

Once Upon a Dark November Short Guide

Once Upon a Dark November by Carol Beach York

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Overview

The "Prologue" to *Once Upon a Dark November* describes a frightened child locked in an attic closet for punishment by an aunt who seems not fully aware of the terror the experience caused. The reader does not know the identity of the child, but suspects that thirty-five years later when Chapter One begins, that the now-grown-up child will not have forgotten the attic closet.

Fourteen-year-old Katie who has a crush on her English teacher, Mr. Herron, helps Mr. Herron's wife do housecleaning two afternoons a week. When Mrs. Herron's mysterious Cousin Martin comes to visit, Mrs. Herron predicts that no good will come of his stay.

Katie discovers that Cousin Martin's suitcase is empty, as are the drawers in the guest room. Cousin Martin seems to have come from nowhere and gives no indication of how long he plans to stay. Katie, too, begins to think that no good will come of his visit. Then Katie's neighbor is murdered and Katie, who witnessed the suspect at the scene of the crime, is suddenly in danger. This novel is a quick read, with short, suspenseful chapters.

About the Author

Carol Beach York began writing and selling stories (to her mother) when she was seven. The first story she sold commercially appeared in *Seventeen Magazine* when she was in her twenties. Since then, she has written more than fifty books, many of them mysteries.

York's mysteries for young adults begin with teen-age characters doing ordinary, mundane activities. Then a seemingly ordinary thing happens, such as a visit from a cousin in *When Midnight Comes* and in *Once Upon a Dark November*, and life is no longer ordinary. In *Nothing Ever Happens Here* a teen-age girl complains that life in her small town is boring, that nothing exciting ever happens. By the end of the summer, she wishes that nothing had ever happened. Suspense builds gradually in York's mystery stories.

She leaves subtle clues that are recognizable only by reflecting on the story after reading it. York incorporates her own experiences into these books. For instance, she draws from high school crushes for *Where Love Begins* and *Until We Fall in Love*.

York has also written mysteries for children, such as *Mystery of the Diamond Cat* and *The Midnight Ghost*. As in her books for young adults, the young characters use their wits to help solve mysteries. Dolls are key figures in several books, such as *The Christmas Dolls*, *The Doll in the Bakeshop*, *Mystery of the Spider Doll*, and *Revenge of the Dolls*. In *Remember Me When I Am Dead* a nine-year-old faces the first Christmas following the death of her mother. York's versatility in writing is revealed in her biography *Johnny Appleseed* and her retelling of Washington Irving's "Ichabod Crane and The Headless Horseman" and "Rip Van Winkle." She has also retold the folk tale of the legendary nineteenth-century daredevil Sam Patch, the Big Time Jumper who jumped off Niagara Falls, and the tales of Casey Jones, Mike Fink, and Old Stormalong, the Seafaring Sailor.

York was born in Chicago and still lives there. She attended Thornton Junior College. She is an avid reader who collects books. She also enjoys visiting art museums and going to the ballet.



Setting

The events take place in a fictional small town in contemporary times. As the title indicates, the entire book takes place in "dark November" during those days between Halloween and Thanksgiving when nothing much of interest is likely to happen.

Miss Gorley's attic with its "cupboards and closets, and hiding places, nooks and crannies . . . a place where children might look to play on rainy afternoons . . . or then again, perhaps not" is a place where frightening things happen. Repeated references to stairs and banisters call attention to this place.

Social Sensitivity

The "Prologue" juxtaposes child abuse against a background of ordinary activities and normalcy. An incident of a "naughty" child locked in a stifling hot attic closet is described only as "muffled sounds of screaming and kicking in the attic closet finally stopped." The reader is left to wonder how frequently the child is locked up, but can be sure that this act plays a key role in the book. The child's pain is not described other than "a face, pale and stunned, hovering there in the gloom of the closet" when released by "Auntie." York tells enough with a few words to make the abuse of the child clear, while avoiding the need to be graphic about the abuse. There is suspense, but no violent acts are described. The book could be used as a springboard for discussion of the effects of child abuse, although the book does not address the issue directly.

