

Prisoner of Psi Short Guide

Prisoner of Psi by Annabel Johnson

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Overview

Prisoner of Psi tells an exciting tale of kidnapping and danger. Its hero, Tris, a young man who has problems with his father, runs away to Mexico, eventually returning to rescue his father from terrorist kidnappers. One of the people assisting in the rescue effort is Clementine Pickett, who becomes Tris's love interest. The theme of communication is developed through Tris and Clem's relationship, contrasting telepathic communication with talking. All these strands come together in a tension-filled but upbeat ending that works out just right.

About the Author

Annabel and Edgar Johnson have written many books together for young adults. They spent twelve years traveling the West in a small camptrailer, finding ideas and material for books in the back roads and deserted towns of the Rockies. At first their books featured people and events from lost history, but in later years they began to set books in contemporary times or, like *Prisoner of Psi*, in a near-future setting which allows them to treat contemporary subjects along with interpersonal and ecological issues.

Edgar Johnson was born in a Montana mining town. As a young man he tried many different occupations, including railroad hand, baseball player, and musician. In the 1940s he went to New York City to study art. He presented exhibits there of ceramics, woodcarving, and jewelry. In New York he also met Annabel, who had grown up in St. Louis. She also had come to the city with hopes of starting a different career, writing. In the meantime she worked for publishers and in a variety of other office jobs. Drawn together by their interest in the Old West, they married and set out on the travels which were to lead to a long, shared career in writing for young people.

Edgar Johnson died in 1990. Annabel Johnson continues to live in Denver, the setting for this novel.

Setting

Prisoner of Psi takes place in Colorado, in a possible near future. The year is 2000, and a long drought is changing Earth's climate. The mountain meadows and the yards of Denver are brown in May rather than a healthy green. Tristan, the book's protagonist, goes through icy winds and snowstorms as he rides his cycle home from Mexico.

The Denver area and the Rocky Mountains are frequent settings for the Johnsons' books. Unlike the stories in some of the other novels, however, environmental changes have little to do with the actual plot of *Prisoner of Psi*. The worldwide weather crisis may have added to the desperation of the Libyan terrorists who kidnapped Tristan's father. On the other hand, his exposure of their nuclear missile facility, along with a new political union between Israel and Egypt, are quite enough motivation for this bunch of "bad guys" to go into action. Other than the effects wrought by drought and bad weather, the world operates very much as it does in our time, complete with sports cars, television news and fast-food restaurants. Clementine Pickett's ranch house, in which much of the story takes place, still has heavy oak furniture and iron kitchen utensils reminiscent of the early days in the West.

This near-future world is one in which psi works. ("Psi" is an abbreviation for psychic or parapsychological powers, ultimately derived from psi--the twenty-third letter of the Greek alphabet.) While psi has led Emory Morgan into trouble, it enables Tristan to avoid traps, get his father's group to work together, and locate him for a successful rescue. The only characters who disbelieve in psi are Clem (who eventually changes her mind) and the terrorists (who believe Emory learned about their missile site from a spy network and are prepared to torture him for the names of his informers). This emphasis on psi is unusual in a novel with a near-contemporary setting. It adds to the fascination of a basically uncomplicated story line. At the same time the psi powers do not give their holder a big advantage in dealing with the world. The psi works selectively and only under optimum conditions. Some effects are uncontrollable. In Tris's life, psi led to so much pain that he ran away for four years. And when he returns, it still does not help him to get along with Emory's hangers-on any better—or to understand the girl who attracts him. They have to work out their communication problems the old-fashioned way—by talking, arguing, and compromising.



Social Sensitivity

Two elements of *Prisoner of Psi* may require some special handling on the part of teachers. First, the villains are Libyan terrorists. The book was written at a time when the U.S. government considered Libya a "terrorist state" (which it still does) and a probable home base for violent anti-Western groups. Even ten years later, the terrorists' identity does not require much suspension of disbelief. However, at several points, the book's American characters comment on the "Arabs" or "Muslims" behind the kidnapping.

While this is probably realistic colloquial usage and does not necessarily indicate real bigotry on the speakers' part, it could strike Arab or Muslim students very negatively. Discussion about the hazards of stereotyping and of labeling whole groups might be helpful, here.

The psi talents so integral to the plot could also be problematic to some readers or their parents. Most people, whether or not they believe in psi phenomena, can appreciate a story with these elements. Many young adults are intrigued by the paranormal, and the central role played by psi communication will add to these readers' enjoyment of the book. At the same time, there are people and groups who take a very different view of psi powers.

Some merely deny that they could exist. These skeptics usually base their position on "science"; they are not likely to object to psi being used in fiction.

Another group, however, believes the use of extrasensory perception to be evil, rather than impossible. Such views are usually based on religious belief. Since psychic communication plays such a central and positive role in *Prisoner of Psi*, there may be cases in which a teacher should tread carefully in assigning this book to a student.

For other readers, the psi component could be helpful. Tris's inner experiences reflect those of many young adults. Whether they feel they have psychic powers, or are just extra-sensitive to others' reactions, reading about someone else who has "been there" can be reassuring. Both Tris and Clem are appalled at the out-of-control aspect of their telekinesis. Any teen-ager who has struggled to control his or her own temper will identify with their problems.

