The Moorchild Short Guide

The Moorchild by Eloise McGraw

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Overview

There is something mysterious and strange about the child who lives in the house of Yanno, the smith, and Anwara. Something, whisper the villagers, "eldritch, freaky-odd."

First, there is the problem of her strange brown face, her color-changing eyes, her shock of pale hair, and her curiously long hands and feet. Then, she has a fear of iron that lingers about her father, a love of honey, and, to her parents' dismay, she finds Yanno's da's old bagpipes and plays, without instruction, weird, unbelievable tunes on them. She escapes to the moor at every opportunity and, all else beside, the child literally climbs the walls.

Anwara's mother, Old Bess, the Wise Woman of the village, suspects the child to be a "changeling," delivered to the village by the Moorfolk who inhabit the moor, but her parents, for all their offspring's strangeness, love her and refuse to see the truth.

And the truth is, the little girl is uncannily caught between two worlds.

The Moorchild is an extraordinary tale of the child, Moql, who grows up with the Moorfolk in the Mound, knows no other world until it appears that she cannot "wink out." This inability to disappear at will makes her a danger to the Band. Inquiry about her heritage reveals that Moql is the child of a human father lured into the Mound by a charming Folk maiden. The heartless Folk, knowing nothing of either love or hate, quickly switch Moql for a human infant who can serve the Band.

A baby again, Moql, now called Saaski, finds herself in a foreign environment among strangers who vex and frighten her. She cries and screams until Old Bess suggests strong measures to return her to the Band.

In fear of fire or drowning or beating, Saaski wills herself to forget the Folk and her former life in the Mound. The child grows up a second time, a stranger in her own home and no way to understand why.

Rejected by the village children, unable to fit into the role of good daughter, Saaski finds only in her wanderings on the moor some peace from the hatefulness that surrounds her in the village. Here she can play her pipes and meets Tarn, the goatherd, who befriends her without hesitation. Here, through a series of unexpected events, she discovers her history and determines to right the Folk's dreadful wrong. She goes into the Mound and brings back Yanno and Anwara's own true child.

About the Author

It was in Houston, Texas, on December 9, 1915, that the family of Loy and Genevive Jarvis welcomed their daughter, Eloise, into the world. Though she grew to be interested in a variety of pursuits, McGraw determined, at the age of eight, when she wrote her first story, that she would be a writer. Still, the path to that goal was not entirely straight. After graduating from Principia College in 1937, she pursued graduate study in painting and sculpture at Oklahoma University in 1938 and Colorado University in 1939. On January 29, 1940, she married William Corbin McGraw, a writer and filbert grower. The couple soon had two children, Anthony and Lauren Lynn.

In 1943 and 1944, McGraw began her career as an instructor in portrait and figure painting at Oklahoma City University. In 1949, she began to write seriously, and after that she produced twenty-two novels, including The Moorchild (1996), Steady Stephanie, a one act play; several adult novels, including Pharaoh, and a variety of articles for literary journals.

In 1961, McGraw volunteered to correct and grade English compositions for a local high school in Oklahoma City. Later, she taught adult education fiction writing classes at Lewis and Clark College. She taught writing classes at the University Haystack summer conference and manuscript clinics and directed juvenile workshops in Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, and La Jolla, California. As of the early 2000s, McGraw continued to speak about writing at schools and literary gatherings and was featured in writers' "teleconferences" broad cast on educational channels. She is a member of the Authors Guild, Authors League of America, and Royal Historian of Oz for The International Wizard of Oz Club.

McGraw has won numerous awards for her work in the field of Young Adult Literature, beginning with the New York Herald Tribune Children's Book Festival honor book award for Crown Fire, in 1951. In 1952, Moccasin Trail was named a Newbery Honor Book, and later it received the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. The Golden Goblet was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1962. Other awards include the William Allen White Nomination, The "Edgar" Award from the Mystery Writers of America for The Money Room (1981), The Mark Twain Award, Sequoah Award, Blue Bonnet Award, and the Western Writers Golden Spur Nomination. The Seventeenth Swap (1986) won the Iowa Children's Choice Award, the Tennessee Volunteer State Book Award, and the West Virginia Children's Book Award, all in 1990 and 1991. The Moorchild was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1997.

