

The Plains of Passage Short Guide

The Plains of Passage by Jean M. Auel

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Characters

Ayla and Jondalar, because they are Auel's perfect couple, have little room for character growth, especially after three prequels. The only changes in the two are Ayla's increased confidence in meeting new groups of people and Jondalar's recognition of his affection for and need for the companionship of Wolf, Ayla's pet who saves both of them from the female tyrant. One improvement in this novel is that Auel lets people other than Ayla and Jondalar invent new processes or come to new discoveries: The healer of the S'Armunai has learned about ceramics, and the Losadunai know how to use coal to produce heat. However, with the setting of the novel sweeping over seven different communities and such vast territory, and with Auel's limited powers of characterization, there are even fewer memorable characters here than in previous volumes.

Social Concerns

The Plains of Passage continues and expands the themes of racism and sexism developed in the earlier novels.

As *The Mammoth Hunters* (1985) showed a Cro-Magnon community coming to accept and care for a Neanderthal boy, *The Plains of Passage* depicts more interaction between the two types of humans, this time on an adult level. The Cro-Magnons who hate the Neanderthals are portrayed as irrational bigots, and the Cro-Magnon communities band together to capture and punish their own people who attack and rape both Cro-Magnon and Neanderthal women.

As Jondalar and Ayla save a Neanderthal husband and wife who are being attacked by the Cro-Magnon gang, Jondalar learns that "flatheads," although different in appearance and customs, are human. Auel reveals her own dream of communities without prejudice when she writes of plans for Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon communities trading and working together to eradicate criminal activities and when she has Jondalar's half-sister wed a man of mixed parentage.

Auel is an ardent feminist and in earlier books emphasized human worship of the Great Mother and the social position of women as equals of men and leaders of Cro-Magnon communities. In *The Plains of Passage*, she portrays feminism gone awry. A community of "Wolf Women" led by the female tyrant Attaroa imprison, torture, and kill men. Auel underscores two themes in this episode: It is wasteful not to use the talents of the whole community, and abuse fosters abuse (Attaroa was a victim of her husband's sadism). Auel's handling of gender issues is very simplistic, especially compared to that of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *The Animal Wife* (also released in fall 1990), which probes the same issues in a similarly primitive setting.

Techniques

In trying to recreate the Cro-Magnon world, Auel includes many natural details, such as descriptions of plants, soil, weather, animal life, and the formation and movement of glaciers. This information, while often interesting, has a tendency to overwhelm the simple story. The problem of excessive detail is also complicated by Auel's prose style, which sometimes runs out of control, allowing the details to overcome the sense of the sentence.

One technique Auel frequently employs in *The Plains of Passage* to create tension is the use of dream sequences.

Italicized blocks of material indicate Ayla's dreams, which, on a vaguely symbolic level, warn her of future events. The dreams are not exact representations of what will happen, but they leave Ayla (and, Auel seems to hope, the reader) with a sense of uneasiness.

Themes

Acceptance is not as important an issue in *The Plains of Passage* as it was in *The Mammoth Hunters*: Ayla is accepted easily by five different CroMagnon communities. Love, on the other hand, continues to be important as Ayla and Jondalar cement their relationship, and jealousy is no longer a disturbing factor. Ayla and Jondalar, especially in their lovemaking, become models of giving and sharing for a young girl who was a victim of rape and does not want to mate. The most pressing question in Ayla and Jondalar's relationship is when and if their love will express itself in the form of a child. Ayla, the Cro-Magnon superwoman, has figured out that men impregnate women during sexual intercourse and has used a drug as birth control to prevent pregnancy on their journey.

Jondalar, however, worries whether Ayla will ever get pregnant and have a child of his heart and spirit. By the end of the book, the issue is resolved ludicrously as both Ayla (after a graphically described lovemaking scene "with a secret") and her beloved horse Whinney are pregnant.

Because *The Plains of Passage* is a journey novel with such natural hazards as glacial cracks, sudden floods, quicksand, freezing rivers, and snowblinding ice, one might expect the conflict of humanity and nature to be an important theme. However, Auel is more interested in human relationships. The importance of tolerance, equality, and humane behavior arises out of Auel's concerns with racism and sexism.



Key Questions

Although *The Clan of the Cave Bear* remains Auel's best-known work, all of the novels in *Earth's Children* lend themselves well to discussion, and readers enjoy following the series as new novels appear. Auel's works also interest readers who enjoy archaeology and paleontology, and the subject of human prehistory lends itself to good discussion, especially among young readers. Group sessions can be augmented with slides or pictures from the Shanidar Caves or other sources, and readers who have seen the movie version of *The Clan of the Cave Bear* have lively discussions as well.

1. Ayla is a resourceful and independent young woman who draws upon both sides of her background, the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon, for her skills. How does each of these contribute to her character, and how does she use both traditions?

2. Neanderthal people are sometimes depicted as a lower form of human life — savage or stupid. How is Auel's depiction different from this tradition, especially in the characters of Creb and Iza?

3. The role of gender and relationships between men and women are central to Auel's depiction of human prehistory. What are the particular contributions of each gender? How are both hunters and gatherers necessary to their community? How does the fact that Ayla is a woman and not a man affect her life?

4. How does Auel show the beginnings of our major institutions — religion, social and political life, the family? What positive purposes do they serve, and what, if any, are the drawbacks present in these traditions?

5. The Cro-Magnon tribes Ayla rejoins in the sequels to *The Clan of the Cave Bear* experience most of the discoveries or inventions which lead to civilization and human society. What are some of them?

6. Ayla and Jondalar have a supportive relationship which allows each of them to be independent as well as committed. What are some of the challenges they face? Rewards they share?

How does their life compare with that of the Neanderthal tribes in which Ayla spends her childhood?

Related Titles

The Plains of Passage is the fourth of the Earth's Children series, and, like The Valley of Horses (1982) is a travel novel. It does include more than nature scenes: Ayla and Jondalar encounter several communities of Cro-Magnon people and even some Neanderthals. It thus has a busier and less character-oriented plot than The Clan of the Cave Bear (1980) and The Mammoth Hunters.

The Clan of the Cave Bear continues to be the strongest novel of the series. In it, the creation of the prehistoric world was fresh and interesting; the story focused on three main characters; Ayla as a girl growing up showed some character development; and the sex in the novel was integral to the story. The Plains of Passage presents new landscapes and new peoples, but its themes and characters wear thin, the sex is overdone, and the source of conflict in the novel — when to have a baby — provides little conflict or interest.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994