My Friend Flicka Short Guide

My Friend Flicka by Mary O'Hara

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Overview

My Friend Flicka is more than a great horse story. It shows the struggles of a dreamer as he enters the hard world that others live in and begins to accept responsibility. Readers of any age can appreciate the struggles of Ken, the scatterbrained son of a demanding father, as he spends a summer trying to prove himself.

The other characters are unusually well-rounded. Howard, the smug older brother, makes a satisfactory antagonist. Both parents command the reader's interest and sympathy. The ranch hands, the Swedish foreman, the army officers and their wives, the bronco buster, and the veterinarian, although less fully developed, seem very real; the whole world of horse ranching is explained in detail.

The quality of O'Hara's prose adds greatly to the appeal of the narrative.

She uses a varied and flexible style, and her descriptions, particularly those of the landscape, are among the best in young adult fiction.

About the Author

Although she had written stories since she was seven and had earned a good living as a screenwriter, O'Hara thought of herself primarily as a composer. She was born on July 10, 1885, in Brooklyn Heights, New York. After her mother's death, O'Hara and her siblings lived abroad for several years with their grandmother and aunt before returning to their father and new stepmother.

Much against her father's wishes, O'Hara married her cousin Kent Parrot; they had two children. They were divorced, and O'Hara moved to Hollywood, where she became a successful screenwriter for MGM studios. Here she met and married Helge Sture-Vasa, a Swede who became an actor after a period working with horses in the army remount service. She and Helge bought a ranch in Wyoming, where for many years they raised horses and ran a summer program for boys. From these years, O'Hara drew material for a fictionalized journal, three novels, and a play. She and Sture-Vasa later divorced, though she always referred to their twenty-five years together as "the happy marriage."

The third of four children of Reese Alsop, an Episcopalian minister, and Mary Lee Spring Alsop, Mary O'Hara wrote and published short pieces for the piano and was especially interested in creating high quality music for beginning and intermediate students. It was not until her mid-fifties that she turned seriously to writing fiction.

While spending a winter in New York, she enrolled in a creative writing class at Barnard College. For this class she finished a short story, "My Friend Flicka," from a draft she had composed at the ranch. Her professor bought the story for his fiction magazine, Story; under contract to Lippincott book publishers, O'Hara spent a year turning the short story into a novel. Critical and popular success followed, and a film version of the book was produced in 1943. O'Hara wrote two sequels, Thunderhead and Green Grass of Wyoming.

A lifelong spiritual seeker, O'Hara read widely in various philosophical traditions and eventually converted to Roman Catholicism. Her most ambitious novel, The Son of Adam Wyngate (1952), reflects much of her spiritual questioning; this book, although well received and a best seller, is now less widely known than her three novels for young adults. Toward the end of her life, O'Hara produced a play and several works of nonfiction. On her ninetieth birthday, she began an autobiography, which her son completed after her death and published as Flicka's Friend Mary O'Hara died on October 14, 1980, at age ninety-five.

Setting

The story takes place over one summer on the Goose Bar Ranch, outside of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Although no year is specified, the details suggest that the time is the late 1930s. The Wyoming landscape dominates this book and its two sequels. The descriptions of the isolated ranch house, which the McLaughlins have made beautiful with a careful respect for the integrity of materials and design, complement the magnificent scenes of Saddle Back, Castle Rock, and the valley. The ranch is so isolated that it forms a world with its own values. Only rarely do outsiders— the doctor, veterinarian, buyers for the horses—come in. The isolation of the ranch helps to make plausible the importance of the animals in the story.

Each animal has a distinct personality, and the humans interact with them as can happen only where there are few other people.

Beyond the house itself, the plains offer a harsh beauty. They are indifferent and unforgiving, and the summer droughts and winter snows bring death.

An injured animal will starve to death or else fall prey to a wildcat or hawk. This compelling, bleak reality makes the novel, in spite of its fairy-tale plot, surprisingly realistic.

The author's classmates at Barnard found her short story version of the novel sentimental, even with its open ending that leaves the colt's fate unknown. The full-length treatment fully develops the setting, which helps suppress the sentimentality.

Social Sensitivity

O'Hara deals with a harsh world, where both humans and animals must be tough enough to survive on their own—or be defeated. Death and pain consume many of the animals; financial hardship afflicts many of the people. In My Friend Flicka, the painful process of gelding nine two-year-old horses leaves Ken weeping; one of these later dies, and another becomes dangerously ill. A horse is shot after an injury, and Rocket, Flicka's mother, smashes her skull on an overhead sign. A mountain lion kills Rocket's new colt and is eventually shot by Rob as it stalks Flicka. In Thunderhead, two stallions fight to the death, and an aged mare dies giving birth in a driving storm. Yet O'Hara never sensationalizes these events, and neither book contains gratuitous violence. Furthermore, humans are not responsible for most of the violence; mountain lions kill, stallions fight, and old mares die whether people are around or not. Even when humans do intervene, as in gelding the horses, they clearly have no alternative. Finally, the hero of this book is anything but violent, and his initiation into adulthood results from love and self-sacrifice, not from killing.

