

On Fortune's Wheel Study Guide

On Fortune's Wheel by Cynthia Voigt

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Overview

On Fortune's Wheel is an adventure story told in three parts. In Part One Birle is "The Innkeeper's Daughter."

But she is not content to spend her life working from dawn till dusk, baking bread, scrubbing floors, or attending to the many other duties of the inn under the direction of her stepmother. So, when she has a chance for adventure, she takes it willingly and begins a journey down the river with Orien, a young Lord, who, like Birle, is unhappy with his fate. Their journey, however, ends in shipwreck, and they are sold as slaves in a foreign land.

In Part Two Birle becomes "The Philosopher's Amanuensis." Her master is a learned man who appreciates the fact that Birle can read and write. She becomes his secretary, recording his notes and observations on the healing power of plants. But when war breaks out, Birle and Orien escape and begin the long journey north, back to their homes.

In Part Three Birle is "The Earl's Lady." Although Birle and Orien are married and she is expecting their child, she is not content with her life at court. She returns to the house and land once held by her grandparents.

But Orien, too, forsakes his role as Earl, and is reunited with Birle and their child as they once again begin a new life together.

Although the plot follows the traditional pattern of a hero tale, the focus is on the heroine. As fortune's wheel forces Birle to face hardships and dangers, she meets each encounter with courage and intelligence.

About the Author

Cynthia Voigt grew up in New England where she attended Dana Hall School and Smith College in Massachusetts. Although she always wanted to be a writer, out of necessity she became a teacher and discovered that she loved teaching English and classics. However, Voigt continued writing despite the fact that her manuscripts were regularly rejected. Then, when she was thirty-seven years old, her first book was published. *Homecoming* was the first in a series of seven books about the Tillerman family. It was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association and was nominated for the American Book Award. Later writings have been enjoyed by young people and praised by critics. Voigt received the Newbery Medal and the Edgar Allan Poe Award, and her books have been named as Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Books. In 1989 she received the ALAN Award from the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English for her significant contribution to adolescent literature.

Critic Dorothy Kaufman summarizes the praise which both critics and readers have bestowed on Voigt: "Cynthia's characters are clearly drawn; her writing is sophisticated and volatile; her word choice is precise; her ability to establish intense emotional levels is keenly developed." Voigt has lived in Pennsylvania and Maryland, the setting for many of her novels. However, she now resides in Maine with her husband, Walter, son Peter, and daughter, Jessica.



Plot Summary

On Fortune's Wheel is an adventure that takes place in an undefined medieval kingdom. Birle is the independent daughter of an innkeeper. Her grandparents taught Birle to read and write, skills common people are forbidden to learn. Birle has accepted the marriage proposal of Muir, a huntsman, simply to escape her life of drudgery, though she does not care for him. Shortly before the wedding, Birle unwittingly embarks on a quest; with Orien, a Lord fleeing his fate, she is shipwrecked. The two are captured and sold into slavery along with a simple-minded giant named Yul. They escape and return to the Kingdom, where Orien assumes his role as heir apparent. Realizing that she can never be happy as a Lady, Birle flees to a simple farm holding where her daughter Lyss is born. Orien is unable to face life without Birle and soon joins them.

The story begins one night when Birle hears a suspicious noise and discovers a stranger stealing one of the inn's boats. She tries to stop him, but she is carried downstream with him in the boat instead. The thief is Orien, a Lord who is trying to escape his fate. In their small boat, Birle and Orien drift past the dangers of the notorious port city. They are swept out to sea in the fog. Their small boat is wrecked on rocks. Trapped without food or water, the two rapidly become weaker. Finally, after 8 days, they see a ship. Orien hails the ship, and the pair is rescued. Soon it becomes obvious that their rescuers are pirates who intend to sell Orien and Birle as slaves, along with the giant Yul and a boy.

Birle and Yul are sold to the philosopher and alchemist Joaquim. Birle becomes his amanuensis, or assistant. Copying ancient texts for Joaquim and assisting him in his experiments, Birle learns the healing properties of herbs. Orien's first owners are a pair of craftsmen who starve and overwork him.

When Orien is sold to work as a slave in the deadly gold mines, he escapes, severely injured. Soon, Orien and Birle are on the move again with Yul, fleeing back to the Kingdom. In order to escape, Birle must leave Yul behind, although she promises to return for him. Birle and Orien return to the Kingdom, where he assumes his role as heir apparent. Birle accompanies him to court as his companion. Birle, though, finds the life of a Lady in the court even more confining than life as an innkeeper's maid. She flees the castle without telling Orien that she is expecting his child. Orien follows her. Birle learns that Orien has liberated Yul for her. She also learns that they are married according to a law that states that anyone who declares their intention to be married before the Earl or his heir is legally married. Together, the two embrace a simple life among the people with their daughter, Lyss.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

On Fortune's Wheel is an adventure that takes place in an undefined medieval kingdom. Birle is the independent daughter of an innkeeper. Her grandparents taught Birle to read and write, skills common people are forbidden to learn. Birle has accepted the marriage proposal of Muir, a huntsman, simply to escape her life of drudgery. Shortly before the wedding, Birle embarks on a quest. With Orien, a Lord fleeing his fate, she is shipwrecked. The two are captured and sold into slavery with a simple-minded giant named Yul. They escape and return to the Kingdom, where Orien assumes his role as heir apparent. Realizing that she can never be happy as a Lady, Birle flees to a simple farm holding where her daughter Lyss is born. Orien is unable to face life without Birle and soon joins them.

Birle, the innkeeper's daughter, sees a suspicious crouched shape moving in the dark, near the dock. Birle herself has no business out this late at night. She belongs safe in bed with her little sisters, dreaming of her marriage to a huntsman at the next spring fair.

Running outside, Birle sees the man making off with one of the inn's boats. Birle falls into the water before she can stop the man. He has no choice but to rescue her, and take her with him, at least for the present. If he leaves Birle behind, she will raise an alarm and he will quickly be discovered. The stranger is unfamiliar with the area's hazards, so reluctantly agrees to take Birle's advice and tie the boat up a short distance downriver for the night. The two are at an impasse. The stranger sleeps comfortably in his warm cloak while Birle shivers in her wet clothes.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Birle knows that any man of the people would carry a lantern and walk openly to the dock. Therefore, the crouched shape must be a thief, something the man later denies. Birle reveals her independent nature by pursuing the man. She knows she should call her brothers. Her father and her stepmother, Nan, will surely be angry if they catch her outside at night. Birle is well aware of the dangers from robbers and animals in the night.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

While the stranger sleeps, Birle has second thoughts about having chased him. She realizes that she has compromised herself by spending the night with a stranger, however innocently. Her fiancy, Muir, may use this incident as an excuse to cancel their wedding. The stranger wonders aloud if anyone lives among the stars. Looking up at them, Birle wonders if any man has ever mapped the stars. Birle herself has seen a map of the land. It belonged to her grandparents, a long hidden treasure. They taught Birle to read the map, and the letters that went with it, although such skills are forbidden to the people and reserved only for the Lords.

Her grandparents told Birle the story of her mother Lyss. When Lyss's mother died at her birth, and Grandma's own baby died after just three days, the old couple adopted Birle's mother. Her grandparents are gone now, dying as gently as they lived. Their holding sits empty among the hills. Birle doesn't know what became of the maps, letters and books the old couple secretly owned.

Birle is more than able to care for herself, although she is only 14 years old. She has a small knife hidden in her boot, and can use it to defend herself. Through the tales told by merchants in the inn, Birle has more knowledge of the mysterious land to the south than most people do. She at least knows enough to avoid the port city. Even merchants and entertainers avoid it when alone.

Just as she is about to slip away in the morning, Birle catches sight of the stranger. When he sees Birle he smiles, and it lights up his entire face. "For a moment, just until her beating heart had returned to her chest, Birle thought she understood everything about herself that she had never understood before."

Chapter 2 Analysis

Birle's independence motivates many of her actions. As an innkeeper's daughter, Birle has a keen instinct for danger. She perceives that the stranger does not mean her any real harm. Birle decides not to slip away in the night. This decision is based mostly on Birle's dissatisfaction with her life in the inn. She is tired of the constant daily chores, and of her stepmother's critical remarks. Birle decides if her future husband wants to reject her for such flimsy reasons, let him. By morning, Birle realizes that she does not truly want to marry Muir. It was just a way to escape the unfulfilling life of endless chores at the inn.

Another of Birle's distinguishing features is her education. When her grandparents first show Birle their secret map, she is convinced it reveals a hidden treasure. She is disappointed to learn that the only treasure it contains is education, the ability to read



the map and the letters that accompany it. By the end of the novel, Birle appreciates that education is a great treasure, indeed.

Birle is loyal to her grandparent's memory, although that loyalty does not yet extend to her father and stepmother. Birle's parents are opposed to her marriage to Muir, who is rude and dirty. As a huntsman, he lives in the city of Sutherland. Huntsmen leave their wives alone for long periods while they are away tending the Earl's lands. Nan ridicules Birle, saying that she is lazy and imagines that life in the city will be easier. Nan reminds Birle that with no holding, a huntsman is unable to provide a living for a son or a dowry for a daughter. Birle resists reminding Nan that the older woman was a poor servant with no dowry herself, when Birle's father chose her. Despite her parents' objections, Birle has already accepted Muir's proposal. The agreement is a binding promise, and the ceremony will take place in just a few weeks, at the spring fair.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Birle realizes she will die slowly of a broken heart if she is forced to marry the huntsman Muir. The stranger has dark brown hair and eyebrows. His eyelashes are tipped with gold, over eyes the color of blue bellflowers. The stranger has no beard, only light brown stubble on his face. Birle knows well that only Lords are clean-shaven. This stranger must be a member of the highborn caste. As soon as she sees the man in the light, Birle falls in love with him.

