One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King Short Guide

One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King by Jane Yolen

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Yolen's dragon stories are among her best, and she seems to enjoy trying out different ways of looking at dragons. In "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King," included in Here There Be Dragons, she presents a Chinese tale with Chinesestyle dragons. She has long been interested in Chinese dragons, and she incorporates a good deal of Chinese folklore into this story, but her clever ending is more reminiscent of European folk tales. The story is an enjoyable foray into the dragonlore of China, as well as a fine adventure and an exploration of how three sons overcome their fear and great obstacles out of love for their mother.

About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, Pirates in Petticoats (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become an esteemed U.S. expert on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children: a daughter and two boys. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Setting

Although the names and places are Chinese, it is hard to place "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" in China because the sea is to the west in the story, and west of real-life China lie other countries, such as Tibet and India; the sea neighboring real-life China is to the east and to the south. If the sea in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" were to the east, it would be easy to place its setting just north of China's southeastern mountains. Thus, even though the characters have names like the wizard Kuang-jun, the actual locale of events in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" is imaginary, a place where Chinese customs prevail but not actually China.

"One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" is a tale of wonder that takes place in strange but beautiful places. There is, for instance, the undersea "castle made of shells," where individuals can breathe even though they are under water. Other places are populated by fearsome beings, such as the hairy wang-liang ogres. Then, too, certain places are strange, like the unnaturally quiet mountain: "Indeed, the mountain was strangely still. No birds, no frogs, no bears called out. It was as if a great magic had silenced them all. Even the three brothers had trouble speaking as they climbed." Interiors are sometimes equally strange, such as "a great room whose ceiling was lined with panels of obsidian and jade and whose walls were encrusted with pearl." Such settings seem to lend themselves to fine adventures.

Social Sensitivity

The situation of the brothers and their mother is not specific to China or to other cultures. The instance of a poor but honest family working very hard just to stay alive is common to many fairy tales from many cultures. The farm has nothing special about it except that it yields poor crops until it is fertilized by the Dragon King. Yolen uses a similar motif in her short story "Dragonfield," which seems to take place in a European culture.

The Chinese names, especially those of the dragons, may have the beneficial effect of inspiring readers to explore more of Chinese mythology and culture. Undersea dragon kingdoms are common in Chinese and Japanese folk tales, as are mountains inhabited by mysterious beings. Learning that the Chinese have their own version of ogres, the wang-liang, may surprise some readers, instilling a desire to discover what else Chinese folk tales have to offer.

Literary Qualities

One does not have to know much about Chinese dragons to recognize that "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" borrows from Chinese folklore. Its Chinese names alone indicate the sources of inspiration for the tale. Even so, this is not a Chinese story. Yolen's story's ending is in a European style, with the main characters tricking the evil dragon. She does not explain how the Chinese might have ended the story, but, typically in a Chinese dragon story, the emphasis in on the magical aspects of the dragons and on their wondrous otherness—how their view of the world is different from the view of human beings.

Humans seldom defeat dragons in Chinese tales, but instead they honor or worship the dragons, often getting what they want by pleasing the dragon with their devotions.

This is reflected in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" in the remarks of the two Nagas about their being pleased with the work One Ox and Two Ox have done to dean their homes. The shape changes of the dragons in this story are also consistent with Chinese folk tales. Chinese dragons often appear in the world as men and women and can metamorphose into dragons or other animals.

The tone of "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" is that of a fairy tale, which is, in fact, in keeping with its Chinese antecedents. Although Western-style dragons tend to be greedy and belligerent, they share with Chinese dragons the fierceness and suspicion of human beings. Both types often appear in stories for youngsters, as well as in tales to frighten grownups. The fairy-tale tone of the story reflects the association of dragons with a mysterious supernatural world where amazing events can take place.

Themes and Characters

The names One Ox, Two Ox, and Three Ox are odd children's names, but they were given with a purpose: "When his wife gave birth to a son, the farmer insisted on calling the boy One Ox. 'For,' the farmer said, 'someday he will work with me in the field.'" When a second son is born, he is named Two Ox, and the third son is named Three Ox. Their father seems like a very pessimistic man, but his life was hard and, after his death, the sons and their mother work very hard just to survive.

The small farm is not particularly fertile.

According to the mother, "'The farm is so small and so poor, it cannot be shared. Only one of you can inherit it when I die.'" This is a bit of subtle misdirection on Yolen's part.

This remark by the mother suggests that the story may be about three boys competing to be the one who inherits the farm.

Further, their mother says that the one who works the hardest will be the one to inherit.

