

On Mystic Lake Short Guide

On Mystic Lake by Kristin Hannah

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Characters

The major characters of *On Mystic Lake* are types: Annie, the plucky heroine and eternal optimist whose major faults are her passionate love and her willingness to sacrifice her own needs for others; Blake, the overworked, inattentive, often cold and condescending husband who is overly concerned with appearances; Nick, the idealist with a painful past and a capacity to love "more deeply, completely than others" that has allowed life "to pummel him so brutally"; and Izzy, the traumatized child.

As a result of these characterizations, the lines are clearly drawn between villains and heroes. While Blake eventually sees the error of his ways, there is little to redeem him; ultimately he simply cannot recreate himself into a loving husband and father.

He does give the reader some satisfaction though when he at least realizes what he has lost in Annie. Annie, in contrast, has few qualities presented as real faults, and despite her questioning of her role, she is often stereotypically feminine. She always believes "the best of everyone," always cares for others, and is described by her father as someone who does not "understand despair or weakness, not really. You can't get your mind wrapped around hopelessness." Annie is very much a typical romantic heroine, with the standard "heartshaped face" and a strength and resolve that enable her to unwaveringly stand up to Blake within weeks after he has left her.

Nick is Annie's male counterpart, on his own journey of self-discovery as he tries to recover the idealism "hacked away" by the harsh realities of his job as a police officer and by Kathy's death. With Annie's help, he transforms back into the loving, involved father he used to be and is able to return to his job. Also idealistic and idealized, his daughter Izzy's frequently-mentioned tearfilled eyes and scraggly appearance seem primarily designed to tug at the heartstrings.

A number of other characters assist in Annie's journey, primarily Hank, her father. Though he once failed to encourage his daughter to pursue her dreams, Annie understands that he was a grieving widower and a product of his times. Unlike Blake, Hank is able to see his mistakes and compensate for the past. In sharp contrast to Blake and Hank, from early on Annie's daughter Natalie roots for her to become her own person and possesses an independence and self-confidence that Annie envies. Somehow escaping Annie's pitfalls, Natalie is strong, sensible, and inspiring to her mother.

Numerous other more minor characters serve to add color and lend contrasts to Annie that subtly reinforce her integrity, strength, and good taste. Terri, Annie's "wild" friend with an "over-the-top actress lifestyle" and a "steady stream of divorces and marriages" gives Annie support and perspective while reminding the reader of Annie's more traditional values. Similarly, Mystic hairdresser Lurlene is a quirky, goodhearted woman who lives in a triple-wide mobile home and wears clashing colors, making her something of a caricature who adds humor as well as contrast to Annie's quieter personality.



Social Concerns

Given the current divorce rate and the ever-changing roles of women in contemporary society, the story of one woman's marital crisis and the resulting journey of self-discovery will resonate in the lives of many readers. As her only child leaves home and her husband abandons her for a younger woman, Annie Colwater must come to terms with her loss and reinvent her life. Through Annie's experiences and those of the two wounded characters with whom she joins forces, the novel tackles a number of other issues as well, among them suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, drug addiction, and blended families.

Annie's shifting perception of her own role is the novel's main focus. Raised by her father after the death of her mother, Annie escaped her hometown of Mystic, Washington, when she went off to Stanford. Rather than pursuing her own dreams of becoming a writer or opening a bookstore, Annie married right after college, becoming pregnant soon after, and fell into a life that revolved around her husband and child.

Afraid even to travel alone, Annie has always felt safest "in the center of the ordinary, with her family gathered close around her."

When her husband, Blake, shocks her by asking for a divorce, Annie leaves California, fleeing back to Mystic. There she reexamines her relationship with her father, Hank, and becomes the caretaker for the daughter of old friends. Gradually she realizes that her father raised her to doubt herself, define herself through men, and have no other goals beyond marriage and children. Not only does Annie recover her own dreams, but she also discovers that her mother once had similar dreams for her own life. Annie assesses her life and her faults without casting blame, recognizing that she herself has played a role in allowing others to limit her dreams and failing to grow. She realizes that "in her quest for perfection, she'd let Blake become a bad husband and father."