The Lord says he has no choice but to take Birle back to the village. He considers her a child, although she protests that she is 14, and about to be married. Birle distracts him by proposing that they spear a fish for breakfast before departing. After they cook and eat the fish Birle has speared, Birle proposes leaving the man the spear, while she returns the boat to the inn's dock. She warns the Lord of the dangers of the port city, but he is skeptical.

The two debate possible solutions to their dilemma. Finally, Birle suggests that she travel with the Lord as his servant. The stranger agrees that he would like the companionship, and that Birle knows many useful things, but gently reminds Birle she is to be wed soon. Birle confesses that she really doesn't want to marry Muir. Now that the two are betrothed, however, only the man may break the pact. The Lord tells Birle that many huntsmen's wives turn to drunkenness and the protection of other men, driven by poverty, loneliness and hopelessness.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Although the stranger is male, older and a member of the noble caste, Birle is the more practical of the two. She suggests they use the spear in the boat to catch breakfast. Birle is the one who gathers firewood and builds a fire with the man's tinderbox. When the stranger unfolds a map, Birle accidentally demonstrates that she can read it. He is still unaware that she knows how to read and write.

Birle realizes that she is beyond the control of her parents and the village with a delicious sense of freedom. There is no one to stop her doing whatever she pleases, including accompanying this strange Lord. The Lord reluctantly agrees to allow Birle to accompany him only to save her from drunkenness and lewdness as an impoverished huntsman's wife. Birle wonders what crimes a Lord could possibly be fleeing.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

For two days, the two gently drift down the river, in the center where the current is strongest. Orien pedantically explains to Birle what he means by "taking a bath." Offended, Birle explains that the common people understand baths very well. Orien is curious about Birle's people, and amazed to learn she carries a small, sharp knife in her boot. Privately, Birle wonders if it was a crime involving a lady that led the Lord to flee his home. She has heard that Lords marry for land, or for a dowry, or to establish an alliance, rather than for love. She wonders if Orien might have left his family in order to escape such a loveless marriage. He assures her only that he has broken no law.

Birle confides that she has never known the name of her mother's father. Her grandmother was already pregnant when she was hired to work at the inn. Whenever the girl was asked about the baby's father, she simply said he was Jackaroo, the perpetual trickster. Birle's grandparents, operators of the inn, took the baby Lyss in when her mother died. When Lyss herself died giving birth to Birle, her father took Nan as a mate. Under the law, the two cannot marry. A common man can marry only once, for fear his second wife's children will compete with the heirs for the holding.

Orien confesses that the Lords can marry many times. His father has buried three wives. In fact, a Lord must continue to marry until he produces a son to inherit the lands. When Birle asks him why he is running away, Orien does not answer. He does not speak to her again for two days.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Both Birle and Orien feel constrained by the strictures of their separate worlds. Despite Orien's noble birth, he rejects many social conventions. Orien wonders aloud why the people must pay tax to the Lords. He questions why the Lords own the land when the people do all the work. Birle confesses she has never seen the Earl, who owns the inn. He must be a very old man by now. Birle herself questions why anyone with a claim must wait until the annual Hearing Day, instead of receiving a quick judgment. Still, Orien refuses to say why he is fleeing. He will only tell Birle that he has broken no law.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

After two silent days, the pair nears the port city. Birle knows she must leave Orien here, but she tries to delay the inevitable. He will continue by land, circling around the port city, while Birle returns the boat to the inn. Birle suggests that she catch fish for him first. Then, she suggests he enjoy a bath. After all, he doesn't know how long it will be before his next bath. Orien agrees. After dinner, Orien rises and says that he must go on alone. Birle argues that she knows the forest paths better, and he should take her. Orien finally agrees with one proviso. Birle must promise that whenever Orien sends her back, she will go home without argument.

The two make their way through the forest on a small cart path, avoiding the wide road traveled by trading caravans. Orien is eager to stay hidden. The two cautiously approach a merchant's campsite, fearing robbers. Orien tells Birle to return to her village, and she protests. She was sure they would be together for days, not mere hours. Orien reminds Birle of her promise. Before she can answer, the dog from the campsite attacks the pair. While the man and dog are locked in a deadly struggle, Birle slits the beast's throat.

The two must flee back the way they came. They jump into the boat just steps ahead of their pursuers. Rowing downriver, the two are unable to tie the boat for the night. Orien confesses that he has cut the rope with his sword. He remarks that it's a wonder he hasn't learned better, in all his nineteen years. He moans that he has a soft bed at home, but instead he is sleeping in a small boat, in clothes covered with a dog's blood.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Birle longs to accompany the Lord because she cannot imagine a world without Orien in it once she has seen his face. When he is attacked by a dog, and unable to reach his own sword or dagger, Birle saves him. As the two flee in the boat, Orien confesses that he has never killed anyone. Birle thinks that at least the crime he is fleeing is not murder. Orien is too quick to disparage himself, but at least Birle learns his age.

Birle displays great loyalty to Orien, saving his life when they are attacked. Still, she asserts her independence. Despite her promise, Birle is unwilling to leave Orien when he insists, just hours into their journey.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The next day the boat drifts through a dense fog. Birle thinks they must be at sea by now, and wishes she could see the sun to get her bearings. Soon, they hear the sound of oars and two men bickering nearby in the fog. The two are thugs, discussing their recent robbery of a gentleman. Birle wants to go back, but Orient promises to protect her. The two hide in the bottom of the boat, covered by their cloaks. Exhausted, Birle falls asleep there.

When Birle awakes, the fog is still dense, but they seem to be far out at sea. Orient realizes that Birle can read the notations on the map. Under his questioning, she admits that she reads and writes well. When Birle presses him again about his reason for fleeing, Orient only asks "How many just Lords can rule before the land goes to ruin?"

Chapter 6 Analysis

Birle appreciates Orient's promise to protect her, but realizes that he will not be able to defend her if many men beset them. While Orient and Birle each rail against the injustices in their own world, they are ignorant of each other's. For her part, Birle betrays her naivety by asking how a Lord can be unjust. Birle begins to suspect that Orient has been caught in a plot against his overlord, a form of treason.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After dark, an icy wind blows the fog away. Although neither of them knows in which direction land lies, Orien and Birle agree to row together. At least it will help them to keep warm, in the cold ocean spray. Orien wonders aloud if they would have been better off taking their chances on shore that first night, among the bears and wolves. Suddenly, the boat is dashed against rocks. Birle is pulled under the water, and knocked unconscious.

When Birle awakes, it is morning. She is on a rock, with seagulls screaming overhead. Her head aches and the Lord is lying unconscious not far away. By pulling her out of the water, Orien has saved her life. They are on a narrow strip of rock surrounded by tall cliffs. Hungry, and even thirstier on the barren land, the two distract themselves by talking of their pasts. Birle tells of her two older brothers, and two tiny sisters, Nan's daughters. Her village has only four families, with none of the boys old enough to marry Birle. Orien has one brother. His father had other children by different wives, but they do not share Orien's mother.

Orien confides that his brother is passionate and fierce. Orien's father died during the winter. He was shot in a hunting accident. One of the men's arrows pierced his father's neck from the back. Orien fled because he fears the death was no accident. He suspects that one of his father's huntsmen was paid to kill the man.

Under Birle's questioning, Orien confesses that he is the next Earl Sutherland. His father was the elderly Earl's oldest son. As the eldest, Orien will inherit. He may even be Earl as they speak. Orien has many ideas for reform in the kingdom, including lowering taxes, increasing the number of Hearing Days and limiting the power of the Stewards. Still, Orien questions how he could rule effectively when he cannot even make a 14-year-old girl bend to his will.

The pair has no food or water, and can see no way to climb the surrounding cliffs. They are exhausted. Orien sings songs while they lie on the rocks. Orien has many questions about the village people. How do they build their houses? What are their marriage customs?

Chapter 7 Analysis

Birle accepts that it may be her fate to die on the forbidding rock, but wishes that Orien would live. Still, Birle wants the two to attempt to escape, although it looks hopeless. Orien, accustomed to an easier life, wants them to wait for rescue.

Birle finally learns Orien's identity, and the story of his disappearance on their ravaged spit of rock. Orien is taken aback to realize his hubris. He had assumed that Birle



recognized his name, and knew all along that he was the Earl's heir. Orien has fled because he believes he is too kind to rule well. He is also afraid and suspects that his younger brother, Gladaegal, paid to have his father killed. Birle realizes that Orien fears for his life, as well. Finally, Birle realizes that Orien was telling the truth about not being a thief. As the future Earl, the inn and everything in it belong to him.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Towards afternoon, Orien apologizes to Birle for drawing her into this fate. Without his signet ring, Orien cannot even prove who he is. The ring, like all their possessions, was lost in the boat wreck. Birle confesses that she often shirked her work around the inn, until Nan found it easier just to do the chores herself.

Birle remarks that if this were a story told around the fire, the legendary trickster Jackaroo would come and rescue them both. Instead, they just grow weaker from hunger and thirst. Orien tells a story of Jackaroo rescuing a prince from his wicked stepmother. Birle tells of the Jackaroo rescuing a woman and her helpless babe, punishing the robbers who killed her family and burned her home. They continue to pass the time by telling each other stories and singing songs until at last they fall into a parched sleep.