The sons already work extremely hard, and this statement implies that competition to inherit the farm would be fierce. Yet it is not in the character of the sons to compete in that way or to begrudge their mother for deciding that only one son may own the farm. Instead, when she falls seriously ill, they pool all their money to hire a doctor to treat her.

The brothers might reasonably be discouraged by the doctor telling them that only the Waters of Life can save their dying mother, and that the Waters of Life come from a ring owned by Lung-Wang, the Dragon King. The doctor says that the Dragon King "is said to be more than a li in length—five hundred yards. He has horns on top of his head, and he is covered with scales." Lung-Wang is a huge, dangerous monster who is served by the Nagas, other huge, frightful monsters. Such is their love for their mother that the brothers insist on trying to get the Waters of Life from the king of all dragons.

The doctor says that the Dragon King may trade the Waters of Life for three magical objects, so the brothers set out to find items that the Dragon King might like, with One Ox going east, Two Ox going west, and Three Ox going into the hills. One Ox journeys to the city Kai-lung, and there learns of the Magician Kuang-li. According to a flower girl, "Kuang-li is one of the Nagas, a dragon master of the highest degree." One Ox shows himself to be clever, as well as determined, by imitating the flower girl's call and waiting for a basket on a rope to be lowered to receive the flowers; he climbs the rope.

Dickering with a Naga, which is what Kuang-li turns out to be, is dangerous business. When she turns into a dragon for the night, Kuang-li is interested in eating One Ox, and "As [One Ox] watched, the dragon shook out its great blue-black wings, arched its back, and ran its claws along the floor.

The claws drew runnels like rivers in the wood." Thoughts of his dying mother give One Ox courage, so his love of his mother is indeed very great. When the dragon gives him a magical gift, he must promise to return to work very hard for her for one year, and he declares that he is not afraid of hard work.

His brothers are equally industrious. Even as One Ox opens his gift, the others are showing their courage and willingness to work. One Ox's gift seems like a very good one, for out of a folded piece of paper emerges a pony: "[the magical pony] eyes were like black gems with a red fire at each center."

Two Ox has fears of his own to overcome. When he reaches the seashore, he sees a boy toss a net with silver stones in it into the sea and then withdraw a bountiful catch, while singing to the sea dragon. One Ox's climb into the tower of a magician who can kill someone with only a word pales beside what Two Ox does; Two Ox wraps himself in the net and sings the boy's song then flings himself into the sea! At the sea bottom he not only finds breathable air but a castle made of shells. Within that castle is a demanding wizard who gives a magical silver hairpin to Two Ox in exchange for Two Ox's promise to return to work hard for a year. "'I am not afraid of hard work,'" Two Ox says, to which the wizard says, "'But be very afraid of me.'" Even then "green scales were beginning to form on the old man's face," who turns into a dragon who would just as soon eat Two Ox. Thus Two Ox proves his love for his mother and shows that he has courage and determination equal to that of his brother One Ox.

Of the three brothers, Three Ox is probably the most complex. He has courage, for he climbs into the hills knowing that living there are "the wang-liang, ogres whose bodies are covered with coarse hair and who devour any human being whole." When confronted by a wang-liang, Three Ox has every reason to flee, for "Head to foot [the wang-liang] was covered with coarse orange-brown hair, and when it smiled its teeth were sharp and long." Instead, he fights and manages to take the wang-liang's face, which makes its wearer invisible. So far, Three Ox shows courage and cleverness to match his brothers, but he has a playful streak they may lack. When he returns to their agreed upon meeting place, he wears the ogre's face, making him invisible. When his brothers return and, exhausted, fall asleep, he takes from each his magical object, the folded paper and the silver hairpin.

This is not a kindly act, or even especially funny, because One Ox and Two Ox each think the other has stolen his magical item, and they nearly come to blows before Three Ox takes off his mask and becomes visible. Then he chides his brothers for sleeping while their mother is dying; they should be headed for the home of the Dragon King. This is uncharitable of Three Ox, who could have roused his sleeping bothers for the trip to the mountain home of LungWang. This somewhat unkind behavior of Three Ox deepens his characterization, making him more well rounded, more fully human than his brothers.

Old "Lung-Wang, King of all the Dragons" is worth all the fuss. When he was first seen, Lung-Wang had a long beard and mustache "drooping down either side of his mouth like twin waterfalls of hair. His gown was gray-green, like old moss, and emblazoned

with dark green dragons." He is a great magical king and not impressed by the gifts of the three brothers. He also is a dragon, and when he changes shape, he is impressive: "His [Lung-Wang's] shoulders, as green as the jade, were fiercely scaled, his eyes and teeth were the black of jet, and down from his back ran a sinuous twisting green tail." This is a worthy antagonist in a tale of wonder, and even if his fall is predictable, it is good to know that his Waters of Life save the mother's life and that the "farm flourished as never before because the ashes of the Dragon King made the soil rich and strong."

