

The Philadelphia Adventure Short Guide

The Philadelphia Adventure by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Philadelphia Adventure is the fifth in a series of books that feature the indomitable Vesper Holly. It is a novel of high adventure imbued with classic elements: a beautiful, fearless heroine, a loyal side-kick with comic qualities, a dastardly villain, a worthy cause that involves saving the "whole blessed United States of America," a growing sense of intrigue and suspense, and a gripping conclusion that includes a high-speed chase—on bicycles. Written in the lighthearted vein of the old-fashioned melodrama, the story moves at a swift pace as Vesper seeks to outwit the fiendish Dr. Desmond Helvitus whose schemes know no limits in the evil they purport. Vesper is aided in her efforts to thwart Helvitus by a loyal contingent of friends that is willing to risk life and limb for her. They endure kidnapping at gunpoint; they leap headfirst into fetid bogs; they are ravaged by brambles, insects, heat, rain, and hunger; they survive horse and carriage chases at breakneck speeds; and they face annihilation on every hand by the diabolical plotting of Dr. Helvitus.

Although The Philadelphia Adventure is a rollicking, exuberant tale, it is not a giddy adventure without substance.

The novel deals with issues pertinent to the reader's world as it explores the questions of whether good is ultimately a stronger force than evil. The story line questions whether Vesper and her loyal comrades can discover the real intent of Dr. Helvitus's chicanery and if their fearless courage will enable them to overcome his odious plans. On another level, however, the book questions whether one can overcome evil by choosing to do good and, in the ideal, what are the qualities that characterize good. It is to Alexander's credit that he deals with ponderous issues in a delightfully entertaining way.



About the Author

Lloyd Alexander is acknowledged to be one of the classic figures in the world of children's literature. He was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 30, 1924, and Philadelphia has remained his home except for a stint in the army during World War II and a period of residence in France following the war. His father was a stockbroker, his mother a housewife, and he describes his childhood as unextraordinary. He was not an excellent student in school although he learned to read when he was quite young and has been an avid reader ever since. He credits Charles Dickens with being one of the writers who influenced his life and helped him to mature. In the course of his reading, Alexander discovered King Arthur and His Knights and began reading hero tales, an act which had a marked effect on his own writing years later.

Following high school he worked briefly as a bank messenger in Philadelphia and attempted college, but found little there to assist him in his ambition to become a writer. In 1943 he decided to enlist in the army in hopes of finding bold adventure and grist for his writer's mill. Although he did not encounter wild adventure of derringdo, Alexander did spend a brief time in Wales before being sent to France, and his impression of Wales remained a vital part of his writer's inner source of story. Following the war, Alexander remained in Paris, attended the Sorbonne, and married his wife Janine.

Overcome by homesickness, he later returned with his wife and her daughter Madeleine to his roots in Philadelphia.

For several years, Alexander worked at a variety of jobs during the day and wrote at night. His first three novels were rejected, but his fourth one, a book for adults, was published. In 1963 he ventured into fantasy and wrote his first book for children, *Time Cat*. In the writing of this book, Alexander became fascinated with a collection of Welsh legends, *The Mabinogion*, which he hoped to retell in a book of his own. In attempting to do this, he realized his real desire was not to retell mythology, but to invent a mythology. Thus the kingdom of Prydain was created, and Alexander continued with the project until he had written the five books of the *Chronicles of Prydain*. The *Black Cauldron*, second in the series, was named a Newbery Honor Book (1965). The fifth book, *The High King*, won the 1969 Newbery Medal.

After the completion of the Prydain series, Alexander turned his attention to the creation of another mythical kingdom, that of Westmark, in a trilogy dealing with philosophical questions of good and evil, and the wide gray area that separates the two. In 1982 *Westmark*, the first of the trilogy, received the American Book Award (formerly National Book Award).

Alexander has stated that he began the *Vesper Holly* adventures as an antidote to the seriousness of the Westmark trilogy—he wanted a chance to be playful. The series has grown to include five books, and one wonders if Alexander is finished with *Vesper's* rollicking adventures or if he is even now at work creating a new escapade for her and her friends. ~ In addition to the three sets of series books, Alexander has written

numerous other books of fantasy for young readers. One of them, *The Marvelous Misadventures of Sebastian*, won the 1971 National Book Award. He has won an impressive array of awards in addition to the prestigious awards named, including nomination for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award in 1975. He continues to live in Drexel Hill, a suburb of Philadelphia, where other interests include music—particularly chamber music—cats, drawing, and print making.