In the gray morning, the rain arrives at last. Birle opens her mouth to catch the water and drinks it. She spreads her cloak on the rock, so she can suck the water from it after the rain. The rain finally passes over them and blows across the sea. That day the two do not speak to each other at all.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Even Birle's usual assertiveness and practicality are extinguished by hunger and thirst. Orien realizes that he has brought disaster on both of them, by trying to avoid his fate. The endless stream of tasks an inn requires disheartened Birle. Although both Orien and Birle have traditional stories of the Jackaroo, they are very different. In Birle's version, the Jackaroo is an advocate for the people, who hide him. In Orien's stories, the Jackaroo defends the nobility against usurpers.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Birle is not sure how many days and nights have passed. Orien passes the time by scratching their names into the rock. Orien confides that he leaves no children behind. None of the wives that were suggested appealed to him. Except Melisaune, and his own father married her, while the Earl was away with the King. The girl bore three children, all of whom died as infants, and eventually died herself.

When Birle is too weak to move, Orien begins to walk along the water's edge. He waves his hands wildly in the air. Turning her head, Birle sees that he is waving at a ship on the sea. Finally, the ship sails out of sight. They are so disappointed they do not even notice another small boat approaching until the oarsman hails them. The man offers to rescue them in return for payment. Orien says all they have to pay their way is his sword and dagger, and Beryl's knife. The man, whose name is Ker, agrees to accept their weapons as payment.

Ker rows the pair to the ship, waiting out of sight beyond the bluffs. Ker introduces them to his younger brother, Captain Torson. The huge men are identical, with bearded faces and small eyes. On the ship's deck, under the canopy, the brothers give Orien and Birle food and drink. After a few bites, Birle falls asleep.

Chapter 9 Analysis

By scratching their names into the rock, Orien at least leaves a record that may endure after their death. Although Orien's father stole the only woman he ever loved, Orien has compassion for the older man. He realizes that as the eldest son of an Earl, the man has spent his entire youth and middle age waiting. Birle thinks how easily Orien could have become a bitter or violent man, instead of the gentle, compassionate soul he is.

When Ker arrives demanding payment, Birle is immediately suspicious. Orien urges her to come, saying it may be many days before he could return for her. Birle chooses to go with him. Aboard ship, it has been so long since Birle has tasted food that she has forgotten what to do with it. After just a few bites, she falls into a deep sleep.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Waking from a heavy sleep, Birle finds she is still hungry. She is thirsty, but for cool, clear water, not the thick ale. Her legs feel intolerably heavy. Looking down, Birle finds her ankles manacled, with a thick chain between. Ker and Torson are in the back of the ship, near the tiller, talking indistinctly. Birle and Orien are on a shelf above the deck, over two oarsmen. One of the oarsmen is a scrawny lad not yet ten. The other is a giant, tall and thick with legs the size of tree trunks. He has the eyes of a dog that has been kicked. The oarsmen, too, are manacled.

Seeing that their captives are awake, Ker and Torson make the boy fetch everyone bread and water. The giant receives the same tiny portion as the starving boy. As Birle eats, she thinks that he must be very hungry. Birle has been so many days without food that her stomach feels uncomfortably full when she has eaten less than half her bread. She offers the rest of the bread to the giant man.

Torson claims that the ale Orien and Birle drank last night was worth far more than their weapons. The captain says that the two should be happy to repay his kindness. Orien tells the men that he is a Lord, worth a great ransom. The Earl of Sutherland will be happy to pay much gold for him. The brothers laugh at Orien's tall tales. In his ragged and weakened condition, he certainly does not look like a Lord. Torson has never heard of the Kingdom Orien refers to.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Birle is not surprised to find herself a captive. Her innkeeper's instincts had warned her that these two men were up to no good. She simply had no choice, except to perish on the rock alone. As Orien points out, this was the only ship that passed in many days. The two consider swimming toward land, but in their heavy manacles, they are sure to drown. Birle quickly understands that the captain means to sell them into slavery.

Birle helps the giant, Yul, out of compassion. He is clearly hungry, and she has more food than her weakened body can use. However, the man proves to be a loyal friend. When Ker tries to fondle Birle, the giant Yul attacks the man, strangling Ker with his wrist chains.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Torson leads the captives through an open gateway. Ker follows behind. They are chained together. None except Yul still wear manacles. The slave market is like a fenced farmyard. Two craftsmen bargain for Orien. They will share him as an apprentice. At least it is better than being sold into the mines, where his face would be cruelly branded. Few men survive long in the mines, and none had ever escaped.

A middle-aged man of medium height bargains successfully for Birle. Birle does not like the way the man looks at her. Just as they are about to leave, an older man walks up. He is stooped and has gray hair. He offers the middle-aged man a gold coin in addition to the price that he has paid for Birle. The man agrees. Just before leaving, the older man mentions Corbel told him to buy a housekeeper. The middle-aged man quickly returns one gold coin. The older man buys Yul from Ker and Torson, as well. Birle just catches a glimpse of Orien before he is lead away by the two craftsmen.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Yul is "a simple," but he can understand speech. He finds it hard to form words of his own, and Birle passes the time on the ship helping him learn to talk.

When the older man in the market mentions the name of Corbel, the other townsman is obviously frightened. Even Torson hesitates for a moment before demanding a premium priced of one gold piece for Yul. Birle guesses that Torson thinks he can get away quickly, and need not visit this port again for many years. A gold coin for Yul seems a great deal, when Orien has commanded only five silver coins.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Birle is lead away to a small house. Dazed, she finds herself weeping. Some time later, a pounding on the door awakens her. It is a slight dark man in a crimson cloak. The soldiers unload a cart of household goods, grumbling all the time. The older man, named Joaquim, returns. His brother is Corbel, the man in the crimson cloak. Corbel instructs the soldiers to put collars on the two slaves.

Corbel tells Birle she is to be Joaquim's housekeeper. Yul will do the heavy work. When Corbel learns that Joaquim has paid an entire gold coin for Yul, he is furious. "Who cheats you cheats me. Who had the man?" he demands. Corbel rushes off, but first tells Birle he will return to inspect the house in one week.

The next morning, Joaquim explains that he is a philosopher. He has been educated in many things. Corbel has brought him here because he hopes Joaquim will unlock the secrets of alchemy, turning lead into gold.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Birle's instinct tells her that Corbel is the most dangerous man she has ever met. When he tells her to stand still or she will die, she obeys. She urges Yul to obey, as well. Joaquim is vague and always immersed in thought, but he is kind. He feeds the two slaves and gives them a place to sleep the first night. Birle is amazed how grateful she is for simple kindnesses like food and clear water. Has she sunk so low, in such a short time?

Despite her predicament, Birle remains a loyal friend to Yul. She helps the giant understand what is required of him, and urges him to follow orders. Birle has one hope she is almost afraid to voice. In her own country, there is a servants' fair. Slaves purchased at the fair are given their freedom after six years of service. She hesitantly asks Joaquim if it is the same here. He destroys all her hopes by telling her that in this country, slavery is for life.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

As a slave, fear is the only reason Birle has for doing a good job. Fear of Corbel, however, is more than sufficient. Corbel drops in unexpectedly several times. Birle makes sure he never catches her idle. Joaquim quickly develops a rapport with Yul, explaining things patiently to the man. The philosopher gives Birle clothes from a large trunk. They belonged to Joaquim's wife, who died last summer of fever.

A week later, as promised, Corbel comes for dinner. He approves of the house and the meal, but still berates Birle for not keeping the laboratory clean, baking her own bread and doing her own shopping. After Corbel leaves, Joaquim gives Birle a purse of coins to the household marketing.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Birle has sympathy for Joaquim's grief, but thinks it would be easier for her if Orient were dead, rather than enslaved. She learns that Corbel, although not of noble birth, owns the entire land for many miles around. He is a fierce general, and the country is his wife's dowry. When Joaquim asks Birle if she can read and write, Birle hesitates to answer. Finally, she decides to trust the philosopher. What is dangerous in the Kingdom might confer safety here. All Birle can think of is that if she's allowed to leave the house and go to market, she will be able to catch a glimpse of Orient.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Yul accompanies Birle when she goes into the dirty, squalid Old Town to market. There, Birle learns how much Corbel is feared in his land. The fishmonger refuses to name a price when she sees Birle's collar, which identifies her as a slave of Corbel's household. Instead, the merchants all tell Birle to pay whatever she thinks is right.

Birle learns why when she passes a spike in the center of the market. There, a man's severed hand with a gold coin is impaled on the stake, for all to see. Another is on the other side of the small square. They belong to Ker and Torson, who were murdered for cheating Corbel. Their hands are displayed as a lesson for all.

Returning from market, Birle learns that Joaquim plans to plant an herb garden. He will continue his studies of medicine, detailing the uses of the healing herbs. In his spare time, Joaquim will work on the alchemy that Corbel demands.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Yul is terrified that he will be lost in the warren-like streets of Old Town. Birle patiently assures the giant that if they become separated he need only stand still. Because of his immense height, Birle will easily be able to find him. A local merchant confirms Birle's suspicions about the hands. Despite the terrible poverty of many Old Town residents, none dares anger Corbel by taking a gold coin from the hands outstretched on the spikes.

Joaquim's passion is the healing arts. With Birle as his assistant and scribe, he intends to produce a huge new book detailing the medicinal uses of herbs. To please Corbel, Joaquim must continue his experiments to try to change stone, lead and earth into gold, although he doubts such a thing is possible.

Birle realizes now that her education represents good fortune. It makes her indispensable to Joaquim, who is a kind and generous master. Because she can read and write, Birle need never worry about being sold to a lecher or to work in an alehouse.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Birle's life is busy in Joaquim's service. Other than her lingering worries about Orien, she might even have been happy. All of her days are spent cleaning, laundering and working in the garden. In the evening, she practices writing under Joaquim's watchful eye and at night, she mends clothes. The philosopher continues to teach Birle the names and medicinal uses of all the herbs. She copies pages of text from his herbals. At least the constant work keeps her mind off Orien's fate.