Literary Qualities

"November was dreary and bleak; the trees looked forlorn and bare; it was dark by four-thirty." Throughout the book, York refers to the cold, sometimes foggy, weather and gloominess of this time of year to create an aura of mystery. She contrasts the gloom with light effectively to create moods as scenes change. She uses Halloween trick-or-treating as a vehicle to introduce Miss Gorley, an elderly woman who makes neighborhood children feel inexplicably uneasy.

The book is written in the third person, from Katie's perspective. The reader knows only what Katie sees. What she cannot see, she imagines—for example, what goes on in Miss Gorley's house—much as the reader might imagine what is not told in the story.

The plot is deceptively simple with a twist at the end. Subtle clues left throughout the book become clear only when the mystery is solved.



Themes and Characters

Katie, a fourteen-year-old only child, is leading a happy, although uneventful, life as a typical high school freshman. Her best friend, Heather, is puzzled by Katie's crush on Mr. Herron, a graying, middle-aged English teacher.

The author reveals very little about Mr. Herron's personality. We learn only superficial facts about him—such as that he drinks his coffee black.

Through Katie's eyes we see only the outer shell of him, as if we, too, are blinded by Katie's crush. Mrs. Herron is described as a compulsive neatnik who seems to spend every waking hour scrubbing, polishing, and putting things away. The reader learns little else about her, but may wonder why she needs help with housekeeping.

Cousin Martin is described as owl-like in appearance, blinking behind thick glasses. A somber man who reveals little about himself, he makes Katie wonder if he ever smiles. Miss Gorley lives alone in the old house across the street. Although Katie has never been beyond the foyer of the house and knows little about Miss Gorley, something about her makes Katie uneasy.

When Katie learns that she is Cousin Martin's aunt, she wonders why he is not close to her.

These shallow, one-dimensional figures do not encourage the reader to examine motive. The book neither condones nor condemns murder as retribution for child abuse, but it does use abuse as a partial motive, along with greed, in the confession of the co-conspirator in the murder. Although Katie feels sorry for Cousin Martin when she finds out that he had been abused as a child, neither she, nor other characters examine any moral issues related to the story.

Although Katie may have been set up to corroborate Cousin Martin's motives and whereabouts, she does not actually figure out the mystery by herself. She is not a sleuth, as one might expect a heroine in a mystery book to be, but she does begin to put some facts together at the end of the book.

Katie does not take an active part on her own to solve a mystery; she is just an average person who happens to become unwittingly involved. Her ordinariness could make Katie more attractive to some readers than would a heroine who is a true detective.



Topics for Discussion

1. Mrs. Herron was not enthusiastic about Cousin Martin's visit and says, "Well, what can you do when it's a relative? You have to let him come."

Why do you have to let a relative visit?

Could you more easily refuse to let someone visit who is not a relative?

2. Why does Cousin Martin make Katie nervous, even though she just met him? How does Katie's mother's react when she meets Martin? How does the author portray Cousin Martin?

3. Katie feels uncomfortable amid the private family affairs that are discussed in the Herron house. How do you handle situations when you feel awkward in the presence of the private matters of another family?

4. Should Katie have reported the empty drawers in the guest room when questioned by the police? If she had done so, would she have incriminated herself by admitting that she snooped?

5. Reread the poem by Emerson early in the book. How does it relate to the story?

6. When did you figure out who the child in the attic was? When did you figure out who the murderer was?

What clues helped you?

7. Speculate on why criminals return to the scene of the crime.

8. The sites of tragic accidents, natural disasters, and crimes often attract curious onlookers. Why do people visit the scene of a crime or tragedy?

9. Is murder ever justified?

10. In what alternative ways could these people have dealt with the pain and anger of child abuse?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find out the procedures for reporting child abuse. What happens after a case of abuse has been reported?
2. Look in a volume of poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson to identify the poem quoted on page 39 of *Once Upon a Dark November*. Explain how it relates to the novel.
3. Why is Katie such a passive heroine? Compare her with heroines in other mystery novels. Are they passive, too?
4. Katie is a witness to a crime. What does the law require of witnesses like her?

For Further Reference

Ward, Martha, and Dorothy Marquardt. "Carol Beach York." In *Authors of Books for Young People*.

Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1979.

Contains biographical information about the author.

Related Titles

Among York's most popular mystery stories for young adults are *Secrets in the Attic* and *On That Dark Night*. As in *Once Upon a Dark November*, ordinary teenagers become involved in extraordinary mysteries.



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