Setting

The story is set in the area around Philadelphia in 1876, a few weeks prior to the opening of the Centennial Exposition. Vesper lives at Strafford Mansion outside Philadelphia with her guardians, Professor Brinton Garrett and his wife Mary. The household includes Smiler and Slider, twins met in earlier adventures, and Tobias "The Weed" Passavant, a young man of about twenty-four who is in residence studying the research of the late Dr.

Holly, Vesper's father.

The group is visited by President Grant who has a dilemma with which only Vesper can assist him. Children in care of the emperor of Brazil, who has come to Philadelphia for the opening of the centennial, have been kidnapped by Helvitus, and Helvitus has stipulated he will release the children only if the ransom is delivered in person by Vesper. Thereby begins the adventure to regain the children and outsmart Helvitus whose intent, it soon becomes clear, is much more insidious than mere kidnapping and larceny. The heroes' efforts carry them to a clandestine meeting in Philadelphia, to a late night sail down the Delaware River, to a tortuous hike through the wilderness area of Aronimink, and finally to a harrowing visit to the great Exposition itself. In choosing Philadelphia as the setting of the story, Alexander breaks the tradition of the earlier adventures which are set in mythical countries.

Social Sensitivity

There are no issues in this book that would unduly concern readers, parents, or teachers. It is a lighthearted, comic adventure that has the added benefit of emphasizing wholesome values.



Literary Qualities

The Philadelphia Adventure is the product of a master storyteller who artfully spins his plot. Alexander has peopled his tale with entertaining, fanciful characters and achieved fast-paced action that mesmerizes the reader and chains him to his reading post. He has punctuated the book with gentle humor and enlivened it with heroic action. Finally, he has enriched the book with literary allusions that spout from the mouth of The Weed. Much to the chagrin of Professor Garrett, The Weed quotes widely and frequently—from Browning to Xenophon—from what appears to be a plethora of trivia stored within his head.

As satisfying as these achievements may be, they are not the greatest triumph of The Philadelphia Adventure, which is the creation of a worthy hero with derring-do and panache who happens to be female. The inimitable Vesper is bold without being brazen, fearless without being foolhardy, good without being goody-goody. She is genuine, honorable, and compassionate. The bond that exists between her and the older Professor Garrett is heartening and endearing. There are many heroic figures to admire in the pages of literature who are male; comparable female figures have been much rarer. It is to Alexander's credit that he has given Vesper Holly, a superheroine worthy of the status, to his audience to be enjoyed and emulated by readers of either gender.



Themes and Characters

The Philadelphia Adventure features an interesting array of characters, including a heroine with marmalade-colored hair and the ability to curse in six languages, a kindly but bumbling professor, a lanky, gawky language scholar who meditates while standing on one leg, and two former sailors, twins with dubious past reputations. In addition, there are two children, one of whom has a penchant for kicking shins, and their governess the traitorous Senhora Da Costa. Looming over all, distorted by his capacity for evil, is the vile Dr.

Helvitus. The book makes use of a sprinkling of real personages including President Grant and Dom Pedro, emperor of Brazil, as well as the imaginary General Daniel "Dapper Dan" Gallaway, based on the real General George Armstrong Custer.

The characters are drawn with wit and ingenuity and depict Alexander's inventive skills. Vesper is now twenty years old, having aged one year in each book in the series, and is the quintessential heroine: brilliant, attractive, dauntless, and possessed with integrity. She mingles easily with all facets of humanity, be it grand-duchesses, Indian chieftains, Gypsy "barossans" or blue-skinned sheiks. She is an orphan whose father has bequeathed her not only an extraordinary intelligence and intrepid sense of adventure, but a large fortune as well. Professor Garrett, "dear old Brinnie," is Vesper's chronicler, whose asides bring a sense of comedy to the pages. Although he means well, Garrett can be relied on to enthusiastically say or do the wrong thing in his endless blundering. He is, however, fiercely loyal to Vesper and follows her faithfully wherever she journeys.