Whenever Birle goes to market, she varies her route, searching for Orien in the complex web of streets. As summer progresses, every trip to Old Town carries the risk of plague. Fights break out frequently as tempers flare in the heat. Corbel's soldiers quickly and brutally quell them.

When the philosopher asks how Birle came to be a slave, she replies that it was fortune. She tells him of her homeland, but Joaquim confuses it with the magical Kingdom of folklore. Traveling through the squalid city, the only thing that distracts Birle from her fate is the puppet show. One day she catches a glimpse of bellflower blue eyes in the crowd. It is Orien, looking dirty, hungry, wary and weak. Before Orien sees her, his master loads him with packages and takes him off.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Although she resented the myriad chores of the inn, Birle now is grateful for the knowledge they provided. She can cook, sew and keep house well enough to please even Corbel's exacting standards. Working with Joaquim on his huge tome of herbal lore, Birle is absorbing knowledge of all the healing arts. With a kind and generous master, Birle is almost content with her fate. Still, she cannot forget Orien. After one glimpse in the market, she is happy to know he is alive but fears that fate has not been as kind to the Lord.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Birle wonders how Orien could sink to the almost sub-human slave she has seen. She is reminded of her powerlessness when Corbel considers giving Birle as a gift to his unhappy young wife, or bedding Birle himself. Joaquim reveals that Celinde, Corbel's bride, is just 9 years old. The girl was a princess, stolen by the mercenary Corbel to gain her dowry lands, including the gold mines. Joaquim warns that when Celinde's father can assemble an army of sufficient strength, he will attack Corbel's city. A great war is sure to erupt.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Birle realizes that her life, like Orien's, depends mostly on the whim of fortune, beyond her control. She understands that the fate of the princess Celinde depends on chance, as much as her own. Despite her independent spirit, Birle is learning that much of life is beyond her control. Birle is amused when she thinks how pleased Nan would be with her new industry and cleanliness.

Birle is saved from entering Corbel's household by her education. Joaquim insists that Birle's assistance is essential to his alchemy experiments. He can find another slave to cook and clean, Joaquim argues, but never one who can read and write.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Notices are posted throughout the city. Corbel will give a great feast to celebrate the end of his first year of rule. It is said that there will be mountains of bread, made from the finest white flour, barrels of wine and puppet shows for the amusement of the guests and slaves. When the day comes, Yul is too frightened to attend, so Birle goes alone. She catches a glimpse of Orien near the table of bread and ale, but he slips away before she can speak to him.

Birle is sure that Orien is avoiding her. She manages to catch up with him, to warn him about the approaching war. Orien tells her that it is none of his concern. He has been sold to the mines, and will be sent there shortly. Birle urges Orien to escape somehow, and join her at Joaquim's house. Orien argues that even if he does, the soldiers will return him and he will be horribly punished. Orien disappears into the crowd, and Birle focuses on the entertainment.

Corbel has engaged a famous showman. His ensemble includes a man as tall and thin as a birch tree, a midget, a strong man, and a snarling wolf man who crawls on all fours. The final performer is the star - the beautiful Emperor's Daughter, with slanting painted eyes, wearing an embroidered oriental dress.

Finding Orien again, Birle convinces him at least to let her bring him food, and salve to treat his sores. Reluctantly, Orien gives her directions to his master's home, in the darkest quarter of the city, near the fountain of the four tortoises. He warns her to bring Yul as protection if she does come. Parting, he says "I never asked you to give me your heart" and she replies "And I have never asked for yours."

Chapter 17 Analysis

Birle earns respect and friendship in the marketplace by treating the various ailments of the city's poorest inhabitants. Slowly, people begin to realize that Birle is of Joaquim's household, not Corbel's. They lose their fear and begin to speak more freely in front of her.

Birle realizes that Orien's life in captivity is much harsher than hers. She hopes to help him escape with word of the approaching war. The news that her beloved Lord has been sold into the mines is bitter, indeed. Few survive the horrible conditions in the mines more than a few months, and nobody has ever escaped. Birle is saddened to see her friend so disheartened that he won't even attempt to run away.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Birle rises while it is still dark and prepares the supplies she will take to Orien. On impulse, she tells Yul where she is going. Birle is stopped by soldiers at the gate to the city, but they assume she is meeting a lover, or luring maids to Corbel's bed, and let her pass. Birle finds the house Orien described. It is the rudest shack in the worst part of the city, but the hovel stands empty. The slave chains outside hang limp. A dirty, diseased girl from the next house tells Birle they have taken the slave to the mines already.

Joaquim tries to console Birle. He tells her Lady Fortune has a wheel, and the fates of all men are bound to it. Nothing but chance dictates whether they rise or fall. In the mines, Joaquim tells her, the best she can hope for Orien is a quick death.

For days, Birle rises early to ease her worry with work. One morning she notices that Yul has left a bundle of dirty clothes near the garden wall. Coming out of the privy, Birle wonders why Yul would do such a thing. He never has before. Thinking to scoop up the dirty clothes, Birle realizes that the bundle is a man. It is Orien. There is no time to be glad. The right side of his face is a fetid, open sore. He smells like rotting meat.

Birle rouses Yul. Together they carry the slave inside and Birle doctors his wounds. While Birle is trying to think how to hide Orien from Joaquim, the philosopher announces that he will leave the city today. The war is sure to start soon, and Joaquim will leave the slaves behind and return to his native land.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Yul is worried by Birle's departure. Again, she promises Yul that as long as she lives, she will return for him. Birle is shocked to discover Orien is already gone. She had thought it would be easier to know he was dead, than to worry about him. Now, she finds that is not true. It is difficult for Birle to accept that her fate is beyond her control. It is even more difficult for her to accept Orien's fate.

Birle realizes that while she has been copying Joaquim's texts, she has also been learning the uses of herbs. She treats Orien's wounds with garlic ointment and barley water. A drop or two of dwale in the barley water will relieve the pain and help him sleep. Too much dwale, and he will die.

Although Joaquim has been kind, he feels no loyalty to Birle and Yul. Joaquim suggests that Birle and Yul leave the cottage before sunset. Otherwise, they will incur Corbel's wrath when he realizes that the philosopher has fled. Joaquim gives Birle a bag with a few silver coins in it. He suggests Birle and Yul separate, because the giant is so noticeable, but Birle refuses to desert her friend.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Birle convinces Joaquim to take the slaves at least outside the city gates. She threatens to expose him to Corbel, unless he helps them get away. They must delay their departure by a day. Birle needs the time to prepare for their flight with a wounded man.

At dawn, they leave the city. Birle drives the cart, with Joaquim beside her. Orien lies in the back. Outside the city gates, they part. Joaquim, frightened, flees in the cart. The mighty Yul carries Orien, who is unconscious. Birle carries their supplies on her back.

All day they follow a small trail through the forest. Birle avoids the heavily traveled roads. The next day they see a huge army traveling on the road. It is the soldiers of the King, Celinde's father, marching to attack Corbel's forces. Birle is relieved that the mercenary has more to worry about than a few runaway slaves.

Birle is eager to put as much space between themselves and the city as possible. They walk all day, and into the night, with Birle in the lead. Suddenly a shadow springs out of the woods, and draws a knife to her throat. Yul stops struggling at a word from Birle. The robbers drag them to a wagon, parked in front of a campfire.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Birle is determined that she, Yul and Orien will escape slavery. She feels little loyalty to Joaquim, since he shows none for the slaves. She is intensely loyal to Yul and Orien. The giant trusts Birle completely, making it impossible for her to betray him. Orien is unconscious and in terrible pain. Birle feels she has already abandoned Orien once, at the slave market, and refuses to leave him again.

Despite all Birle's precautions, the three are soon captured again. Birle feels sure they will be sold again. Still, she is more prepared this time. She understands slavery, and will be cleverer at escaping.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The head robber's name is Damall. Birle recognizes him as the showman from Corbel's fair. His accomplices are the performers in the show. Damall promises not to hurt the three slaves unless it becomes necessary. While Damall ponders what he will do with them, he has their chains and collars removed.

Damall would let them go free if he could be sure they will not betray him. Finally, he hits on a compromise. Yul will remain with the sideshow, as a guarantee of silence. Damall will give Birle a horse, to carry Orien back to the Kingdom. Birle refuses to sneak away while Yul is asleep. Instead, Birle asks the giant what she should do. Yul agrees to stay with the sideshow. Birle promises to return for Yul, if she lives.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Damall plays a dangerous game. He has spies among Corbel's household. He travels freely between the royal houses, bringing news of Celinde's father to Corbel and news of Corbel to Celinde's father. Birle does not trust the man at all. Despite the robber's weapons and threats, Yul will only take orders from Birle. He realizes that she would never do anything to harm him.

Birle is reluctant to leave Yule, but she can think of no alternative. Still, she makes Damall promise he will give Yul up when Birle returns for him.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Birle continues to travel north, toward the Kingdom. Behind her, the city is in flames on the distant horizon. Birle makes a camp deep in the forest. There the two remain until Orien's fever passes. When Orien is better, he catches two fish in a nearby lake. Laying them at Birle's feet, he says "And with them, I plight you my troth." Birle replies that there is no need for mockery.

Orien assures her he is not mocking, and asks her formally to be his wife. Birle still thinks he is teasing. When Orien insists he has given his heart to her, Birle agrees to become his wife. Embracing in the forest, they agree to be husband and wife. Together they bath in the chilly lake waters and lie together as man and woman. One day when Orien is fully recovered, they leave for the Kingdom. Birle says that it will be good to have shelter, when winter comes. They traveled on until autumn. Finally, one day they crest a ridge in the forest. Below they see the mountains and forest beyond Northgate's city. Orien says they are home, and Birle does not doubt him, although she has never seen this part of the Kingdom.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Birle and Orien are both content to loiter in the summer forest until Orien regains his strength. Birle learns the story of Orien's escape from the mines. When his face was branded, the wound became infected. The soldiers were convinced Orien was too weak from fever to escape. He crawled away, staggering through the city to the philosopher's cottage, where Birle found him. Birle's comment, that it will be good to have shelter in the winter, foreshadows her pregnancy.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Approaching the city of Northgate, Orien takes a few of the silver coins and buys a feast for the two. He brings back news that the fair is recently ended and the city preparing for Hearing Day. Orien wants to learn more about current affairs in the Kingdom before he announces himself as the next Earl. They arrive in the city on Hearing Day.