Writing, for McGraw, is a highly personal experience. Here she unconsciously explores her own emotions, clarifies her attitudes, sometimes resolves an inner conflict, and comes to terms with a problem in her own life. These elements of her life come to light for her, she says, after the story is complete and she revisits it later.

McGraw describes her writing as a process which involves listening. She turns her inner ear to what her characters are saying and how they say it and writes down what she has heard as nearly as she can catch it.

Starting with a character, she begins to shape the plot and mood of the story which grows and changes as the writing progresses.

Once a believer in meticulous outlines, McGraw has developed a freer, more fluent approach. Using index cards, she first writes notes, ideas, bits of scene or dialogue, plans for setting and character development as well as other facts she needs to know. Slowly, the story takes shape in her subconscious and pours itself out on paper.

McGraw is, by her own admission, an avid researcher. She enjoys research, she says, the discovery of a place, time, and the people who live there and then recreating it in stories. This search for accuracy not only expands a writer's education, she says, but keeps her from making a fool of herself. To this end, McGraw uses three infallible approaches to her research: library shelves, museum collections, and her own powers of visualization.

Where once she juggled a 9-to-5 workday with all its necessary interruptions, she has recently adopted a long, half-day schedule. She rises at six and, with coffee in hand, begins work at her desk. Around 8:00, McGraw takes time out for dressing and breakfast. At nine, she is back to work until 12:00 or 1:00. By then she's tapped of her writing and focuses on other things.

In a March 1995 article for The Writer, McGraw set out to answer the question so commonly asked of her: "Why do you choose to write for children?" She thinks a better question would be: "How do I—does anybody—write for the children of today, who are growing up in a world of grim realities that they must take as a given and learn to cope with?" Since several of McGraw's works involve worlds far different in space and time from the realistic problem fiction produced by many writers, she has thoroughly considered both the why and how.

She writes for children because they are more interesting, she says, still in a state of flux, changing and changeable, not yet in the "jelled" condition of adults. Also, she likes telling stories the way the characters come into her head and those characters often fall between the ages of ten and twelve.

This approach, she says, gives her freedom to write the way she wants to.

Having said that, McGraw believes that no matter what the child's status or place in the world is, that child can relate to stories of imagination, stories that create a special place, characters different from themselves, remote planets, historical distance and time, and a "magic far beyond a mere change of scene." These stories provide an "escape from narrow vision."

Setting

Setting, McGraw says, is fundamental to every story she writes. She likens the process of establishing setting to watching a movie in living color complete with sound.

She must have a clear mental picture of where and when the story takes place, together with an inner map.

Setting is integral to the story of The Moorchild. The reader, in a suspension of disbelief, is spirited away to an imagined world in what may be ancient Britain.

Closely linked with folklore of the British Isles, the story mingles myth and legend of medieval times with the realities of human existence that challenge young people even today.

Two worlds provide a setting for the story, the wild and open moor and the closed and stagnant village. Here lives Saaski, a misbegotten child, who must find her place somewhere between the two. For Saaski, the moor means freedom, a place of escape from the constricted life of the village. It calls her, incessantly, to run and climb and play her pipes on the dry meadows among the rocks. The moor intrigues her with its mysterious bogs, its wind and sun, and its fringe of ever present clouds.

Here she is free to be herself.

The villagers, on the other hand, fear the moor. For them, it holds hidden terrors in the form of bogeys, will-o-the-wisps who lure the unsuspecting to their death in the bogs, and the ever present Moorfolk who trick humans into the Mound where time stands still. The moor is to be avoided by any but the wandering shepherd or other loner, traveling through. The moor represents a forbidden place of magic and superstition. It is a place where the tame child never ventures but where the wild child seeks freedom and the thrill of possible danger.

Conversely, while Torskaal provides a safe haven for the villagers, it represents, for Saaski, a virtual prison. Here she must obey the rules, perform the dull duties expected of a village child, and endure restrictions on her activity when she misbehaves.