Annie arrives at her realizations in the course of caring for Izzy, the daughter of Nick and Kathy, Annie's childhood friends.

Traumatized by Kathy's suicide, Nick and Izzy are falling apart: at six, Izzy is convinced that she is disappearing and she has stopped speaking; Nick takes refuge in alcohol. Annie falls back into a care-taking role, assisting Nick in becoming sober, helping Izzy to deal with her loss and begin speaking again, and making the three of them into "a patchwork family." In feeling helpful to and appreciated by Nick and Izzy and in gaining understanding of her father, Annie comes to value herself and her dreams again.

Along the way, the novel touches on other serious social issues, including alcoholism, suicide, murder, and poverty. Nick's temptation to drink remains a daily struggle for him, even after he begins recovery; Kathy's suicide creates a complex web of pain and self-blame for Nick and Izzy.



Nick's memories of childhood poverty and homelessness as well as of his mother's murder add to his difficulties as a police officer when he answers domestic violence calls.

Despite these harsh realities, *On Mystic Lake* is at heart a romance, affirming love, marriage, and families. As a result, Annie is not free to simply reinvent her life; she is, after all, still married, and within a few weeks Blake tires of his less domestic lover and wants Annie back. Discovering that she is pregnant with Blake's child, Annie returns to him to try to rebuild their marriage. Finally, though, Blake is unable to do his part and Annie returns to Mystic with the new baby, intending to open a bookstore and continue her relationship with Nick and Izzy. Annie's journey of self-discovery leads to her becoming more independent while still valuing her role as a caretaker.

Techniques

Hannah's background as a romance writer is evident in her lush descriptions of nature as well as in the metaphor, hyperbole, and personification that often cross over into sentimentality. From the first line, in which rain falls "like tiny silver teardrops from the tired sky," the climate and the landscape frequently foreshadow or reflect the emotions of the characters. Rain and tears appear in abundance and are often linked.

More than once the reader is reminded that the rain is "an angel's tears"; Annie tells Izzy that rain is her mother's tears, "and the sunshine is her smile."

The descriptions of Mystic are equally idealized and sentimental, the sky starting "deep in the palm of God's hand," dusk portrayed as day rounding "the bend into a lavender evening." Descriptions of characters are also clichéd and hyperbolic: one character has "breasts the size of the Alps" and another character's smile falls "faster than a cake when the oven door was slammed." Such language does underline the friendly colloquialisms of Mystic natives and the conception of nature as a beautiful refuge, thus linking such details to Hannah's thematic concerns.

A number of plot contrivances contribute to the novel's emotion if not its credibility, including when Izzy is—illegally—kicked out of school because she refuses to speak; when a supposedly trained therapist tells Izzy that she "had to talk or else she wouldn't get over her mommy"; when Nick says that the "technical term" for his late wife's illness is the outdated "manic depression"; and when Annie's baby is kept in an incubator and allowed no physical contact because she weighs "only" five pounds. Hannah's writing is most likely to appeal to readers who enjoy suspending disbelief for the sake of being manipulated.

Themes

Returning to a literal or spiritual home to recover a lost self is a common literary theme. Hannah emphasizes the idea of losing and finding oneself through her repeated references to silence, disappearance, and invisibility. The child Izzy serves as the most obvious representative of this theme; silent since her mother's suicide and convinced that her fingers are becoming invisible, Izzy symbolically reenacts the disappearance of her mother into death.

Annie's instinctive understanding of Nick and Izzy's grief is partially tied to her own experiences of loss—of her mother, her marriage, and her sense of self. Annie knows about "mothers who disappeared one day and never came back" and sympathizes with the daughter "who no longer spoke and the father who had no idea what to say." Annie helps Izzy to see that she cannot follow her mother; as a result of Annie's love and insight, Izzy becomes visible to herself again. A compass given Annie by her father so she would "always know where she belonged" comes to symbolize Annie's process of finding her own center again: "If only there were some internal mechanism that pointed unerringly to the true north of ourselves," she thinks.