The Earl sits on a platform, handing down harsh but just sentences to wrongdoers. Orien is proud to see his brother, Gladaegal, ruling so wisely. As the proceedings end, the two men's eyes meet across the room. Gladaegal calls out for them to wait. He recognizes Orien immediately in spite of his branded face. Gladaegal tells Orien he must see their grandfather. Orien introduces Birle as his Lady, and Gladaegal offers his arm. Bathed and dressed in borrowed finery, Birle joins the royal family for dinner at the castle, where the men are seated far from the women.

Chapter 22 Analysis

After all they have been through, Birle and Orien are both changed. Birle thinks of herself as Orien's betrothed, much different from the simple innkeeper's daughter. She was often contented as the philosopher's amanuensis, writing and learning about herbs. Only knowledge of Orien's slavery made her unhappy.

Birle is surprised at the tension between Gladaegal and Orien, until she remembers the manner of their father's death. Although Gladaegal extends every courtesy to Birle, he has eyes only for his brother.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

One winter morning Birle stares out the castle window. The Earl of Sutherland, Orien's grandfather, has accepted her. She has met Orien's grandmother. Birle has seen Orien for only a few moments in the weeks since their arrival. Everyone has been kind, referring to Birle's "foreign customs" instead of admitting her humble origins. Still, she feels awkward and clumsy.

Orien's grandfather tells Birle the story of her grandparent's saving his life, sheltering him from a blizzard in their inn. The Earl reveals that Orien's father was murdered, but not by Gladaegal. The huntsman was seeking his own revenge for a dishonored daughter.

Birle quietly asks permission of the Earl to leave the castle. He refuses until his wife points out that Birle will simply run away if he persists. Among the people, the men and women work side-by-side. Birle can never be happy merely as a Lady. The Earl's Lady knowingly asks if the baby Birle is carrying belongs to Orien, and she admits it does. Finally, the Earl agrees to give Birle her grandparent's holding.

It is arranged that in the spring, when Orien travels east to pay obeisance to the King, Gladaegal will secretly return Birle to her home. Birle bids Orien farewell, telling him that she would prefer to make every journey with him. Orien, not understanding, assures Birle he will return soon.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Birle is surprised that Orien has never mentioned his grandmother. This is just one incident that contributes to her realization that among the Lords, women are not important. Females are considered purely decorative and completely isolated from the men. Even the children are raised in a nursery, separate from their parents.

Orien seems to have overcome his fear of ruling as the next Earl. Gladaegal seems to admire his brother even more than he envies him. Only Birle is unhappy at the castle. She has no work, no outlet for her education and no opportunity to learn more. Orien seems indifferent to her.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

At the holding, Birle sits in the sun. Soon she will put on the servant's clothes brought from the castle. She will arrange her hair. Not in the long tresses of a Lady, or the twin braids of the innkeeper's daughter, but in the single thick braid she devised for herself as a slave. Before she has started, a woman comes up the path. It is Nan. She is delighted to see Birle, calling her "daughter." Nan asks where the man is for the holding, and Birle tartly asks why every holding has to have a man.

Nan fusses about all the work to be done in the house, with Birle just sitting in the sun. Birle plants an herb garden to make ointments and diffusions. When the baby comes shortly after the spring fair, Nan helps Birle. The baby is a girl. With Nan's blessing, Birle names her Lyss, after her own mother.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Nan reveals her great affection for Birle in her greeting. She was present at Birle's birth, and almost feels that Birle is her own child. Nan tells Birle that her parents had a plan to prevent her from marrying the huntsman Muir. They had decided to tie Birle to her bed, and tell the huntsman she had the dreaded spotty fever.

Nan is just the same, but Birle sees her differently. She realizes that chiding is merely Nan's way of expressing affection. Birle appreciates all the woman taught her. It helped her to survive her days in slavery. Compared to being a slave, Nan's rule was mild indeed.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Birle has not forgotten her promise to Yul. In the spring, when Lyss is big enough to leave with Nan, Birle will travel south to find the giant and bring him back. It hurts her to think that she might be killed on the journey, leaving Lyss an orphan. With Birle gone, no one will be able to doctor the farmers who come to her door. Maybe Yul won't want to leave the sideshow. Still, Birle has given her promise and must honor it.

At night, a shadowy figure creeps across the grass. Birle thinks of the robbers who sometimes visit isolated holdings. He walks into the light and tosses his hood back. It is Orien. He calls her Lady, but Birle reminds him she could never be a Lady. Orien asks to see the baby. He insists that no one told him where to find her. At any rate, the Earl could not. He has died this past summer.

Birle realizes that the Earl's death changes everything. Now Orien is the Earl of Sutherland, not just her companion. All at once, she realizes that Orien has come to tell her he will be married. She asks if it's true, and he replies that he is already wed. Birle is speechless. The Earl and his eldest son, Orien explains, have the power to solemnize marriages. The couple only has to declare their intentions to be man and wife in front of the Earl or his heir, and they are legally wed.

Birle realizes that she and Orien have been married since that day in the forest. The Earl must have known this, and his Lady as well. Orien asks her again, if she would be the Earl's Lady. Birle replies that she cannot. "Then it's simple. If you will not be the Earl's Lady, I can't be the Earl," Orien replies.

Orien tells Birle a story, about a young Earl enslaved in foreign lands who won the heart of a mysterious princess, also a slave. Returning home, the princess found she could not be happy away from her home, and sadly returned. The young Earl was miserable without his Lady and followed her, naming his brother regent. If he did not return within the year, the brother was to be named Earl. The young Earl rode off with a troop of soldiers, to the south.

Orien says, "I would stay here with you, Lady, if you will have me." Birle agrees. Then she remembers Yul. She tells Orien she must return to the south. Orien confesses that he has already been south to retrieve Yul. He gave the showman Damall three green gemstones, beryls, for the giant. It is a great price, but Yul looked hale.

Birle wonders aloud what Orien will do. He will never be happy as a simple farmer. Orien has thought of that, too. He has brought back a huge cart of rich fabrics and woods from the south. With Yul's help, he will form them into puppets. Orien will travel the towns, telling fabulous stories of Earls and craftsmen, slaves and merchants from the south.



Lyss stirs in her cradle. Birle lifts the baby and puts her in her father's arms. For just a moment, they both stand with their arms around her, as if they are dancers, or fortune's wheel holding the child.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Just as Birle can never be happy as a Lady in the castle, Orien can never be happy as a simple farmer on a remote holding. Birle will spend her time studying herbs and writing an herbal. Orien will travel the countryside with his puppet shows. Together, despite fate's many twists and turns, they have crafted a future that is satisfying to them both.



Characters

Birle

Birle is the 14-year-old protagonist of the novel, a heroine in every sense of the word. Birle hates the drudgery of her life as the innkeeper's daughter. She especially resents her stepmother, Nan, who is frequently critical and is a demanding taskmistress. To escape the endless work and boredom of life at the inn, Birle has betrothed herself to a huntsman, over the objections of her father and Nan.

The wedding will take place at the next gathering of the people, the spring fair. Birle is intelligent and practical. Before their deaths, Birle's grandparents taught her to read and write, as well as to decipher maps, skills forbidden to the common people. Birle is attracted to Orien, but accompanies him on his journey as much to avoid her own life as to protect his. Throughout their quest, Birle is the dominant personality. She has much more knowledge of the practical side of life than Orien, and is a better judge of character. When slave traders capture the two, it is Birle who is eventually able to free them.

In her days of slavery, Birle begins to appreciate her stepmother, Nan, much more. Compared to true slavery, life with Nan seems easy. Birle realizes the older woman shows affection by chivvying. Birle is grateful for everything Nan has taught her about running a home and cooking. Once Birle is forced into a life of idleness in the castle, she appreciates the industry Nan taught her even more.

Orien

Orien has dark brown hair and eyebrows, with eyelashes tipped with gold. Birle knows immediately that he is a Lord, because he wears no beard. His eyes are bellflower blue. Birle falls in love with him as soon as she sees him in daylight. Compared to Birle, Orien is dreamy and a bit impractical. Almost the first words he says to her are to wonder aloud if men live on the stars. Birle assures him the stars are merely lights, like flames, and nothing can live there. Birle deftly handles the practical aspects of their existence, like food and firewood.

Orien is quick in thinking up plans, stories and lies - if need be. He passes the time while the two are shipwrecked by singing songs, reciting poems and telling stories. Orien knows little about the common people, and is curious about them, as well as everything else. Orien tells Birle that he has been "bred to rescue damsels in distress."

Orien is thoughtful and introspective. He wonders how many kind Lords the Kingdom can withstand. When he and Birle are confronted with the dangers of the port city, Orien wonders if would have preferred the hazards of the forest, if they had a choice. Throughout their days of captivity, Orien amuses Birle and himself with stories, songs,



and poetry. Orien is accustomed to a life of ease in the castle. Just as Birle could never be happy as a Lady, Orien could never be happy as a simple farmer.

Yul

On the pirate ship, Birle shares her food with a giant man who is starving. When the two are sold together as slaves, Yul develops a deep attachment to Birle. Even when she is forced to leave him to escape, Yul believes Birle will return if she lives.

