

Moonwind Short Guide

Moonwind by Louise de Kiriline Lawrence

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Overview

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to stand on the moon?

To look out into a sky that is black even when the sun lights the surface beneath your feet, because there is no atmosphere to make it blue? To see the Earth as the astronauts see it, a lovely distant globe in shades of blue and green and white, wrapped in soft strands of cloud? If you cannot do it in person, perhaps this book can give you the next best thing—sharing such a trip vicariously with a boy and girl from the near future who do travel to the moon. Along with the spectacular sights they find an unexpected mystery, and face loneliness and fear and some tough decisions. It is a book which takes ordinary teen-agers to some extraordinary places, within their own hearts as well as on the lunar surface.

About the Author

Elizabeth Rhoda Holden was born in Leatherhead, England on June 5, 1943. Growing up as a bricklayer's daughter in "the English stock-broker belt," she was miserable at school. The place where she knew the most happiness was in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, where her grandfather lived. Wandering around the countryside and listening to her grandfather's vivid, spooky stories form her warmest childhood memories. Her family moved to the area when she was eleven. Today she still lives in the region. She left school at seventeen and worked at a bank and several libraries before finding a career writing books for young people.

Louise Lawrence (the pen name she uses as an author) says she never consciously sought to become a writer.

Rather, an idea came to her while she was doing housework. She felt compelled to write it down, and it turned into a novel. As a young woman trying to cope with children in an isolated farmhouse, writing was an escape from unhappy reality. When her first marriage broke up, it also provided the means of financial survival. But, adds Lawrence, she came to see writing as a way of searching, of exploring the "questions that have no answers" which she believes everybody has.

She remarried in 1987. Busily involved in other projects starting with remodeling an old house, she admits she sometimes wonders if she needs to go on writing. But then, a new idea may come to her at any time. She is eager to see what her next book will be about.

Setting

This novel takes place on the moon.

It is approximately one hundred years after the first space flights and lunar landings, which would make the year sometime around A.D. 2060 to 2070.

Both Americans and Russians have established large, permanent moon bases by this time. There are also smaller, widely scattered research stations operating as offshoots of these bases.

Despite this future setting, the humans seem to have jumped to the moon straight from the 1980s. America is still trying to maintain an uneasy truce with Russia (although the superseded term "Soviet" appears twice in the text). At one point Gareth, the young hero, even dials up computer diagrams of a subsurface nuclear silo which the Americans are covertly maintaining.

"California girls" still pop bubble gum and chatter about beach outings and Daddy's corporation. Perhaps this allows young readers to better concentrate on the characters and events, without dealing with possibly irrelevant "future history." But readers of more complex near-future novels may find the "frozen in time" background annoying and implausible.

The lunar landscape itself is described vividly and accurately. We see the great jagged mountain ranges jutting up against the black sky of prolonged night, and the chalky dust which gives an eerie, parched softness to the flatlands. Loneliness and terror lurk just beyond the air locks of the base. This landscape reflects and magnifies the loneliness felt very strongly by both Gareth and the alien girl Bethkahn.



Social Sensitivity

Most readers will just enjoy the book as an adventure story with a poignant ending. Nevertheless *Moonwind* contains several potentially troublesome elements that teachers and parents should be aware of.

First, the American moonbase seems to be staffed entirely by white Anglo-Saxon males. Lawrence has not included even a minor character who is black, or an adult female, or anyone whose name might show an ancestry other than Northern European. This character mix does not reflect current reality. The U.S. space program includes astronauts of both genders and a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

One does not have to be "politically correct" to find a problem here, both in plausibility and in the lack of role models for many children. It is inexplicable that neither the author nor her publisher seem to notice any reality or sensitivity gap. However, this very defect may be a useful take-off point for discussion. Young readers might examine what they think it takes to be a scientist or explorer.

Second, Gareth is not only the protagonist but is presented as a hero. We are told that he is more sensitive, made of finer stuff than the other people of Earth who are concerned with "having and getting." Presumably this is why Bethkahn, the "astral spirit" alien girl, is drawn to him. Yet we see very little evidence in the story of these finer character traits. From the time Gareth arrives on the moon he is touchy, sullen, and deceitful. He delights in slamming Karen's attempts at friendship back in her face. He lies to virtually every person on the moonbase, and when caught merely covers up his guilt with more lies. While some of his later actions can be justified by his need to protect Bethkahn, and his idle weaving of tall tales by the Welsh bardic tradition, overall he behaves more like a punk than like a spiritually advanced soul. The appeal of a teenage protagonist who defies authority figures because he knows something they do not know is obvious. But Gareth's prickliness predates his knowledge of the young alien, and the book's explanation, that he is reacting to the madness of life on Earth, is not very convincing.

Discussion as to whether Gareth really is a hero might help illuminate these issues.