It is possible that some readers will find the idea of father and son 'speaking mind-to-mind unsettling, regardless of their attitude toward psi in general. Such a worry could stem from any one of several sources, such as a young person's troubled relationship with his or her own parent, or a strong sense of personal boundaries. Adults should be aware of individual differences here and not dismiss a reader's unease with this motif as unfounded or illogical.



Literary Qualities

Most of *Prisoner of Psi* is told in Tristan's voice, written as entries in his Daybook. Chapters are labeled from Day One to Day Ten, with some nights also included.

The book opens with a summary of the world's situation in the year 2000, followed by a news clip on Emory Morgan's disappearance. The Prologue continues into a scene where the terrorists discuss their hostage and their scheme for capturing and torturing Tristan. In the next scene, Emory's associates meet Clem and Rainy in the ruins of Emory's mountain lodge. Only after this background is set up does Tristan appear. Likewise, near the end of the book we meet Emory Morgan for the first time, when he picks up Tristan's Daybook and records events as a "substitute scribe," after his son is captured.

Surprisingly, this mixture of narrative approaches works very well. When Emory writes, his worry about Tris comes through more strongly than he would ever show in his actions. Tris sprinkles his notes with irreverent comments. From these the reader gets a good sense of his personality and state of mind. Despite the Daybook entry device, the story is fast-paced, with much action and dialogue. A reader forgets he or she is reading a journal account, and simply follows the story.

The book provides an unusual blend of thriller, identity-quest story, and paranormal exploration. Comparisons with other books in any of these three categories are likely to be helpful, but incomplete. The authors also draw on more remote literary traditions for some of the details: for example, Emory Morgan has told his son the family name and heritage can be traced back to Morgan le Fay, a character in romances about King Arthur.

Morgan le Fay was Arthur's halfsister, an accomplished sorceress and seer. In most versions of the legend, her seduction of the young Arthur sets the stage for his Round Table's destruction, years later, when their illegitimate son Mordred appears to press his claim. The Morgan name hints at the risks run by those who use paranormal powers.

Tristan's name, of course, comes from the hero of another story in the Arthurian cycle, the legend of Tristram, Yseult, and King Mark. Tristan Morgan may well have gotten his name because his father was fascinated by these ancient stories. However, beyond the point where both young men undertake a journey because of a powerful older male relative, the two stories diverge.

The legendary Tristram shares a love potion with Yseult, his uncle Mark's intended bride, which leads to tragedy and death. The present day Tristan discovers that the love between father and son can break barriers and save lives.

Clementine, on the other hand, bears little resemblance to the fair damsels in these tales. As an independent young woman with her own inner secrets and financial resources, she serves to anchor the story in a modern setting and frame of mind.



Themes and Characters

Tristan Morgan did not have a typical childhood. As the son of a famous television personality and psychic, he felt valued more as a freak for his father's television show than for himself.

Like many teen-agers, he was intimidated by and resentful of a strong minded parent. But unlike most, he also had to contend with unwanted fame and extreme sensitivity to other people's thoughts. The pressures piled up, until he finally ran away when he was thirteen. Tris spent the next four years in Mexico. There, picking lettuce and living in primitive camps, he could blur his senses with hard work. Even the fact that he knew practically no Spanish helped; it is hard to read someone's thoughts if you do not understand the language they are thinking in! Because all his other problems had been intensified by telepathic overload, Tris felt such psychic blankness was the only way to save his mind.

As the book opens, Tris is on his way back home. By pure accident he has heard about his father's abduction on a television news flash. Although he half suspects a publicity trick on his father's part, he feels obliged to go back and investigate anyway. He explains it to himself in cynical terms—"the old man will really owe me if I'm the only one who can help"—but it is likely that he feels as much guilt as duty at this point. After Tris disappeared, Emory Morgan's regular show was canceled.

Tris's father has since lived mostly in seclusion at his Psi Lodge up in the mountains. And his recent comeback effort, in which he described the exact location of a secret Libyan missile base, led directly to his kidnapping.

When Tris reaches the burnt remains of his father's lodge site, he finds most of the other characters poking around in the ashes. Three are members of Emory's entourage whom Tris already knows. Gunter Mundt, the business manager, is a gruff take-command type who feels he should be in charge of the rescue effort. Ashley Kell, an awkward man with "a face like an Afghan hound" gave Emory the flash of precognition about the base. And Isabel, Tristan's stepmother, uses biblical quotations to voice frequent criticisms of the boy's attitudes. All three stand out as unique, prickly individuals who constantly irritate Tristan. But working with them despite their peculiarities is essential if he is to free his father. Cooperation in pursuit of a larger goal is hence one of the themes of the book.

Tristan, who has refused to recognize the risks he runs as a lone wolf, needs to learn this lesson.