Topics for Discussion

1. Did you guess how the folded pony and the silver hairpin would be used by the brothers in their confrontation with the Dragon King? What cues in the text contributed to your suspicion?

2. If the Dragon King is dead, who becomes the Dragon King?

3. Why would Yolen write a story in the tradition of Chinese storytelling but give it an ending she says is in keeping with European folk tales, not Chinese ones?

Could it have anything to do with who she thinks her audience is?

4. Why would the Dragon King's remains make the farm fertile and prosperous?

5. Were the Nagas lying when they told One Ox and Two Ox that their gifts would surely please the Dragon King?

Use evidence in the story to support your answer.

6. What purpose might the Nagas have really had when they helped the brothers?

7. Why did One Ox and Two Ox fulfill their promise to work a year apiece for the Nagas even though the magical items of the Nagas do not entice the Dragon King to trade for them?

8. Why did the Dragon King underestimate the three brothers?

9. How important is the brothers' love for their mother to their success?

10. Why would the father assume that his sons were doomed to lifetimes of drudgery?

11. When their mother says that only one of them can inherit the farms, why don't two of them give up and leave home?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Draw pictures of the dragons in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King." Pictures might include their transforming from people into dragons. Be sure to follow Yolen's descriptions of their colors.

2. Do the dragons of "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" resemble any of Yolen's other dragons?

In what ways do they seem unique?

What do they share with Yolen's other dragons?

3. What aspects of Chinese culture are presented in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King?"

4. Why would Yolen write "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" to sound like a fairy tale? What aspects of it sound like parts of a fairy tale?

5. Why would Yolen choose to tell the pony story first before the seas and before the wang-liang story? What would "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" be like if these were told in a different order? What problems would Yolen have had to overcome?

6. Write a story about who becomes the new Dragon King or about what happens if there is no new Dragon King.

7. How much do the dragons in "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King" resemble dragons from actual Chinese folk tales?

8. One Ox and Two Ox spend a year apiece working in the home of a naga.

Write a story about one or the other brother's adventures during the year.

Remember, when in the form of dragons, the Nagas have an interest in eating the brothers.

For Further Reference

MacRae, Cathi Dunn. Review. Wilson Library Bulletin, vol. 69, no. 2 (October 1994): 119-120. MacRae's short review of Here There Be Dragons praises the collection.

Review of Here There Be Dragons. Publishers Weekly, vol. 240, no. 44 (November 1, 1993): 81. The reviewer says, "Dragonlovers and maybe even dinophiles will unite to celebrate Yolen's .. . virtuosic poems and stories about dragons."

Rogers, Susan L. School Library Journal, vol.

40, no. 1 (January 1994): 117. "'The King's Dragon' and 'One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King' are pieces that have the familiar motifs and rhythmic cadences of authentic folk tales, making them good read-aloud choices," says Rogers.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." Children's Literature in Education, vol. 8 (1977): 21-29. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retelling.

—— . "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus, vol. 26 (January 1991): 4,78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

"Yolen, Jane." In Something about the Author, vol. 75. Edited by Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 223-229. This entry gives a list of Yolen's publications with a short biography.

"Yolen, Jane (Hyatt)." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series, vol. 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale, 1990, pp. 463-469. This entry provides a summary of Yolen's publications with a brief interview with Yolen.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Yolen has written many novels and short stories that contain dragons. She may have gotten her start with "Cockfight," which appeared in an anthology of stories about dragons. This tale of dragons forced to fight for the entertainment of humans became the basis for a trilogy of novels about the dragons of Austar IV, which take place on a planet other than earth; Dragon's Blood (1982), Heart's Blood (1984), and A Sending of Dragons (1987), have been reprinted and are among Yolen's most popular works. Some of Yolen's short stories and poems about dragons were printed in Here There Be Dragons (1993). This collection shows the wide variety of kinds of dragons and mythological sources for dragons that Yolen has written about. For instance, "Dragonfield" (please see separate entry) is set in the north, probably northern Europe, and features a fairly traditional ravening dragon, whereas "GreatGrandfather Dragon's Tale" (please see separate entry) is a telling of the St. George versus the Dragon tale from the dragon's somewhat surprising point of view. On the whole, Yolen's dragons tend to represent people's fundamental fears of unknown dangers, and her stories about them, as with "One Ox, Two Ox, Three Ox, and the Dragon King," tend to be about how people cope with those fears.

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