In the village, Saaski is both prisoner and stranger, made miserable by strange forces and attitudes she does not understand.

The metaphor created by the setting could be applied to the experience of the child who wrestles with the inner turmoil of growing up. What will she keep of the wild child? What will she take on of the tame child?

A third important setting, the Mound, helps to bring the theme of the outsider into focus. Saaski is not welcome in the village.

She is rejected, without pity, by the folk who inhabit the Mound, buried deep within her beloved moor. As the prince puts it, she is not quite one or the other. Only on the moor does she truly belong and here she finds the strength to grow, to love, and to leave behind, holding the essence of the place in her heart, knowing it will never change and she can always come back and make music there with Tarn.

The characters are shaped by the setting.

Anwara and Yanno are as closed in as the village, superstitious and fearful. It takes great strength of character for them to love and protect the changeling child in the face of an angry mob. The villagers are steeped in ignorance and have a dislike for anything unusual in their midst, and are ready to seek out a scapegoat for events they cannot readily explain and do not care to understand.

The Moorfolk could exist nowhere else except the moor and the Mound, so bound to it are they in nature and tradition. Saaski, though she remains, in part, as wild as the moor, begins to understand the reasons for the intolerance of the village and changes to a wiser, more knowing person at the end of the story. Only Old Bess remains untouched by the environment in which she lives, having come to terms with it long ago and having chosen to live apart. As for Tarn, he is a free spirit, at home on the moor and anywhere else, and he sets out to show Saaski a new life.

In creating the world of Saaski, a child of the moor, McGraw produced two vastly different environments for her setting. One, an isolated human village at the edge of a non-specific moor similar to the middle ages and not bound by real time. The other, Mound, a parallel world of the Moorfolk.

Slowly, as the characters came alive to McGraw, so did the village of Torskaal, the Mound, and the desolate surrounding moor.

The village of Torskaal and the moor became a place reminiscent of the northwest English countryside or the Scottish Highlands. The Mound became the reincarnation of a salt mine McGraw had visited as a child, a vast, eerie, glittering cavern where sound traveled without an echo and time seemed to stand still.

And so it seems to the reader. Torskaal appears to be frozen in time, with its thatchroofed houses, its grassy crooked street, the village well, its hillside apple orchard, the paths and creeks, its pond and fences and woods. The road to Moor Water and the pasture that ends at the stone wall complete the scene.

Yanno's smithy is a place that can practically be seen and heard and almost smelt, as is the house where he and Anwara and Saaski live uncomfortably together. The reader can feel the wind on the moor where Saaski meets Tam, the goatherd, and escapes to play her pipes. Old Bess's house is a quiet sanctuary for Saaski. Here she learns to read, comes to know the art of herbs, and fastens down the truth about herself.

On the Mound, a place of magical abundance and careless abandon, a place where, to the human eyes, the walls glitter with jewels, the Moorfolk dress in fantastically elegant

garments, and the tables are laden with oranges, stuffed swans, exotic sweets, and flagons of deliriously sweet wine. There is the Nursery where babies sleep in golden cradles and the nurses wear golden crowns.

There is the Schooling House where younglings learn their lessons in survival and the Gathering where constant merrymaking is the norm. And, as the Prince warns,"Time runs different in the Mound."

Language plays a large part in scene setting for The Moorchild. The humans arglebargle among themselves. They call Saaski "eldritch , changeling, freaky-odd, strangeling." The Moorfolk shape change, "go dim-like" or "wink out."

If listening to her characters is McGraw's way of creating them, they certainly spoke out clearly in The Moorchild. Their dialogue reflects Old English usage as shown in the following conversation between Saaski's parents.

Can't you keep the babe from squalling, wife?

What ails it? Screamin' like a boggerflook?

She's got the colic, is all. Sit you down and eat your dinner and leave Saaski to them that knows more about it.

With dialogue like this, the reader also knows where and when, just from the voices she hears in the cottage and in the street and on the moor.

Social Sensitivity

Of the many reviews written about The Moorchild, all mention the issue of the "different" child. In truth, Saaski is different, but the question of "why" seems to be absent from these investigations into the story. The "why" of her difference runs through the tale, creating a central theme.