The Weed is a new character to the series, and now that Vesper is past adolescence, brings a romantic interest to the story. Although unassuming and modest, he is from one of Philadelphia's old, respected families, is on first-name basis with the president of the United States, and shows a quick wit akin to Vesper's own. Professor Garrett finds him deplorably unsuitable; however, since the professor's judgments are usually flawed, this is proof that The Weed is a possible suitor for Vesper's hand.

As is characteristic of this series, the characters in The Philadelphia Adventure tend to be either "good" or "bad." The "good" characters are scrupulous and exhibit desirable traits; likewise, the "bad" characters are unscrupulous and exhibit wicked traits. One exception is Senhora Da Costa, the children's governess, who is less one-dimensional than the others. Although she is an ally of Helvitus and abets him in kidnapping the children, she appears to be more misguided than evil. She acts from unselfish motives, and deplores Helvitus's unconscionable ways.

The conflict between good and evil, which is central to this novel, serves to reinforce that good is a stronger force than evil as Helvitus's plotting and machinations are brought to naught.

The book also emphasizes that to do wrong is ignoble even if the wrong is committed from commendable motives, such as Senhora Da Costa's desire to avenge her father. It



further demonstrates, through the character of General "Dapper Dan" Gallaway, that greed, vanity, and self-aggrandizement are dangerous and potent vices that leave one vulnerable to larger areas of wickedness. In order to further his ambitions, General Gallaway, once an officer in the United States Army, allows himself to become an accomplice to Helvitus' plans to murder a large number of people, including the president of the United States and the emperor of Brazil.

While the book heralds the triumph of good over evil, it broadens its theme by lauding such qualities as courage, loyalty, and compassion. The chicanery of Helvitus is foiled because Vesper and her friends are caring and compassionate, and they are willing to risk their safety and physical comfort to effect justice. Their concern for each other adds strength to their efforts as they become a force united against Helvitus. Alexander creates a world in which the heroes are heroic, in which right is served, in which love and mercy are compelling and dominant forces. It is a make-believe world, but one that suggests what humankind is capable of achieving.



Topics for Discussion

1. When Vesper is asked to deliver the ransom note, she knows she is dealing with a notoriously evil man who has previously tried to kill her.

Why does she put herself at such risk?

2. Vesper has nicknamed Tobias "The Weed." What does this nickname reveal about him?

3. When President Grant comes to see Vesper on urgent business she insists he speak in front of the Garretts and Smiler and Slider. What does this tell you of her relationship to them?

4. Senhora Da Costa is a traitress and ally of Dr. Helvitus. However, her motive is to avenge the death of her father. Does this make her less a villain in your eyes?

5. Professor Garrett makes the statement, "Misfortune makes equals of us all." If this is true, give examples of such. If this is not true, what disproves it?

6. Does Vesper have a romantic interest in The Weed? What in the book suggests it?

7. It is uncertain what has happened to Helvitus. Vesper last saw him at the bottom of the Schuylkill River, yet no trace could be found of him when the river was dragged. What do you think has happened to Helvitus?

8. Each of the previous Vesper Holly adventures was set in an imaginary place whereas Philadelphia is the setting of this adventure. Is the use of a real place more or less effective than the use of an imaginary country?

9. Is it satisfactory to the reader that the bad characters in this book, Helvitus, Sergeant Shote, General Gallaway, Senhora Da Costa, etc., go unpunished?

10. Professor Garrett provides much of the humor in this work. How is this humor achieved?

11. In spite of being set during the 1876 Centennial Exposition, this book has achieved a sense of timelessness.

What makes Vesper appear a modern heroine?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Lloyd Alexander has said that while his Vesper Holly series is intended to be playful, he was still writing about issues he felt were important. Are there moral lessons you think can be drawn from *The Philadelphia Adventure*?

2. Helvitus is an archfiend who shows no remorse or regret for his acts.

Likewise, in real life, one reads of people who commit heinous crimes. What is it that turns a person to evil? For example, is one born in some way defective, does one make a choice to be evil, or does one become evil little-by-little?

3. Alexander ends each of his chapters with a "cliff-hanger" that keeps the tempo lively and sustains the readers interest. At the end of Chapter 18, however, he states, "Explosions rocked Machinery Hall," whereas the explosions are the cheers, applause, and shouts of the audience. Has Alexander gone "too far" and descended to the use of slapstick or has he merely made good use of his cliff-hanger approach?