Third, as a background premise the book projects that Bethkahn's astral body colleagues became the biblical sons of God, who looked upon the daughters of Earth and saw that they were fair, and interbred with them. A sophisticated reader can enjoy playing with such an idea without necessarily accepting the "ancient astronauts" theory of human origins. However, it is possible that some parents may object to this far-out use or interpretation of the Bible.

Lastly, the book's assumption that Cold War rivalry between America and Russia will continue for another halfcentury has already been overtaken by events. This particular error is unlikely to upset anyone. However, it might be a good lesson in the hazards of trying to predict the future as a straight-line continuation of the present.



Literary Qualities

The style of *Moonwind* is smooth and unobtrusive. The book starts with three chapters from Bethkahn's point of view, explaining her predicament, and then switches back and forth between chapters contrasting her actions with Gareth's. Aside from some Welsh turns of phrase which he uses, the dialogue is standard American speech. The moon's physical features are described in stunning images which contrast with the matter-of-fact words used for story events—a technique which underlines Gareth's feelings of alienation from ordinary life.

Bethkahn, as an alien female who "calls" to a human male, has some resemblance to the enchantresses of legend and literature. In many of these stories, a human hero outwits the enchantresses at their own game, as Odysseus did with the Sirens and with Circe. In others, such as Keats's poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci," a young man is lured to his doom. In the present book, however, the author tells the *Moonwind* 3655 tale from Bethkahn's point of view as well as Gareth's, which makes her attempts to lure the young man understandable. Rather than pitting his wits against her, Gareth has to outwit the moonbase personnel in order to help her.

Whether he seals his doom by doing so depends upon the reader's interpretation. The book's ending, in which Gareth gives up his known existence to travel to Bethkahn's planet, carries traces of several different—and perhaps contradictory—motifs. The "dark lady" of myth often lures a youth to his destruction with the promise of untold glories. Is this what happens to Gareth? Or, could his action merely represent the suicide of a sensitive young man unable to cope with reality, an obsession seen in some modern minimalist fiction? Or, is Gareth's decision to leave his body a variation of the quest theme? Having discovered a wonder, and set things right at the moonbase, must he now travel on, just as the standard Western hero must ride off into the sunset? There are more levels to this novel than one would guess from its straightforward story line and whimsical cover illustration.



Themes and Characters

Moonwind's primary theme is the gap between aspirations and reality. Both of the main characters are haunted by this gap. Gareth, a Welsh boy who wins a contest to visit the moonbase, was only dimly aware of his dissatisfaction before. Nevertheless this awareness resulted in his winning essay on the Lunacy Syndrome, which looks at "space sickness" as the darker side of the religious conversion which occurs to many visitors. When Gareth himself arrives on the moon, he begins to hate the prospect of returning to Earth. At the same time he has episodes of disorientation and perceptual blurring, which only strengthen his belief that he is destined for another life entirely.

Bethkahn, a young woman of an advanced species who live without bodies, has seen her aspirations cruelly cut off. On her first voyage as a new member of a spaceship's crew, the ship mal3654 Moonwind functioned. It set down on the moon of an unknown planet. Bethkahn was left to repair the broken stabilizer while the rest of the crew went down to the planet. But they were trapped there, and Bethkahn discovered that the supplies she needed to repair the stabilizer had all been used up. Unable to get back to the idyllic worlds where she expected to live, she is trapped on the barren moon surface, her only company the talking ship which makes demands of its own. When, the ship wakes her from a 10,000-year sleep in a stasis chamber, the contrast between her hopes and her present situation is almost unbearable.

Intertwined with this motif is another theme, loneliness. Bethkahn is understandably lonely in her long isolation, and develops an attraction to Gareth, the only human male near her own age, long before she reveals herself to him. Gareth is lonely in the midst of people. This is a feeling many of us—child, teen-ager, or adult—have known. But in his case it is heightened by the desolate conditions that surround him on the moon, which scare him at the same time as they call to him. Because of his own loneliness he is able to hear the stranded alien girl, and to respond to her plea for help.

Karen, the California teen-ager who is the other contest winner, is also lonely. She had looked forward to meeting Gareth. Early in their moon-stay she tells him: "You're the only reason I'm not scared out of my mind." But he rebuffs her attempts at friendship, "puts her on" with wild stories, and generally makes himself as obnoxious as possible around her. As these two are the only teen-agers among a group of highly trained adults, her resultant loneliness is almost as great as his. She is left to deal with it unaided, however—no astral boyfriend appears for Karen—and one assumes that when she returns to Earth her loneliness will fade as she resumes her everyday life.

Among the other characters is Dr.