Society has only recently begun to recognize the psychological dilemma of the child or adult of mixed blood. Saaski is clearly one of those children whose cultural heritage is sharply divided. African American, Native American, Asian American, Hispanic American children and adults, among others, are all aware of this distinction and it is brought directly into focus in the story of this child of the moor.

The Moorchild 273 Compassionately, McGraw helps her confused and troubled little heroine find out the truth. She causes Old Bess, the Wise Woman, to see that Saaski is not a threat but a pawn in a nasty game. Bess muses, as she watches Saaski search for her reflection in the pond: Poor unblessed creature, it may be she has no more wish to be here than we have to have her—Does she yearn, as one of us might, for her heathenish home? Does she even remember a place where she once belonged? Did she ever belong there?

And Old Bess can sympathize, because she was a foundling in the village of Torskaal herself. Left by the gypsies, adopted by the miller's family, she grew up neither one nor the other, isolating herself, at last, in the old monk's deserted cottage at the village edge on the road to the moor.

Tam, like Yanno and Anwara, is steadfast and true, but he is not conflicted about Saaski's heritage as her parents are. Instead, for him, Saaski is herself, not freaky-odd or eldritch, but an outsider like he is, whose friendship he cherishes from the start.

But the concern for cultural heritage in the early 2000s goes beyond mixed blood.

Our upwardly and laterally mobile society of place change, job change, changes in monetary and social status, and, especially for children, school change, create psychological tensions for many. The search for blood parents by adopted and foster children also has its stressful decisions, which often leave the individual with a sense of being stranded "between two worlds."

The story of The Moorchild gets right to the heart of this complex matter, offering hope that learning to be and to accept is possible, even inevitable, with the assistance of friends and loved ones. For, in the end, Saaski's human nature, her persistence in the face of danger and confusion and fear, her strength of purpose, her intelligence, determination and spunk, overcomes her folkishness. It is her gratitude to Yanno and Anwara for their loyalty in the face of all odds and, ultimately, her new found feelings of love which show the reader that, indeed, peace of mind and personal reconciliation are possible, though not without the inevitable pain of growth and separation.

Saaski's human determination, love, and common sense give the story its balance and bring it into the real world.

Literary Qualities

The Moorchild, based upon folklore and legend, includes all the important characteristics of good modern fantasy. The author's invented world is detailed and believable. The events are imaginative yet consistent with the story world as are the multidimensional characters. Vivid images are backed by solid, understandable story structures and the age-old themes are meaningful to the reader, illustrating dilemmas consistent with life in the now. In short, the story of The Moorchild more than adequately suspends the reader's disbelief.

As with much modern fantasy, the story opens in an invented, seemingly real world akin to Great Britain in the Middle Ages.

Old Bess, the Wise Woman, is the first to wonder what changed Yanno and Anwara's contented baby into such an ill-favored one who unexplainably shrieks and rages in her cradle. Her parents, representing another element of fantasy, the characters who reject the possibility of magic, refuse to believe the child might be a changeling as Old Bess suggests. She has the colic, Anwara claims. With these opposing viewpoints, the story is set.

Then, as quickly, the reader is moved back in time to the Mound, where Saaski is found to be a misbegotten member of the Band. She relives, in memory, the moment she was discovered to be half-human, and in remembering determines, for her own safety, to forget. Thus, the author begins a play with time, magic and real, for, as Saaski has been told, "Time runs different in the Mound."

The first three chapters present the only formulaic flashback in time. The plot, after this, continues in a linear fashion with time changes represented by Saaski's returning memory. On the moor, the flights of crows, the flash of a green lizard, the twittering of an unknown bird, and the faint glimmering tracks across the bogs and grasslands all seem strangely familiar. Then there is the sudden appearance of "runes" in the village that only Saaski can see and dimly understand. Eventually, she encounters the Moorfolk and memories surface thick and fast in a jumble until at last her father's name, Fergil, gives her the final key to recognition and understanding.