Joaquim the Philosopher

Joaquim is the gentle, dreamy older brother of the mercenary Corbel. Under Corbel's command, he has been brought to the city to discover the secrets of alchemy, in particular, how to turn base metals into gold. Joaquim is far more interested in the healing arts, and spends most of his time writing an herbalist with Birle's help.

Nan

Birle's mother died days after Birle's birth. Nan, the family's serving girl, was on hand at the birthing and cared for Birle. Eventually Birle's father takes Nana for his mate although legally, as a commoner, he cannot marry again.

Muir

Muir is the huntsman Birle is betrothed to at the beginning of the narrative. She is so desperate to escape the drudgery of life at the inn, and Nan's sharp tongue, that Birle has accepted the man's offer of marriage over her parent's objections. After Birle innocently spends the night in a small boat with Orien, she realizes that Muir might use it as an excuse to cancel their marriage.

Lyss

Lyss is Birle's mother, who died when Birle was born. Lyss's own mother was a young pregnant woman when she came to work at the inn. Whenever anyone inquired about the baby's father, the girl simply said he was Jackaroo, the mythical trickster. The young girl died giving birth to Lyss. The inn's kindly owners adopted Lyss. They are the couple known to Birle as her grandparents, who taught her to read.

Gladaegal

Gladaegal is Orien's younger brother. Orien believes that Gladaegal's personality is more suited to ruling as the next Earl. However, Orien also fears his brother. When a



hunter shoots their father, Orien suspects that Gladaegal has conspired to murder him.

Ker and Torson

Ker and Torson are twin pirates. Torson is the younger, and captain of the ship. Ker rescues Orien and Birle from the rocks where they have been shipwrecked. Together Ker and Torson sell Orien, Birle and Yul as slaves in Corbel's city. When Corbel learns the twins have overcharged his brother Joaquim for the giant Yul, he has the men executed. Corbel leaves their severed hands, holding gold coins impaled on iron spikes in the city square.

Melisaune

Of all the wives offered to him before his escape, Melisaune is the only one Orien loved. The Earl, Orien's grandfather, gave his blessing to the marriage. Instead, while the Earl was away with the King, Orien's father took the girl for his bride. By the time the Earl returned the two were wedded and bedded, with no recourse. Orien's father insisted he should be pleased. Melisaune's dowry lands would still come to Orien on his father's death. Melisaune bore her Lord three children, who all died in infancy. Soon, she too was buried - the third wife outlived by Orien's father.

Corbel

Corbel is a slight, dark man in a deep red cloak. He is a vicious mercenary soldier commanding a fierce army. With his army's support, Corbel has kidnapped and married the beautiful princess Celinde. As the princess's husband, Corbel rules over her lands and owns her gold mines.

Celinde

Celinde is Corbel's child bride. Although the two are legally married, Corbel has not yet bedded the girl, since she is only 9 years old. Celinde, a princess, was betrothed to a prince before Corbel stole her. With the girl, Corbel gained control of all her lands, including the lucrative gold mines.

Damall the Showman

Damall is the tall, lanky master of ceremonies of a traveling sideshow that includes the world's tallest man, the world's shortest man, a wild man and the Emperor's Daughter. Damall regularly travels between Corbel's city and that of his father-in-law, Celinde's father. Damall has a wife in each city and sells both Corbel and his rival information about the other.



Objects/Places

The Falcon's Wing Inn

The Earl gave Birle's grandparents the Falcon's Wing Inn before her mother's birth. A small village soon grows up around the inn. Now, it is run by Birle's father and his second wife, Nan.

The Kingdom

Orien and Birle both live in the Kingdom at the beginning of the story. The King rules over two Earls. Orien is the eldest son of the eldest son of the Earl of Sutherland. Thus, he is destined to become Earl one day.

The Port City

On their journey south, Orien and Birle are careful to avoid the port city, a notorious den of thieves.

The Inn's Boat

Birle's adventure starts when she sees a mysterious man stealing one of the inn's boats from the dock, and rushes to stop him, instead of calling her brothers.

The Rock

Birle and Orien are shipwrecked on a rock surrounded by high cliffs. They grow weaker for eight days without food or water, until they finally sight a ship.

The Pirate's Slave Ship

Unfortunately, the ship that rescues Birle and Orien belongs to a pair of pirates who soon sell them into slavery along with the giant, Yul.

The Philosopher's Cottage

Joaquim the philosopher lives in a small cottage in the city belonging to his younger brother, the mercenary Corbel. Enslaved, Birle becomes Joaquim's housekeeper, and eventually his student and assistant.



Orien's Signet Ring

Orien carries a signet ring, the only proof he is actually a Lord and the next Earl. When the boat is wrecked, it is lost along with all his other belongings.

The Castle

Orien returns to the castle of his grandfather, the Earl of Sutherland, along with Birle.

The Holding

Birle's grandparents retired from the inn to a small farm, or holding, in the forest. Since the couple's death, the Earl has given no one the holding. When Birle rejects the pampered life of a Lady, she retreats to the holding.

Setting

Neither the time nor the actual location of the novel is ever specifically identified, but Voigt has created a mystical medieval kingdom of rigid social classes. The King, the Earls, and the Lords rule with complete authority over the "people" who can neither read nor write. The rulers live in luxury and move against a tapestry of bright colors and ritual. The people suffer under heavy taxes, poor crops, and harsh weather. The women, but never the men, make regular trips to the "doling room" where they wait patiently to receive food, the charity of the rulers.

When Birle and Orien travel south on the river, they leave the Kingdom behind and come to a strange land known to Birle only through stories told at the inn—stores of a land of pirates and outlaws. But in this land, in Corbel's City, she discovers a new world of middle-class merchants who have emerged in the cosmopolitan area along the coast. However, it is not a free land. The rulers, those with the strongest military might, govern the merchants, the poor, and the slaves. As Birle is carried by fortune's wheel through these new worlds, she grows and changes as she adapts and survives.



Social Sensitivity

Birle, the heroine of *On Fortune's Wheel*, carries a double burden: she is a member of the people who must obey the rulers, and she is a woman who must obey the men in her life. The titles of three sections of the novel emphasize her subservient role. She belongs first to the Innkeeper, then to the Philosopher, and finally to the Earl.

Cynthia Voigt is a contemporary and successful woman, and she introduces the dilemma of establishing a woman's role as her heroine struggles against the limitations of her society. As the innkeeper's daughter, Birle resents the drudgery of her daily chores; as a slave, she is constantly reminded that she has no real options; she recognizes her complete helplessness to save not only herself but also Yul and Orien.

Even at the Earl's court, her options are limited; she is only an accessory. Little is expected of her other than to look and play the part of the Earl's Lady.

When she receives the freedom which she seeks, it is the freedom to live alone, work hard, and raise her child.

Although she is from another time and place, in the end, Birle seems to have what many modern women want— husband and child, and the work which she enjoys.

The story is set in a time of war and violence, and Voigt recreates it in vivid detail. When a man breaks the law in Corbel's City, his head is put on display as a warning to others. Slavery is an accepted way of life, and even Yul, with the strength of a giant, is forced to obey his captors. Even a Lord can become a slave; Orien tells Birle how he was branded before he was sent to work in the mines: "At the branding two soldiers would hold the man down while the third stood above him—waiting, waiting—then slowly lowering an iron that shone red-hot—until the slave screamed and screamed and screamed first in terror, then in pain." But Voigt does not dwell upon these scenes. They are woven among scenes of love and compassion as mirror of this time and place.

The love between Birle and Orien is clearly documented. As they travel north and Orien's health returns, they live together as husband and wife, and Birle conceives their child. Later, Birle learns that Orien, as Earl, had already performed their wedding ceremony when he asked her to be his wife and she agreed. Birth and death, joy and suffering—Voigt recreates these basic human experiences in the lives of her characters.

Literary Qualities

While telling of Birle's adventures, Voigt follows the pattern of the traditional hero tale. In such a tale, according to critics Moss and Stott, the hero's birth is shrouded in mystery, his education is challenging and unusual, and as a leader he is brave and noble but not without weakness or flaw. As a result, the hero is defeated, but, before he dies, he promises to return.

Birle is embarrassed to admit to Orien that her own ancestors are somewhat of a mystery. Her grandmother died in childbirth after claiming that the father of her child was Jackaroo, the legendary hero of the poor. And this child grew up to be Birle's mother.

Birle, herself, has a unique education.

Her grandparents, the couple who raised her mother, taught her to read and write even though such knowledge was forbidden among the people. As a leader, Birle does not lead an army, but she does lead an earl safely from captivity to freedom. If Birle has a fatal flaw or weakness, it is in her steadfast love for Orien, she refuses to see his faults. She follows him devotedly, loving him completely, even when he is indifferent to her or jealous of her situation in the Philosopher's house. But Birle is not defeated by this weakness.

When she leaves the Earl's court, she does not die, but she does hope to disappear, to leave no trace by which she could be followed. However, Orien remains true, and when he finds her, she is released from her isolated existence as they begin their lives together.



Themes

Independence

Both Birle and Orien long for independence. Birle is eager to escape the drudgery of life as an innkeeper's daughter. Birle resents the way her stepmother, Nan, talks to her. Birle has already exerted her independence by accepting a marriage proposal from a man of whom her parents disapprove. Muir, the huntsman, asked Birle to marry him at the last fair. The ceremony will take place at the next sprint fair, in just a few weeks. Birle is already having second thoughts about the marriage. The life of a huntsman's wife is lonely and impoverished. If she has children, there will be no holding for her son to inherit, and no dowry for her daughter. Yet, Birle has pledged her troth. Only the man can break the engagement. Just as Birle agreed to marry Muir to escape her parent's house, now she agrees to a journey with Orien to escape Muir.

