The protagonists and plot of Mercy Short do not appear in any of Farber's other works. Two other authors, however, wrote novels dealing with young women, witches and witchhunts in Puritan New England—Elizabeth George Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond (1958), and Ann Petry's Tituba of Salem Village (1964). The protagonists in both books, Tituba, a black slave, and Kit Taylor, a young white woman, dare to be their own unique selves in their harsh, religiously-conformist communities. Their innocent, yet different, actions bring about fear, suspicion, and hostility among the villagers.

They are accused of being witches.

Despite this unjust persecution, they remain steadfast, courageous and committed to their beliefs. In this personagainst-society conflict, they endure in the end.

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