Many elements of the plot go on inside Saaski's head as the author, an omnipotent narrator, examines her thinking. Still, though many clues are dropped by the author, the reader is kept in suspense until the very end regarding how Saaski will solve her problems and bring about a highly satisfactory resolution.

Language, dialogue, and imagery in The Moorchild are consistent with the characters and setting. Children are "young'ens," who sleep in truckle beds and dance in circle games, and come down with the pox. Oddly behaving adults drink "muxta" and run like old "clootie" was after them, the addled, "rattleheads," regular "Tom Noddys."

Seemingly sane adults gather rowan wood and St. John's Wort for the Midsummer Eve Hillfire in which to cast the "creeter," the strangeling, the eldritch pixie in their midst.

Constantly making mistakes, Saaski sees herself over and over as a blunderhead.

Moorfolk dialogue is dispassionate as demonstrated by this conversation with the Prince, Moql, and Pittittiskin.

"Well! You're misbegotten. Half-human, y'see. Danger to the Band having you around."

He smiled at Moql then turned to Pittittiskin.—"You know of a chance?"

"Half a dozen."

"Take the nearest." He turned back to Moql. "There you see how simple?"

Wordless, she shook her head.

"Why, you'll be changed m'dear. We'll just swap you for a human child who'll make a good servant to the band. Halfhumans never work out 'mongst the folk.

No, never do."

The human dialogue rings with emotion as the villagers debate Saaski's responsibility for the pox epidemic.

"Gypsy boy, indeed. Why the gypsys were gone a fort-night afore Jankin sickened."

"That's true! So 'twas that—changeling— payin' out all our young ones because a few played a bit rough."

"should have been thrown on the fire to begin with—It'll be the crops she'll put a blight on next. Or do the sheep a mischief."

"God forbid—and our lambs so scant and late this year. Could she have done so already. Ach, what'll Edildan say?"

As for imagery, the cavernous Mound glitters with a greenish light, its walls and ceilings studded with jewels to the eyes of a human. In the Gathering, the tables are laden with pheasant and fruits and elegant wines, while the wild dance goes on and the Folk, their pale hair fluttering, float up and down the winding golden stair in careless play and abandon.

In the uplands, "high among the mists and bogs and wild stony reaches of the moor," Saaski "was never sure which part she liked best—the steep broom-gilded heather, shadowed slopes, always solid underfoot, or the sometimes steeper bogs, spiced with danger." It is on the moor, also, that "except for one long golden slit, clouds still

darkened the sky and draped like a wet purple blanket over the looming slopes of the moor, " when Saaski heads home to tell her human parents the inescapable truth of her misbegotten heritage.

McGraw's entire work is, without question, an exceptional story. Only once does she run the risk of losing the reader, and that is during Tam and Saaski's foray into the Mound. Even carefully read, it is hard to keep track of stairways and doors and Nursery, Schooling Room, and cattle pen.

And when they finally emerge through the cattle door with Tinkwa and the human child, the Prince, who earlier appeared to be on the stair, comes riding past their outside hiding place on a litter carried by his faithful Folk. But this confusion can be forgiven. After all, Tam and Saaski are confused inside the Mound, why not the reader as well? It only adds to the Magic.

Themes and Characters

Chorus: Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen.

We daren't go a-hunting for fear of little men.

Wee folk, good folk, trooping altogether.

Green jacket, red cap, and white owl's feather.

They stole little Bridget for seven years long And when she came home her friends were all gone.

They took her lightly back between the night and morrow.

They thought that she was sleeping, but she was dead from sorrow.

The Moorchild is rooted in legend; it brings to mind the haunting tales of ancient cultures which once inhabited the countrysides of the British Isles. But, according to McGraw, the Moorfolk are her own invention. Taking some of the attributes of traditional magical beings, such as their non-human emotions and attitudes, she created a Band of sprites who are strictly themselves. They are expert shape changers and they play the bagpipes. This last characteristic caused her some problems with research, which was finally resolved by a high-school-age piper whom she found right in her own neighborhood.