Repeated references to absence and invisibility resonate with the losses suffered by these characters as well as with Annie's process of recovery and self-discovery.

Annie says that over the years, she became a "poster child for a missing soul"; she tells her husband that in his shadow, she let herself "become nothing." When she goes back to Blake she feels herself "fading" and imagines herself "searching in mirrors once again for evidence of her own existence."

The gradually disappearing ghost of Kathy only Izzy can see represents her gradual acceptance of her mother's death; the child's insistence on moving a Candyland piece for Annie during every game after she leaves suggests Izzy's faith in and love for Annie despite her absence. Nick, too, becomes associated with the image of disappearance when, as a result of his flagging self-confidence before sobriety, he sees himself as "nothing."

The foggy, rainy, verdant landscape Hannah describes lends itself to related recurring images of sunlight and shadows. After leaving California, Annie thinks of her life in Los Angeles as comparatively cold and sterile, a life in which sunlight was taken "from [her] soul" and she was left "stranded in a cold, gray landscape." The wilder, greener scenery of Mystic becomes symbolic of the restorative powers of returning home.



Key Questions

Hannah appears on the surface to promote a feminist ethic, advocating that women define themselves rather than letting others do it for them. At the same time, Annie finds her inner self in caring for Nick's family and bearing another child, and these are the activities she seems to find most fulfilling. Whether or not Annie truly challenges traditional roles and undergoes significant change is a subject likely to engender controversy among students. Furthermore, Annie's changes may strike some readers as less convincing because of clichéd writing and implausible plot twists, while others are willing to overlook those because of the familiar experiences the story taps into and the familiar emotions it evokes. The novel can serve as a springboard for a discussion on what makes some literary manipulations more effective than others, and what, finally, constitutes good literature.

1. Is Annie a feminist heroine? In what ways does the novel question traditional roles and in what ways does it affirm them?

2. How convincing is Annie's change at the end of the novel? Does it matter that, though she plans to open a bookstore, she has never read a book in the course of the novel except to Izzy? Is her change toward Blake believable and consistent with her character? How independent is she finally?

3. Once afraid to travel, Annie later goes to Mexico alone for an afternoon and sums up the benefits of travel afterward, focusing on the self-esteem gained upon going "to a wildly different place" and learning "that you could negotiate for a silly trinket in a foreign language."

Discuss the authenticity of this revelation.

4. The novel frequently relies on sentimentality to stir the reader's emotions.

Izzy, for instance, is described in ways that emphasize her state of neglect and grief and that underline her childish innocence. In addition, Hannah compares the rain to tears and shows tears springing to her characters' eyes numerous times. How effective are they at creating emotional responses? Do these details make you care more or less about what happens to the characters?

Literary Precedents

American literature's prototypical novel of a woman's mid-life attempt to recreate herself is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Edna is the foremother of Annie and characters like her, discovering a deep discontentment with her marriage and her life and beginning to gain new awareness as she seeks to find herself. In her artistic pursuits and her love affairs, Edna casts about for a new center but ultimately cannot find a way to fit into her society.

While *On Mystic Lake* borrows from a Chopin-influenced literary tradition, Hannah's story is also strongly shaped by the romantic tradition—one that elevates and seeks solace in the natural world—as well as the romance genre, in which happy endings are paramount. Hannah's novel of awakening is one in which the heroine trades one love affair for another, and, unlike Edna, finds fulfillment in family life, develops clearly defined goals, and is presumed to live happily ever after at the close of the novel.

Related Titles

Hannah's eight previous paperback romances include *Waiting for the Moon and Home Again*. She made her hardcover debut with *On Mystic Lake*, an attempt at a more mainstream novel in the vein of Luann Rice, Anne Rivers Siddons, and Barbara Delinsky. Hannah's follow-up novel, *Angel Falls* (2000), returns to northwest Washington State and to themes of identity and family connection, though as in *On Mystic Lake*, the influence of the romance genre remains evident.

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