

Murder in a Pig's Eye Short Guide

Murder in a Pig's Eye by Lynn Hall

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Overview

Lynn Hall's books for young readers often center on difficult, sensitive, and controversial themes, but *Murder in a Pig's Eye* is nearly pure escapism.

Hall's intent in this book is simply to divert, enchant, and entertain her audience by means of creating pleasing characters and a hilarious and absorbing plot. This short novel is, specifically, a farcical comedy/mystery.

When aging farmer Henry Siler cuts his arm with a chain saw on the same weekend that his wife, Bella, disappears, suspicions take shape in the mind of Bodie Tureen, the book's sixteen-year-old protagonist. Bodie, along with his younger sister Gracie and his friend Zach, attempts to prove that Henry has murdered his wife and hidden her body on his small New Hampshire farm. Bodie searches for Bella's body in such places as a cistern, a manure pile, a pig pen, and finally the basement of Henry's farmhouse, but each investigation ends only in increasing hilarity for the reader and humiliation for Bodie. Closely following the established traditions of the mystery story, Hall provides a "surprise" and highly satisfying plot twist at the novel's end.

About the Author

Lynn Hall is an astonishingly prolific author of books for young adults, and her books have been well received by both her pre-teen and teenage audiences and by critics. She was born in the Chicago suburb of Lombard on November 9, 1937, but her family moved soon after to a small town near Des Moines, Iowa. As with many other writers, Hall was a loner as a child, perceiving herself as radically different from her parents and her younger and elder sisters in her intense love for animals. She daydreamed about escaping from her family and living by herself in some rural spot, surrounded by dogs and horses.

Hall's childhood dream eventually came true, but only after many years of false starts and hard work. She left home immediately after graduating from high school and traveled all over the country, laboring at a number of essentially menial jobs, several of them involving the care of animals. After returning to Des Moines in the early 1960s, Hall went through a brief and unhappy marriage and then set out on the road again, filled with a new determination to achieve the goals she had established for herself years before. She drifted into writing after reading a book about horses and deciding that she could have done the job better than the book's author. Supporting herself with a series of day jobs and writing feverishly by night, Hall soon found publishers for her books and was finally able to break into full-time writing.

Hall now lives in her "dream" house, Touchwood, in the hilly countryside of northeastern Iowa on a bluff overlooking the Volga River valley. Ever faithful to her childhood dream, Hall shares the house with two English cocker spaniels—currently her favorite breed — while Tazo, a Paso Fino buckskin horse, frolics on the acreage outside.

Setting

Murder in a Pig's Eye is set in contemporary rural New Hampshire. Boris Tureen, Bodie's father, has moved the family from Boston to the archly named hamlet of Lower Bacpane so that he can pursue a career there as editor of the tiny town's weekly newspaper. Although thematic concerns are lightly treated here, the novel's setting speaks to the significant "back-to-the-land" movement of the 1960s and the desire of many city dwellers to flee the competition and hubbub of city life.

The pastoral setting also permits Hall to fill the novel's landscape with a variety of animals, including Yellow Beauty, an amazingly soporific horse loved passionately by Gracie; Sport, the Tureens' adopted dog, who is permanently loyal to his original family and despises every member of his new family; and champion pig Gloria, Henry Siler's porcine pride and joy.



Social Sensitivity

The title of the novel itself gives the reader an early indication that the normally serious subject of murder will be treated lightly and ironically in the pages that follow. In fact, for a mystery novel, *Murder in a Pig's Eye* is remarkably free of blood or violence of any kind. However, Hall does not condescend in a sentimental way to either her characters or her young audience.

She recognizes, for example, that it is quite natural for Bodie and his adolescent friends to speculate in chilling detail about the gruesome possibilities suggested by Bella Siler's disappearance, and the reader is prompted to speculate right along with them. But the emphasis throughout the book is on humor, sprightly characterization, innocent suspense, and low farce. Even the most fastidious or squeamish of readers will find little to object to in *Murder in a Pig's Eye*.

Literary Qualities

Murder in a Pig's Eye offers those literary qualities most looked for by fans of mystery fiction: a taut, wellpaced plot and interesting characters.

Accordingly, readers who desire only lifelike narratives may be disappointed. Bodie's final bravado, for example, is less than believable, given his previously established character; unlikely coincidences abound; and some of the book's minor characters are flat, one-dimensional, "cookie-cutter" figures. But both the improbable plot and the stock characters are perfectly in keeping with Hall's aims for this novel.

Escapist fiction provides its audience with an alternative reality, one that may seem distinctly more exciting (and therefore more inviting) than the real world. Therefore, books such as Murder in a Pig's Eye supply solid entertainment: From the safe position of audience, the reader is able to join Bodie's funny and suspenseful search for the missing Bella and to meet, along the way, a host of agreeable characters.