These Moorfolk provide an explanation for Saaski's bewildering difference as she slowly works her way to a realization of who she is and what makes her so "freakyodd." The Moorfolk are like shadows, leaping, scampering, chattering behind a thin curtain at the back of the stage. They provide an elfin chorus much like the sprites of William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. They bear names like Pittittiskin, Zmr, Elsnik, Timkwa, and Talabar.

While they are minor, flat characters who never change from their prankish, heartless, thievish ways, they are essential to the story. Tinkwa is especially essential since Saaski persuades him, through bribery, to help her bring home Anwara's human child.

If the Moorfolk are like shadow figures behind a curtain, the villagers resemble a Greek chorus. They constantly intrude upon Saaski's life, causing a furious "argle-bargle" with Anwara and Yanno until Saaski slips away to her beloved moor to escape the din.

Old Bess is a constant, the Wise Woman of the story, frequently found in folklore and modern fantasy. Remembering her own childhood differences, she catches glimpses of them in Saaski and feels sympathy for the elfin-child. She reprimands the villagers, gives Yanno and Anwara sound advice, teaches Saaski the value of herbs, and helps her in her search for herself. It is through Old Bess that Saaski learns to read.

Tam, the goatherd, bears his lot with the drunken tinker, Bruman, matter-of-factly and with good cheer. He knows more about Saaski than she does but cherishes her friendship anyhow, with a steadfast loyalty. Only when she is ready does he reveal what he knows and, together, they face the uncertain future. Tam provides a foil for Saaski, asking the right questions and giving the best information all at the right time. And it is through Tam that Saaski begins to understand love and hate, emotions foreign to her amoral folkish nature. Bruman himself is a one dimensional character, who, in the end, provides the means for Tam and Saaski to live free.

Anwara and Yanno are solid human parents. They never stop loving this strange child, no matter the problems she causes them, no matter the villagers' gossip, no matter the well-meaning advice of Old Bess, but they are really never able to understand her. Still, they steadfastly refuse to believe that Saaski may be a changeling, no matter the overwhelming evidence. And when finally forced to confront the truth, they do so without judgment, but with true love and stoic resignation.

And then there is Fergil, the old fisherman who lives far out beyond Moor Water and the sea and seems, to the villagers, to be addled. He encounters Saaski at the smithy and is terrified. Though he does not appear until late in the tale, he is essential to the story, helping to bring about the surprising conclusion.

The gypsy woman appears for only a moment, but she cannot read Saaski's hand, leaving the child with one more odd piece to fit into the puzzle of her life, and thus serving to advance the plot.

As the main character, Saaski or Moql, as she is known by the Band, wrestles with her difference. She learns, early on, to avoid the superstitious villagers who whisper about the "eldritch" child and the children who tease and taunt and torment her. Saaski tries hard to please Anwara and Yanno, but often her efforts go awry. She does her best with the tasks expected of her, but it is only with Yanno's bees and the herbs she finds for Old Bess that she is successful. Still, it is her struggle with her inner nature that captures the reader most completely, her nonfeeling, folkish nature that pits itself against her lonely, troubled human side over and over again.

270 The Moorchild Saaski is a conflicted mixture of folk and human. As the Prince said, "'Aye, you're not one thing nor yet quite 'tother. Pity, but there 'tis,'" and so she finds her life to be.

She weeps human tears when she is forced from the Band; she feels a terrible dread not knowing what may come. And yet, once changed, she cannot understand hate and over and over fails to return Anwara's gestures of love, knowing all the while that within herself there is something lacking.

Here is a wild child who cannot keep still, one who is filled with an insatiable curiosity and so much energy that she suffers real pain when confined to the cottage.

She has no talent for household chores, burns the bread, slops the milk out of the churn, cracks the dishes, and, while she washes the fleeces in a frenzy of motion,

cannot card the wool or spin. Iron and salt burn her skin and St. John's Wort or Valerian make her shiver. Yet she loves honey and is, as Yanno grieves, "so quick and handy with the bees."

As Saaski grows, she learns, at last, who she is. She learns to love Anwara and Yanno and she sacrifices her precious pipes to bring her parents the happiness she knows they yearn for. She is a well-rounded character and, step by step, event by event, Saaski comes into her own and accepts herself for who she is and what life is as well.