My Friend Flicka illustrates the financial strain of ranching, a point made more poignant because O'Hara started writing the story at the depths of the Depression. Much of the tension in the McLaughlin family comes from Rob's determination to earn a living by raising thoroughbred horses at a time when there is no market for them. His change to sheep-farmin g in Thunderhead marks a new attitude, as well as improved family relations.

Few females and no members of ethnic minorities appear in My Friend Flicka.

The same is true of Thunderhead Green Grass of Wyoming introduces three new female characters: Carey, Ken's new love; her domineering grandmother; and the heavy-drinking cook, Pearl. Although not innovative in their roles, given the time and place of the story, these are all exceptionally strong characters. It is particularly interesting to see how little tolerance the characters show for the grandmother's "feminine" use of ill health as a weapon, while everyone accepts Pearl exactly as she is, complete with an aggressive sexuality not often seen in middle-aged women in fiction of this period.

Literary Qualities

The fairy-tale plot of My Friend Flicka, in which the ugly duckling Ken is transformed by his love for Flicka, is a modern fable. Although set at the time when the Great Depression was ending and World War II was beginning, the story does not deal with social realities, only addressing those of nature and how they affect people. Freed from the specifics of American history and set in an idyllic, isolated environment, the book retains a timeless quality that has helped it endure.

The book has many other literary strengths, prime among them the author's ability to create strong and complex characters. The point of view shifts periodically among these characters: from Ken to his mother and occasionally to his father. Telling much of the story from Nell's point of view adds depth and interest; the tensions between Nell and Rob, as well as their strong physical bond, appeal to adult readers as well as young ones. The descriptions of Wyoming must surely rank among the best ever written. Every detail of the landscape, every kind of native plant, every change in the weather is reflected in a lyrical description that is all too rare in books for young adults.

Themes and Characters

My Friend Flicka introduces a small cast of major characters, supported by important animal characters and minor human characters. Ken McLaughlin, his parents, and his brother command most of the reader's attention.

Ken, a relatively small ten-year-old, is a brilliant dreamer. He lives most fully in his imagination, losing himself in pictures such as the Audubon print on the stairs or the peasant scenes in his bedroom. He can block out the outside world completely, often with disastrous results, as when he does not even begin to write his final examination essay, or when he stampedes his father's horses and nearly causes them to go over a cliff.

Ken's brother, Howard, is everything that Ken is not: tall, outgoing, competitive, and responsible. He constantly teases Ken and gets him into trouble, but, even so, the boys share a good deal of camaraderie. Throughout much of the book Ken is compared to Howard. At the beginning Ken is portrayed as contemplative while Howard is a person who takes action. Ken cannot articulate his thoughts; Howard speaks easily but without much substance. Ken is passive when confronted by the threats of nature while Howard, like his father, seeks to dominate both animals and people.

By the book's end, however, Ken has changed so that he is no longer Howard's opposite. He can act decisively and express his thoughts, but he retains his imagination and sensitivity.

Nell and Rob McLaughlin are fully rounded characters. To some extent, they exhibit adult versions of the differences seen in the two boys. Rob is energetic, physical, and inflexible, while Nell is sensitive, thoughtful, and responsive to people, animals, and the landscape. Much of the story is told from Nell's point of view. In the midst of the western plains, she preserves much of New England; her clothes, cooking, and house reflect an uncompromising traditional culture. Rob, too, is a quintessen tial easterner, maintaining West Point military school notions about discipline, manners, and, above all, horses. The conflicts between them are all the greater because of the values they share.

Of the animal characters, Banner and Rocket stand out especially. Banner's strength and reliability make him the perfect range stallion and the object of Rob's pride; Rocket's unwavering defiance commands respect in another way. Throughout the book, suspense builds as Ken waits to see whether his filly Flicka will grow up to be like her magnificent and steady sire or like her "loco" mother Rocket, daughter of the Albino.

The theme of My Friend Flicka and its sequels has broad appeal. Ken's struggle to leave the world of fantasy and daydreams for the real one is difficult and often painful. His acceptance of the sometimes cruel realities of nature marks the beginning of adulthood. Ken's choice of Flicka, against all advice, commits him to her and to fighting her wildness, her fear, and the infection that nearly claims her life. Through his growing sense of responsibility for another living being, Ken develops from a passive,

introspective dreamer into a boy who can take on both his autocratic father and the forces of nature.