Readers choose a variety of books for a variety of reasons. Often, one of those reasons is the very real need to be entertained—to live for a time in an alternative reality created by the skill of a writer. The literary value of Murder in a Pig's Eye resides chiefly in its invitation to participate in the wacky, exciting, and eminently entertaining events in Lower Bacpane, New Hampshire.



Themes and Characters

Essentially escapist fare, *Murder in a Pig's Eye* is more concerned with providing broad entertainment than with expounding complex ideas. Nonetheless, the book's major characters are sharply and, most often, realistically drawn; in them, we may well recognize traits, mannerisms, and approaches to life that are similar to those of people we actually know. For example, Bodie is by nature a physically timid and almost compulsively tidy person; but this latter trait so flies in the face of expected adolescent behavior that, out of feelings of shame, he tries to keep friends from ever seeing his scrupulously spotless room. Bodie's sister Gracie is an ardent horse lover who gives no thought to either boys or her own appearance; she is happiest when she is lying on *Yellow Beauty's* broad, swayed back, endlessly braiding the sluggish mount's mane and tail. Bodie's mother is a meek, retiring woman who nevertheless harbors ambitions to be a stand-up comic; much to Bodie's chagrin, she constantly corners unwilling friends and family members and tries out new jokes on them. And Bodie's friend Zach comes from a household that reveres tight-fisted Yankee frugality; for this reason Zach is fascinated by what he takes to be the Tureen family's profligacy.

These and other characters in the novel, both major and minor, are treated to Hall's individual, quirky, identifying "stamps" so that they quickly become distinctive and memorable. Whenever one of them is forced by circumstances to act out of character—for example, when Bodie must confront a man he believes is a homicidal maniac—the reader's sympathy and interest become actively engaged.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the course of the novel, Bodie Tureen searches for Bella's body in a variety of places. Each time, he is certain that he has located the actual site of Bella's remains. How does Bodie's attitude during these episodes contribute to the overall level of suspense that Lynn Hall creates in this book? What other methods does the author use to promote feelings of suspense on the part of the reader?
2. Bodie and Zach are quick to believe that Henry Siler has murdered his wife; Gracie, although a little more skeptical, finally joins in their assumption. What might Hall be saying about jumping to conclusions about the people around us?
3. Why is Bodie so excruciatingly embarrassed by his mother's joke telling? Why do so many adolescents become upset with parents who occasionally act out of character, even in essentially harmless ways?
4. Gracie has made a pact with her best friend that neither will be the first to allow boys to take the place of horses in their affections. But Gracie's friend, we learn, is already drifting away from horses and toward boys.

Must Gracie follow? Can you recall similar pacts from your own childhood? What is Hall saying about those awkward years between childhood and young adulthood?
5. At what point in the novel do you begin to suspect that Bodie and his friends are fundamentally wrong in their beliefs about what has happened to Bella? Share your answer with other readers of the book.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Murder in a Pig's Eye has been compared to the Hardy Boys series and to the Blossom family books by Betsy Byars. What similarities do you find between this novel and other mysteries for young adults that you have read?

2. Hall is best known for her books about animals. How does she portray animals in this novel? What is her attitude toward them? Is it realistic, sympathetic, or sentimental? Defend your answers with specific examples from the book; compare or contrast the treatment of animals in Murder in a Pig's Eye with that in other books you have read.

3. We are told that the "Silers' forty acres was a leftover from another era, an almost self-sufficient small farm."

Examine Bodie's chores on the Siler farm and describe what, if anything, they taught you about agriculture or about the way of life on a small farm.

How does this new knowledge influence your own attitudes and feelings about farming in general and about farmers specifically?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 47. Detroit: Gale, 1987. A discussion of Hall's works, featuring the author's own commentary and several illustrations from her novels.

Garrett, Agnes, and Helga P. McCue, eds. *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1990. A substantial overview of Hall's life and writings, including many personal comments from the author herself.

May, Hal, and Deborah A. Straub, eds.

Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Vol. 25. Detroit: Gale, 1989.

Updates all previous entries on Hall in this series.



Related Titles

Lynn Hall's books for young adult readers often center on difficult, sensitive, and controversial themes. For example, *The Boy in the Off-White Hat* treats the problem of sexual molestation; *Fair Maiden* deals with the loss of virginity; *The Solitary* focuses on such issues as alcoholism and learning disorders; *The Giver* involves a school girl's romantic feelings toward her middle-aged teacher; and the teenage hero of Halsey's *Pride* battles the stigma of epilepsy. But Hall has also written many books offering lighter fare, more reminiscent of *Murder in a Pig's Eye*.

Often these books combine the plot of a mystery story and a central concern with animals, especially dogs and horses. In *Ride a Dark Horse*, for instance, Hall writes knowledgeably about the world of horse racing, even as she recounts an exciting murder mystery. Other books about horses include the trilogy initiated by *A Horse Called Dragon*, a mustang stallion and sire of the Ponies of America breed.

This novel won the 1972 Charles W. Follett Award and remains one of Hall's best-known and most readily available works.



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