Orien also rejects his lot in life. Dreamy and impractical, Orien has lofty hopes for the Kingdom but realizes his personality is not forceful enough to make him a great ruler. Orien's grandfather, the present Earl, has a similar personality. Orien insightfully questions whether two kind rulers in a row won't be damaging to the kingdom. Orien also fears for his life when he suspects that his aggressive brother, Gladaegal, has conspired to murder their father.

Birle is more aggressive than Orien. She is braver and often the leader in their exploits. Birle rails against the restrictions put on women in both the world of the common people, and in the castle. When Nan asks where the man for the holding is, Birle caustically questions if every holding must have a man. Clearly, Birle demands life on her own terms, not dominated by any male.

Once Birle and Orien return to the castle, Orien seems to accept his role as the future Earl. Birle chafes at the idleness and isolation of a Lady. She can never accept such a life and leaves Orien for her grandparent's holding. Orien realizes he can never be happy without Birle. He leaves his brother as regent to forge a life both he and Birle can be content with. Although Birle and Orien certainly have their share of misfortune, Voigt implies that we all have some control over our destinies. Thus, even the enslaved daughter of an innkeeper can find happiness with the son of an Earl.

Education

Some of Birle's discontent and all of her opportunities are due to her education. Although only Lords and Ladies are allowed to learn to read and write, Birle's grandparents have taught her these prized skills. Birle's education and knowledge of a world outside the tiny village lead to her discontent.

Birle is much better at reading maps than at keeping secrets. First Orien and then the philosopher Joaquim figure out Birle is literate from her skill with maps. Orien allows



Birle to accompany him partly because of her knowledge and literacy, and partly to save her from the squalid life of a huntsman's wife. When Birle is enslaved, her ability to read opens up a new world for her. Birle finds conditions as the philosopher's amanuensis far more comfortable than the life of the average slave. She is able to travel freely about the city searching for Orien and lives in relative comfort. Most important to Birle, her literacy enables her to learn about the healing power of herbs. Medicine becomes her life's work.

Returning to the castle in the privileged role of a Lady, Birle finds the idleness all but intolerable. This is partly due to her education. Birle is accepted at the castle in part because of her literacy. With no outlet for her intellect, Birle resents the enforced idleness as much as she once resented the constant mindless drudgery. Birle is forced to forge a life that utilizes her talents and education, even if it means she must leave Orien.

Loyalty

Just as Birle is fiercely independent, she is incredibly loyal. She refuses to abandon Orien after the two are enslaved. Even when Birle must endanger her own comfortable life, she continues to search for the Lord. When faced with the prospect of an easy escape, Birle insists on bringing the feverish Orien with her, vastly reducing her chances of success.

Birle earns the loyalty of the giant, Yul. She befriends the huge man aboard the pirate ship by sharing her bread when he is starving. Yul's intellect is limited, but his loyalty is boundless. He believes Birle each time she promises that if she lives, she will return. In the final test, Yul agrees to indenture himself to Damall the Showman, in return for Birle and Orien's freedom. Throughout the remaining years, Yul never doubts that Birle will return.

Birle and Orien's final act of loyalty is returning home to the Kingdom. The two fled the Kingdom seeking adventure and freedom in exotic southern lands amongst dragons. They arrive in Corbel's land as slaves. There, the two learn their own Kingdom is considered a mythical land of forests, Kings, Earls and fabulous riches. While Birle and Orien know that is not true, they have learned to appreciate the gifts of their homes. By returning, Orien finds the acceptance and security of his own family. He learns his brother is not a murderer, and indeed holds great affection and respect for Orien. Birle too comes to see her old home in a new light. While she still cannot accept a lifetime of drudgery at the inn, she recognizes the comfort, security and love of her home.



Themes/Characters

Birle, the innkeeper's daughter, is only fourteen years old when the story begins, but she is already betrothed to Muir, the huntsman. Her father and stepmother recognize the folly of her decision, but Birle is impetuous and sees marriage as a way to escape the drudgery of the inn. However, once she meets Orien and they begin their journey, she realizes she would never be content to return and marry Muir.

The same adventurous and independent spirit which led her to accept Muir now drives her to follow Orien.

At first she serves him as any of the people would serve a lord. She finds their food, builds their fire, and carries their supplies as Orien leads the way.

But gradually, their roles reverse and Birle becomes the leader. As they travel overland through dark woods, Orien acknowledges that she should go first since she knows the forest better. And soon he owes his life to her when she saves him from an attack by a vicious dog. Their reversal of leadership roles is completed when they escape from the city where they were held as slaves and begin their journey northward.

Orien is ill and delirious, suffering from an infection caused by a branding iron. Birle leads the horse which carries his unconscious body, she tends his wounds with healing herbs, and with her knowledge of the stars, she leads them steadily northward. When they reach the Kingdom where Orien will reign as Earl, their roles again reverse as Orien leads them to his castle. But Birle's independent spirit remains strong. She cannot accept her role as the Earl's Lady and confesses her discontent: "Among the people, a man and his wife are both necessary to the well-being of the house. I can't change myself into a Lady. . . ." And in the end, when she and Orien plan their lives together away from the castle, she realizes "she would be herself and his wife too. . . ."

Birle is compassionate and honorable and her devotion is not limited to Orien. While a slave she befriends a fellow captive, a gentle giant named Yul. She offers to share her bread with him, and he becomes her loyal and obedient follower. She is forced to leave him behind when she and Orien escape northward. But she vows to return and is planning to do so when she learns that Orien has already rescued him.

Birle is not perfect. As the innkeeper's daughter, she resents the unending chores that are assigned to her by Nan, her stepmother. She tells Orien how she would hide when there was work to be done and remain hidden until her family grew tired of looking for her and did the work themselves.

But as a slave, she is grateful for the lessons Nan enforced; she is glad she knows how to pluck a chicken or make a stew. She begins to take pride in the house she maintains for the philosopher, knowing that Nan would laugh if she could see her working so diligently. And, in the end, when Nan comes to assist in the birth of her child, Birle's understanding of and appreciation for Nan has come full circle.



Orien is a member of the ruling class, but he is not without compassion for the people. He wonders that they do not question the heavy taxes and the rigid laws which govern them, but fears his compassion would make him an unfit ruler. So he runs away from his responsibility and the intrigue of the court; despite his sympathy for the people, he has little real understanding of their lives and hardships. He is shocked that Birle can read and write and that she has a knowledge of life outside the Kingdom. As a slave, Orien gives up. While it is true that his fate is worse than Birle's, he seems to resent her good fortune in serving the philosopher more as a secretary than a slave.

When she urges him to escape, he rejects her plans, believing there is no hope left for him. However, when he becomes desperate, he does escape and find his way back to Birle. And he is not without gratitude and faithfulness.

When they return to the Kingdom and he reigns as Earl, his love for Birle remains strong, and he renounces his title when he realizes she cannot be happy at court. Motivated by honor and loyalty, he travels south, to the land where he was held as a slave, and rescues Yul even before he seeks a reunion with Birle.

The title of the book is a recurring theme throughout the novel. As Birle plans her escape with Orien, Joaquim, the Philosopher, warns her: "There are some who say that the Lady Fortune has a wheel, and all men are fixed upon it. The wheel turns and the men rise, or fall, with the turning of the wheel." Birle is able to accept this metaphor for her own life, for she is constantly amazed at the way she can accept and adjust to her changing situations. Even as she is about to be sold as a slave, "she thought, standing bound, that she might grow accustomed even to that, even to being on sale, like an animal. Aye, it was terrible how easily she could grow used to things." But she refuses to accept such a fate for Orien and, eventually, her determination leads them both to freedom. In the end, when Birle and her child are reunited with Orien, Voigt suggests they are now in control of their own lives as "their arms encircled Lyss, as if they were dancers at the fair, or themselves the wheel that turned." Voigt takes the classic dilemma of fate versus free will and weaves it into a spellbinding adventure story.



Style

Point of View

On Fortune's Wheel is written in third person past tense from Birle's point of view. At its essence, the novel is the exploration of one young woman's growing independence. It recounts Birle's journey of self-discovery, which eventually leads her back to her home. The point of view remains close to Birle, recounting her innermost thoughts and feelings. The reader is aware of Birle's love for Orien long before the Lord is. The reader suspects Birle's pregnancy long before it is revealed in the castle.

This point of view has both strengths and limitations. The reader is shown only what Birle directly experiences. The details of Orien's daring escape from the mines, his father's death and his life in slavery are not accessible. The result is that while Birle is presented as an independent, forthright young woman, Orien seems rather weak and ineffectual. The personality of Yul, the gentle giant, is also less well rounded because he is presented only in Birle's perspective.

Through Birle's eyes, her growing understanding of Nan is especially dramatic. Initially, Birle regards Nan as a cold, unfeeling and at times cruel taskmaster with a sharp tongue. By the end of the novel, Birle regards Nan as a mother - the only mother Birle has ever known. She realizes that Nan's sometimes sharp comments are nothing more than the older woman's way of taking care of her family, and showing affection.

Setting

On Fortune's Wheel is set in an undefined medieval kingdom. The topography and culture are not based on any actual location. Orien is the heir apparent of the Earl of Sutherland, one of two Earls in the Kingdom. As such, he is loyal to the King. All of the land and physical possessions belong to the Earl, including the inn, and the inn's boats. Thus, Orien is telling the truth when he tells Birle that although he took the boat, he is no thief. The people of the Kingdom pay heavy taxes to their Earl. When there are disputes, they must bring them before the Earl on an annual Hearing Day. The land to the south of the Kingdom is largely unknown, except for a dangerous port city. It is rumored that dragons live there, guarding trunks filled with gold and jewels.