4. Vesper informs President Grant of General Gallaway's intent to take over as president. "So Dapper Dan thought he'd take my place?" Grant muttered.

"It would have served him right."

What is implied in this statement?

5. Vesper Holly and Nancy Drew are chronologically about one hundred years apart. Compare the two heroines.

6. Helvitus says of the Constitution of the United States that he doubts if many citizens have read it and that they care very little whether it is observed or not. Is this an accurate assessment?

7. Many of the characters mentioned in the book are real people. Choose one of the literary, artistic, or historical figures (for example, Xenophon, Wagner, Grant, Corliss, or Bell) for further study.

For Further Reference

Alexander, Lloyd. "Fantasy as Images: A Literary View." *Language Arts* (April 1978): 440-446. Alexander writes of the validity of fantasy as a form of literature for children. He discusses the visual and psychological influence of fairy tales and mythology and summarizes fantasy as "a kind of dress rehearsal for life."

———. "The Flat-Heeled Muse." *The Horn Book Magazine* (April 1965): 141-146. Alexander declares the muse of fantasy to be a very demanding muse who wears sensible brogan shoes. Two points on which the muse is relentless, he declares, are plausibility and rationality. He discusses the role of these two elements in the creation of strong fantasy.

———. "The Grammar of Story." In *Celebrating Children's Books*. Edited by Betsy Hearne and Marilyn Kaye.

New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1981: 3-13. Alexander discusses the role of story—to make sense of a world not noted for making sense—and delineates the facets of story as grammatical elements. Alexander concludes that grammar ultimately can give only tantalizing clues to the nature of story.

———. "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance." *The Horn Book Magazine* (December 1971): 577-584. Alexander discusses high fantasy and its relation to heroic romance. He looks at the conventions of fantasy as a "pot of soup" from which the writer can draw and establishes fantasy as an art form on which children thrive.

———. "No Laughter in Heaven." *The Horn Book Magazine* (February 1970): 11-19. The author discusses the nature of humor and justifies it as a necessary element that helps humans live reasonably and compassionately.

———. "Wishful Thinking or Hopeful Dreaming." *The Horn Book Magazine* (August 1968): 383-390. Alexander establishes the premise that our nation is collectively developing a conscience and moving toward a more humanistic attitude. In this new moral climate he finds fantasy is coming into its own. He delineates some of the values of fantasy and cites hopeful dreaming as one of the most precious.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *More Books by More People*. New York: Citation Press, 1974: 10-18. The chapter entitled "Lloyd Alexander" is a biographical look at the author. The article gives insight into the inspiration behind Alexander's writing as well as personal data.

"LJ Meets Lloyd Alexander." *Library Journal* (April 15, 1971): 1421-1423.

The article is the result of an interview with Alexander shortly after he was awarded the Newbery Medal. In it he discusses the background of some of his works.



Related Titles

The first of the Vesper Holly adventures, *The Illyrian Adventure*, sends Vesper, along with the faithful Professor Garrett, to the tiny country of Illyria to find information that would vindicate her father's theories about the country's earlier history. Once there, Vesper and the professor are drawn into a struggle between opposing factions and meet the nefarious Dr. Helvitus, who is striving to use the civil unrest to his advantage. Peaceful solutions are reached, but Helvitus escapes. In *The El Dorado Adventure*, Professor Garrett and Vesper sail to El Dorado to investigate Vesper's large land holdings which someone suddenly and mysteriously wishes to buy. She finds the Chirica Indians threatened with extinction and learns Helvitus is once again behind the scheming. Vesper foils his plans, but he again eludes capture. *The Drackenberg Adventure* takes Vesper, the professor, and his wife to the diamond jubilee celebration of the Grand Duchess of Drackenberg. They discover all is not well in the duchy and must again confront the iniquitous Helvitus who goes so far as to attempt their destruction with an exploding sausage. Once more the wily villain defies capture.

The Jedera Adventure opens with Professor Garrett and Vesper organizing a caravan bound for the famous library at Bel-Saaba in the North African country of Jedera to return a book Dr. Holly once borrowed. They overcome numerous obstacles to reach Bel-Saaba only to realize their old nemesis is waiting for them. Vesper, along with various friends she has met, restores order to Bel-Saaba, but Helvitus is last seen galloping across the desert on a camel.

Vesper is undaunted; she knows they will meet again.



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