Drew Steadman, the base medic who calms and treats Gareth during his episodes of space sickness. He is also the adult Gareth comes to trust most. Jefferson Bradbury, the base commander, and Jake, a brawny driver who assures Gareth that fear is natural on the moon, are other recurring characters.



They are part of the background to the story and do not advance any sub-plot or theme of their own.



Topics for Discussion

1. Karen's constant babbling and her overfriendliness irritate Gareth. His aloofness disappoints and baffles her.

Which of them do you have more sympathy for? Is there anything they could have done to get along better? If so, would it have ruined the story?

2. Moonwind takes place around the middle of the next century (approximately A.D. 2060). In this story, Russians and Americans both have moonbases, and the two countries still do not trust each other very much. Great Britain, which includes Gareth's Wales, is a grim and impoverished land. Do you think we will have moonbases by that time? Do you think this is a likely prediction for the three countries' future? Why or why not?

3. Would Bethkahn have fallen in love with Gareth if a young man of her own species had come back? Was Gareth able to "see" Bethkahn because she showed herself to him, or because he had aspirations and insights that the other humans did not have? Or for another reason? Do you think there could be unseen entities like Bethkahn around today? If so, what would we call them?

4. Although Bethkahn is said to have only an astral body, not a physical one, at various times the author describes her eyes, her clothes, and the furnishings of her room. Her spaceship also depends upon tangible parts, like the stabilizer, to fly. Is this because it is hard to imagine or to portray anything which is entirely nonmaterial? Can you give examples from television or movies or books of other ways the nonmaterial realm can be conveyed? What are some of the difficulties?

5. How can someone be lonely when surrounded by people and activities, as Gareth is? Would he still be lonely even if he had never gone to the moon?

What sorts of places or events could make you feel as lonely as he is?

6. Would you like to work at a moonbase or space station, if the opportunity came along? What training and other qualities would give you a good chance of doing so? Is the author realistic in her portrayal of the moonbase staff?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Gareth's impulse to make up "tall tales" draws on a long tradition of Welsh bards and mythology. List some of the famous Welsh stories and legends. Read one of them and write a short report about it, pointing out any elements it may share with Moonwind.
2. Unless they are protected by a special suit or structure, visitors to the moon die within minutes. What are some of the hazards to life on the moon? List and explain the most important, starting with the lack of atmosphere. Also explain what essential safety features would have to be built into a moonbase. (You may need to do some further reading in books about the moon and space science.) Don't forget about psychological hazards.
3. Will Gareth and Bethkahn stay together once they get back to her planet? Do you think he will have a hard time learning to live as an astral body? Write a story or poem about what happens to them after this book ends.
4. Draw a moonscape showing features of the lunar surface and sky. You may want to look at some actual photos of moonscapes as well as checking the descriptions in Moonwind. Label at least some of the features with their correct names.
5. Suppose it is the middle of the twenty-first century. You are part of a committee to draw up a plan for the first permanent moonbase. Write an outline of the proposal, including the purposes of the moonbase (scientific?

defense? commercial? other?), what kinds of specialists will be needed for its operation, the estimated time needed to build it, where the resources will come from, and other matters. What government or other authority are you submitting the proposal to? (This may affect your answers to the other questions.)

For Further Reference

Flowers, Ann A. Review. Horn Book 63 (January/February 1987): 60. Favorable review which analyzes the book's story line in terms of the psychological traits and interaction of the three main characters.

"Holden, Elizabeth Rhoda (Louise Lawrence)." In Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series. Vol. 16. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Lists the author's published books and personal data, and includes comments by her on her motivations for writing.

"Louise Lawrence." In Sixth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989. The most complete easily available source of information on the author's life and sources for ideas, told largely in her own words.

Sutherland, Zena. Review. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 40 (December 1986): 71. Brief, mixed review which praises the style and the unusual love story, but finds the actual events unconvincing even as a science fiction or fantasy story.

Related Titles

All of Lawrence's young adult novels can be roughly classified as science fiction, but the techniques, themes, and approaches she uses vary widely. *Earth Witch* (1981) draws on the Celtic legend of Rhiannon in a fantasy story about a young man bewitched by a beautiful woman who is not what she seems.

Calling B for Butterfly (1982) and *The Warriors of Taan* (1988) are primarily action-adventure tales in an outer space setting. *Children of the Dust* (1985) is a post-nuclear holocaust novel. Her more recent novel, *Keeper of the Universe* (1993), shares with *Moonwind* the premise of more powerful beings who interact with humans without the humans' knowledge, but uses it on a larger scale, with the fate of whole worlds hanging in the balance.

Stories of moonbases or moon settlement are rare in recent general science fiction, perhaps because the space program has not gone in that direction.

However, readers interested in the topic might enjoy earlier books set on the moon. One of the most famous is Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), an adult science fiction book that also projects anarchist and sexist attitudes which come across strangely today.



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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

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