Orien and Birle flee to an unnamed land to the south of the Kingdom. In Corbel's city, they find a thriving market with a middle class of merchants and craftsmen, in addition to the familiar common people and Lords. Everyone wears colorful clothes of reds, golds and blues, and the fierce mercenary Corbel gives a great feast. Although there is much wealth in Corbel's city, there is also great poverty. Here, the Kingdom is considered a mythical land of impossible mountains, forests, lakes, and magical beings like Jackaroo.



Language and Meaning

The author, Cynthia Voigt, relies on language to convey a sense of time and place in *On Fortune's Wheel*. Much of the language is that traditionally associated with adventure tales set in medieval times. For the reader familiar with the genre's conventions, it immediately evokes a sense of time and place. For those unfamiliar with the genre, the usage may be slightly confusing at times. Often this typical usage involves placing dependent clauses at the beginning of sentences.

An example occurs in Chapter 2, page 21. "But to linger under a lightening sky, which must surely awaken him if the noisy birds didn't, was foolish." Another example common in the genre is the use of the phrase "For all that" to mean 'even though,' especially at the start of a sentence. An example occurs in Chapter 1, page 5. "For all that she was the Innkeeper's daughter, her own life tasted more like service than freedom. . . "

The author uses the word "Aye" both in dialogue and to provide additional emphasis in narration. An example in narration occurs in Chapter 1 on page 4, which reads: "Aye, they [Da and Nan] were counting the days left to the spring fair, when they would have her married and gone from their care. Aye, and Birle was counting them, too." An example in dialogue occurs in Chapter 1 on page 9. "'Aye, my clothes are wet, and cold.'"

Structure

On Fortune's Wheel is divided into three parts, which reflect Birle's different roles in life, as well as stops along her journey. Part 1, *The Innkeeper's Daughter*, details the beginning of Birle's journey as she runs away from her family's inn at midnight. In this section, Birle meets Orien, and learns he is a Lord. Birle convinces Orien to allow her to accompany him on the journey. The two avoid the treacherous port city only to be shipwrecked. They are rescued, only to discover their saviors are in fact pirates who sell them into slavery.

Part 2, *The Philosopher's Amanuensis*, details Birle's experiences in slavery. First, she is sold as housekeeper to the philosopher Joaquim. Yul the Giant is also sold into Joaquim's service. Birle learns the herbalist's arts while searching for Orien. She finds him, and urges the enslaved Lord to escape. After Orien's daring escape from the mines, the pair flees with Yul. They are forced to leave Yul behind with a traveling showman, Damall.

In Part 3, *the Earl's Lady*, Orien and Birle return to the Kingdom. Orien resumes his rightful place at the castle, and Birle accepts the life of a pampered Lady for a time. Realizing that she will never be content to be separated from Orien at court, Birle returns to her grandparents' holding where her daughter Lyss is born. Orien seeks her out and in the climactic chapter of the novel, reveals his plans for the two to have a satisfying life together.



Quotes

"An oar fell down upon her shoulder, just missing her head. She grabbed the blade with one hand, and held it. 'Thief!' she cried. 'Thief!'" Chapter 1, pg. 6

"'Let go,' he grunted. 'Let go! I've no wish to harm you but I will. I warn you. Go off, let go, go away now. You can swim, can't you?'" Chapter 1, pg. 6

"'Don't be frightened,' he said at last. There's no need for you to fear me. I'm just surprised - dumbfounded, more like. I thought - 'His smile faded. 'You're a child. Last night, in the dark, you sounded - I thought--' He scolded her, 'You made me think you were older.' Chapter 3, pg. 23

"'You'll see, Brother,' Ker said. 'A little food, and a little drink, and you'll see what I've brought in.'" Chapter 9 pg. 98

"'I can tell you this: Birle's no wife - nor strumpet. I'm a patient man.' Orien laughed, and pulled at his beard with his hand. 'She's but a girl, still. Let the peaches ripen, before you take them from the branch: That's the advice my grandfather gave me.'" Chapter 10, pg. 108

"'[Yul's] not deaf. Once I've made him understand what needs doing, he does it. It's simple, really - he won't do anything until he understands, that's all. I know learned men who haven't acquired that wisdom.'" - Joaquim the Philosopher, Chapter 13, pg. 137

"'I'm like your lost Earl - I have no desire for power. It's my brother who desires that. He counts the cost well spent that gets him what he desires.'" - Joaquim the Philosopher, Chapter 18, pg. 197

"'Do you believe, then, whatever anyone says to you? I'll tell you what I believe. I believe that if I had the luck, and the wits, and the courage and strength to get free of [the mines] - I'd not return to the city to boast of it. Doubt what they say, whatever they say.'" - Damall the Showman, Chapter 20, pg. 214

"'Birle will come back - if she lives,' Yul said, still smiling." Chapter 20, pg. 218

"'I would have you for my wife, Birle,' Orien said. 'Will you have me for your husband?'" Chapter 21, pg. 230

"'I would make every journey with you,' [Birle] told [Orien]. " Chapter 23, pg. 255

"'The young Earl had no peace without his Lady. No song lifted his heart, and his feet forgot how to dance. Flesh nor fowl nor sweetmeat could coax him to hunger. There was nothing anyone could do, except watch him weaken and fade toward his death.'" Chapter 25, pg. 272



Topics for Discussion

1. When the story begins, Birle is a rebellious teen-ager. Do you find more similarities or differences between Birle and contemporary teen-agers? Explain.

2. Why does Orien allow Birle to continue traveling down the river with him? Are his reasons plausible? What underlying reasons would you suggest?

3. Why does Orien run away from his responsibilities as the future Earl?

Does this decision indicate a strength or a weakness in his character?

4. Birle has problems with her stepmother, Nan. How and why do Birle's feelings toward Nan change even before she returns to her home and they are reunited?

5. Why does Birle leave the castle where she could reign as the Earl's Lady? Is her decision believable? Explain.

6. How is life in Corbel's City different from life in the Kingdom? Consider homes, occupations, businesses, and government.

7. Does Voigt emphasize too heavily the suffering and violence of Birle's world? Cite examples and defend your answer.



Essay Topics

Of all the women suggested as possible brides for Orien, the only one who interested him was Melisaune. Why didn't Orien marry her? How did Melisaune die?

Why has Orien fled his own country?

At the beginning of the narrative, does Orien believe he will be a good Earl? Why or Why not? Do you agree?

What are some of Orien's ideas to reform the Kingdom?

Is Orien more like his father or his grandfather, the Earl, in temperament?

What aspects of life in the Kingdom that Birle accepts does Orien reject?

Birle and Orien live in the same Kingdom, but in very different worlds. What are some surprising things each learns about the other's life?

How does Birle befriend Yul? How does Yul repay her kindnesses?

Why does Birle leave Yul behind? Does she keep her promise to return for him?

How is life at the castle different from what Birle expected? Why can't Birle be happy as a Lady?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read a hero tale, such as the story of King Arthur, Robin Hood, or Ulysses. Compare Birle's adventures to a hero tale, noting similarities and differences.

2. Read Voigt's novel Jackaroo, which tells the story of Birle's grandmother.

Compare the heroines, Birle and Gwyn, noting similarities and differences.

3. Voigt suggests a happy ending for Birle, Orien, and their child. Will Orien be happy as a puppeteer? Will Birle be content to live quietly in a remote holding? Will Yul be able to fit in and adjust to this new life? Write another chapter, showing your readers what happens to these characters.

4. Write a report, based on research, describing life in a port city during the Middle Ages. How accurate is Voigt's picture of life in Corbel's City? Explain your evaluation based upon your research.

5. Plants and herbs have been used as a source of healing for many ages.

Write a report, based on research, analyzing their effectiveness by modern standards.

Further Study

Beichman, Judith M., and Elizabeth A. Belden. "Books for the Teenage Reader/Dragons, Dystopias, and Time Travel: Fantasy and Science Fiction for Everyone." *English Journal* 80, 1 (1991): 78-81. Review of *On Fortune's Wheel*. The authors note not only the exciting plot but also the philosophical issues which are raised: independence, fate, leadership, and government.

Kaufman, Dorothy. "Profile: Cynthia Voigt." *Language Arts* 62 (1985): 876880. Based on an interview with Voigt, Kaufman discusses the source of Voigt's characters and plots and the importance of writing in her life.

Moss, Anita, and Jon C. Stott. *The Family of Stories: An Anthology of Children's Literature*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1986. The authors analyze basic literary patterns which are repeated throughout the ages.

Review of *On Fortune's Wheel*. In *Book Review Digest*, 1990: 1887. Excerpts from four reviews are generally very favorable although one critic is displeased with the character of Orien.

Voigt, Cynthia. "Cynthia Voigt." *Speaking for Ourselves*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990: 217218. Voigt emphasizes the normality of her life, noting that writing is the most exciting part.



Related Titles

Voigt's novel *Jackaroo* was published five years before *On Fortune's Wheel*. It is the story of Birle's grandparents, Gwyn, an innkeeper's daughter, and Burl, a servant at the inn. Burl loves and eventually marries Gwyn, and it is Burl and Gwyn who, many years later, teach their granddaughter Birle how to read and write. When they were still young, Gwyn and Burl had served and rescued from a snowstorm the Earl of Sutherland and his young son, Gaderian. It is the elderly Gaderian that Birle learns to know when she meets Orien's grandfather. The most recent addition to this series of loosely connected novels is *The Wings of a Falcon*. In this *adOn Fortune's Wheel* 3793 venture story, the hero, Oriel, meets Beryl, the granddaughter of Birle and Orien. By the end of the novel, Beryl has become the wife of the Earl of Sutherland, the role which her grandmother Birle had rejected many years before. The three novels can be read independently, but, when read in sequence, readers make interesting connections which enrich their reading experience.



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