This thematically rich novel externalizes the hero's internal conflicts, partly through a traditional humankindagainst-nature plot and partly through the representation of Ken's potential mature personality as reflected in Howard, Rob, and Nell. As he gains a more adult perspective, Ken incorporates some family traits and rejects others through a long process of selfrealization. No single event brings about Ken's maturity; instead, his love for Flicka confirms his willingness to continue the struggle of life.

Topics for Discussion

1. At the beginning of the story, Ken spends a lot of time looking at pictures and "losing himself" in them. What does this show about him?

2. Both Rob and Nell, Ken's parents, fight to maintain certain standards from back East. What kind of standards are these, and how are Nell's standards different from Rob's?

3. The author uses Howard, who is very different from Ken, to show some of Ken's most important characteristics by contrast. What are some of the ways in which Howard and Ken differ, and what do we learn about Ken from the differences?

4. Is it important for the reader to know that Ken's chosen colt is one of the descendants of the Albino? Why or why not?

5. What do Gus and Tim, the ranch hands, add to the story?

6. Why do you think Ken's headmaster is so impressed with Ken's essay that he promotes him to the next grade?

7. How does the constant financial struggle at the ranch affect Ken and the rest of the McLaughlin family?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Ken changes from an immature dreamer to a responsible boy in the course of one summer. Do you think this is convincing? Why or why not? Relate this change either to another book about coming of age or to personal experience.

2. The Wyoming landscape almost becomes a separate character in My Friend Fticka and its two sequels. How does the setting contribute to the enjoyment and understanding of the books?

3. Compare the Ken we see in My Friend Flicka, whose fanatic determination to possess his own horse changes his life, to the older Ken in Thunderhead, whose motive is ultimately to let a stallion lead a natural life in the wild.

4. The world of ranching as shown in My Friend Flicka is sometimes harsh; many of the animals suffer and die.

Assess the effects of violence and death on Ken as he matures and on the reader.

5. My Friend Flicka, in its original version, was written over half a century ago.

Explain why the story continues to have appeal today, showing what theme or themes in the book have not become dated over the years.

For Further Reference

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Martin's Press, 1978. Contains a brief biographical and critical sketch.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

The story of Ken, his family, and horses resumes two years later in Thunderhead. Now twelve, Ken has turned Flicka into a well-trained and docile saddle horse. As the story begins, Flicka's new colt, Goblin, makes his first public appearance, and to the horror of Rob McLaughlin, he is a throwback to the Albino: white, powerful, built close to the ground. Throughout the book, Ken strives to keep Goblin (named Thunderhead by Nell) as he is, ungelded, with his very difficult personality unchanged. Unlike the first book, Thunderhead centers on the idea of renunciation; at the end, his dream of making Thunderhead into a racehorse abandoned, Ken releases him into the valley of the Albino to take his rightful place as a stallion in the wild. Rob, too, renounces a part of his dream and introduces sheep as the main cash line of his ranch. His twenty-five-year-old thoroughbred Gypsy, once his polo pony at West Point, dies in a heart-rending scene, and Rob finally lets the past go.

Throughout the novel nature represents unyielding death. Even the plot's satisfying resolution ends in death when Thunderhead must kill the Albino in a bloody fight before he can take his place in the valley.

In Green Grass of Wyoming, Ken, now fifteen, falls in love. This book has less of a story to tell than the other two: Thunderhead has escaped from the valley and, in forming a new band of mares, has taken away a valuable filly belonging to Carey Marsh. In the ensuing hunt for Thunderhead and the filly, Ken and Carey are drawn together in spite of opposition from Carey's tyrannical grandmother, a hypochondriacal invalid. Subplots involve Nell and her new daughter Penny, the drunken cook Pearl, and a dangerous bull. The main conflicts involve finding Thunderhead and deciding what to do with him. Eventually, with Rob's approval, Thunderhead takes his place as the Goose Bar Ranch stallion, and Banner is retired.

Though O'Hara's characterization is as strong as ever in Green Grass of Wyoming, and the experience of first love inspires some of her most lyrical prose, there is no complexity of themes as satisfying as those in the first two novels. The solution that allows Thunderhead and Banner to co-exist verges on sentimentality, and there are contrived scenes with the stray dog Pilgrim and the baby Penny.

A film of My Friend Flicka came out in 1943. Surprisingly close to the plot of the book, it differs mainly in its omissions. There is no Howard; most of his lines go to a little sister, Hildy. The veterinarian is also missing, as are a few graphic scenes. Thunderhead, Son of Flicka was released in 1945, and Green Grass of Wyoming in 1948. A television series, entitled My Friend Flicka and loosely based on the ranch and the McLaughlins, began airing in about 1957 and is still syndicated today.

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