Several important and meaningful themes run through the story of The Moorchild; difference, the search for self, need for acceptance, a dual nature, and coming-of-age.

Moql, thrown out of the Mound, becomes Saaski, the supposedly human child of human parents. Thus, she is cursed with a difference apparent to her parents, who try to deny it; to the suspicious villagers who want her gone; and the Moorfolk, who reject her outright.

Another theme centers on the need for acceptance. Saaski gets it neither from the folk, the village children, nor from her parents, hard as they try. Only Old Bess and Tarn love and accept her for who she is as she struggles to love and accept herself.

Within this theme of acceptance, Saaski's dual natures, amoral folk and moral human, produce another. Should she give over to the careless, forgetful, unfeeling, unknowing nature of the folk? Should she take up the loving, hating, grieving, caring nature of the human? Or should she strive to learn to live with the two?

These dual natures, then, provide the basis for a coming-of-age story like no other.

Possessing the folkish traits of the Band, Saaski, at first, seems infantile and selfish, caring only for her own needs, screaming and raging her at her ejection from the Mound. It is an eerie picture of a newborn refusing to leave the womb to live in the real world; a disturbing glimpse of a life before life that must be discarded if a child is to become a truly functioning human. In becoming human, as she grows and learns the truth of her history, Saaski makes peace with both natures, gives Anwara the gift she sincerely desires and joins Tam in a nomadic life that may eventually lead to home. And in going, she leaves behind a memory of the odd Moorchild, "so quick and handy with the bees" and an echo of a folkish tune heard only upon the moor.

Topics for Discussion

1. Time runs different in the Mound.

Humans are said to grow old there, but the half-grown child of Anwara and Yanno reverts to a baby once outside.

What is the meaning of this and its contradictions?

2. Examine the viewpoints of stereotyped characters in the story, such as one of the village children or one of the Folk.

Present this viewpoint to the class and ask for discussion on how the viewpoint could be changed if, indeed, it could.

3. Saaski is an outsider, shunned by Folk and human alike. Discuss the role of insider and outsider as they function in society today. How do these roles come about and what can be done to change society's outlook, if anything?

4. There are elements of magic at work in The Moorchild, but Saaski solves her problems in a human way. Why does the author choose to give Saaski that way out? Was this a literary way to make the story work? Why or why not?

5. Read The Land and The Color of Water.

Take on the identities of mixed-blood people of different nationalities and express your viewpoints, positive and negative, about the world that exists between two cultures. Consider values, morals, customs, food, education, music, dance, drama, literature and other elements important to that culture.

6. There are gender issues to be found in The Moorchild. What are they? How would the story change if the main character had been a boy?

7. Fantasy literature is a subject for controversy and censorship. Discuss the issues of witchcraft, supernatural beings, and escape from reality. How can these issues detract from or enhance what fantasy literature does for readers?

8. Consider the theme of coming-of-age in The Moorchild. How does the author show Saaski's transition from one stage to another? Has her growth been accomplished by story's end? Why or why not? Is there more for her to do? What is it?

9. The Moorchild could be considered a metaphor for life in any time period. Discuss the meaning of that metaphor,what it means in the context of the story, and what connection it has with real life in the early 2000s.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Moorchild teems with both actual and invented words and phrases. Create a dictionary, either individually or as a small group project, defining and illustrating your favorites.

2. Research the origins of modern fantasy, its roots in folklore, myth,and legend.

3. As a small group project, create dioramas of the two worlds, Torskaal and the Mound. Include story posters and labels.

4. Write a sequel to the story detailing what happens to Tam and Saaski as they traveled to Kings Town. Do they come back to the moor? How do they live? Where and how do they find home?

5. Write a story about Bruman's experiences in the Mound after Saaski and Tam leave. Does he stray? How long? If he comes out, what happens then? Do Tam and Saaski find him again?

6. Tinkwa has the chanter, but must retrieve the rest of the pipes from Fergil, the old fisherman. If you were Fergil, how would you receive Tinkwa? If you were Tinkwa, what would you do or say? Create a scene between the two using action and dialogue to examine their encounter with each other.

7. Authors of fantasy are said to have characters step in and out of their imaginary worlds. How does this happen in The Moorchild? Revisit other works of fantasy to see how this transition is accomplished, Charlotte's Web, for instance, or Tuck Everlasting, or The Devil's Arithmetic.

8. Research the background of modern fantasy using stories like Peter Pan, Alice Adventures in Wonderland, or Mary Poppins. Compare these early stories to The Moorchild. What similarities can be found? What differences?

9. The Moorfolk are shape-shifters. Have students research shape-shifters in Native American and other folklore. How do they compare? What relationship do these shape-shifters have to the Animorphs of current popular YA fiction?

10. Research your own cultural heritage. You may want to interview your parents and other relatives to help create a family tree. Research online and use other resources in your library.

The Moorchild 275 11. Midsummer Eve is an old observance with roots in the traditions of the British Isles. Research library sources and the Internet for information on this day's origins and purpose.

For Further Reference

Dennis, Lisa. Review of The Moorchild. School Library Journal, vol. 42 (April 1996): 136.

Dennis calls The Moorchild a "truly magical find" but suggests that some readers may find Saaski's treatment by the villagers upsetting and the ending somewhat vague.

McGraw, Eloise. Hands on Research: Finding a Bagpiper. Writer (October 1997): 16-18, 43. McGraw details her research methods, with particular references to The Moorchild.

——. "A View from the Deck." Writer (March 1995): 9-10, 45. McGraw gives her answer to the often asked question: "Why do you write for children?"

"McGraw, Eloise Jarvis." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series, vol. 36.

Detroit: Gale, 1992. This is a biographical sketch about the author, giving highlights of her life, her work, and her plans for the future.

Parravano, Martha V. Review of The Moorchild.

Horn Book, vol. 72 (September/October 1996): 598. Parravano briefly summarizes the story, relating it to the classic portrayal of the amoral side by such writers as Katherine Briggs and Mollie Hunter.

Parravano sees Saaski as a sympathetic character and her future with Tarn "fulfilling" and a relief to readers.

Phelan, Carolyn. Review of The Moorchild. Booklist, vol. 92 (March 1, 1996): 1178. This brief review of The Moorchild covers the essentials of the story as it relates to fantasy and reality.

Related Titles/Adaptations

An audio production of The Moorchild is also available and highly recommended by reviewers as a supplement to the written version.

For students wishing to read other stories of the fantasy, folklore, and legend of the British Isles, The Dark Is Rising series, by Susan Cooper, is a fine choice. One book in the series, The Grey King, won the Newbery Medal in 1975. The Harry Potter series, by J. K. Rowling, is also a must for the British fantasy fan. Though set in present-day England, the tales have countless references to legend and folklore. Other recent British fantasy includes a series of three satiric novels for young adults by Terry Prachett, individually titled Truckers, Diggers, and Flyers. In these stories, a clan of "nomes" take on the human world with astonishing and sometimes comical results.

Older students may want to read Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream to get a feel for fairies, transformations, and the tricks of sprites who inhabit this magical play. As a companion book, they may want to read King of Shadows, also by Susan Cooper. This time tale explores the adventures of young, aspiring actor Nat Fields, who finds himself transported to the world of London in 1599 with no certain hope of ever getting back to the twentieth century.

For teachers wishing to expand the theme of the child between two worlds, the outsider, a selection of realistic fiction is available. The Land, by Mildred Taylor, recounts the saga of Paul Edward Logan, born in the south of a slave mother and her white owner.

The Starfisher, by Lawrence Yep, is the semiautobiographical account of the author's Chinese grandmother who moves with her parents to a remote West Virginia town.

She tries, painfully, to adjust to the subtle racism that she encounters there. Katherine Lasky creates a convincing young heroine in Beyond the Divide, the story of an Amish family experiencing the "shunning" of their father by the community. Plain City, by Virginia Hamilton, examines the experiences of a mixed-blood child in a small Midwestern town.

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