Also at the cabin site are two strangers who come to play a major part in the rescue effort. Clementine Pickett has her own reasons for hating the terrorists: a year ago, the same group captured and killed her father. Clem's father, an agricultural innovator and ambassador, left her a fortune. She is spending large chunks of it on private security forces, hoping to track down the secretive LLOP and avenge her father's death. Despite her wealth and mission, Clem is a likable young woman. She shines with a confidence



that intrigues Tris at the same time as it annoys him. As they work together, Clem and Tris ultimately find out each other's secrets. Not only does this deepen the growing attraction between them, but it leads each to further revelations about the nature of love that form the story's emotional core. Tris discovers that Clem's independence and self-assurance masks a vulnerability very much like his own. Only when they both let down their various shields do they realize how much they share.

But there are some crucial differences too. Clem had never admitted that her famous father had any flaws.

But she comes to realize that he cared little for people as individuals; not even for her, his only daughter. He was too busy with his public persona.

And Tris, who for four years has thought of Emory only as "that old charlatan," learns that his father is prepared to die at the terrorists' hands rather than endanger his son. The contrast makes a strong statement on the power of love. Even though Emory Morgan remains an unregenerate con artist at the end of the book, his bond with and love for Tris is genuine.

The last member of the rescue crew is Clem's friend and all-round helper, an old Indian called Rainy. While at first glance Rainy may resemble the stereotypical Indian sidekick in Westerns, his actual function in the plot is different. He has degrees in meteorology and anthropology. He does heavy physical work despite being in his late seventies or beyond. Knowledge gained from his shaman grandfather gives him insights into Clem and Tris's maverick psychic talents that they themselves do not have. Rainy probably represents a subtle theme of the book: that both scientific knowledge and an intuitive respect for nature are needed to preserve the Earth's ecosystem. He also serves as a sort of surrogate grandfather to Clem, making up for some of her father's neglect.

There are also three villains, the Libyans who capture and hold Emory Morgan. These men are stereotypical bad guys, referred to only as Lips, Pits, and Scar. Although these labels give them instant visual images, we learn little about their motives, except that they work for higher-ups in the LLOP, and fear their superiors' punishment if they mess things up.

Topics for Discussion

1. Clem urges Tris to let trained security agents handle the rescue. Tris refuses because he thinks they would botch it up. In real life, which approach would you favor? Why?

2. If Tris and his father's associates had not had any psychic abilities, could they have located the house where Emory Morgan was being held?

How would trained security agents do it?

3. Early in the story, Tris tells Rainy that everyone has the capacity for psychic contact, but that most people lose it because of the way they are brought up. Do you believe this? Why or why not? Should we try to help children stay more sensitive to "the unseen" and "the unsaid"?

4. Even Emory Morgan admits that there's a large degree of showmanship involved in his acts. Does this prove his psi is just a trick? Is it legitimate to embellish an ability in this way? Where else does such image-building occur in our society?

5. In the book's 2000 A.D. world, the climate has changed drastically. What industries in the U.S. would be affected first, or most severely, by a prolonged drought? What are some other likely social and political consequences?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read about global warming and other potential long-term climatic changes, then write a report describing several possibilities. Include ways that our weather and landscape would change if each occurred, how we might cope with the bad effects, and which seem the most likely to occur.

2. The title *Prisoner of Psi* hints that Tristan is stuck with his psi talents, whether he likes them or not. How could he use them productively (besides being in another TV show)? List some ways these talents could cause him problems, and list several jobs in which psi sensitivity would be an asset.

3. Tris's father's friends think he is unreliable and naive; he thinks they are a bunch of fools. Yet they bridge the gap between them and manage to work together. How do you think they will get along together in the future? Will Tris and his father start another show?

Will Tris and Clem keep seeing each other? Write an outline or scene showing what the characters are doing a few months after the end of the book.

4. There are many novels about the relationship between a father and a teen-age son. Write a paper comparing another such book with *Prisoner of Psi*.

Include the settings, the focus of any conflicts between them, how they react to this conflict, and how the problems get resolved.

5. With your teacher's or parent's permission, do some simple experiments in extrasensory perception.

(There are books that explain how to conduct such experiments with cards or other everyday objects.) Report back on your experiments. Give possible reasons for whatever results you got (positive or negative.)

For Further Reference

Flowers, Ann A. Review. *Horn Book*, 62 (March/April 1986): 207. Thoughtful, positive review highlighting the book's diverse group of characters and the edgy interaction between Tris and Clem.

"Johnson, Annabel," and "Johnson, Edgar." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*. Vol. 33. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991: 253-256.

The only recent widely-available article about this pair of authors.

Contains brief biographies, along with a long list of the books they have written, awards won, and further sources of information. There is some discussion of the Johnsons' place among authors of young adult books.

Klein, Aaron E. *Beyond Time and Matter: A Sensory Look at ESP*. New York: Doubleday, 1973. An overview of extrasensory perception and the status and problems of research into it.

Although the book is over twenty years old, most of its information is still valid. Written in a clear style which explains the basics and maintains a middle stance between "believers" and "skeptics", it is a good starting point for a student wanting to explore the topic further.

LeShan, Lawrence. *Alternate Realities*.

New York: Ballantine Books, 1976.

Unlike Klein's book, this is not written for the novice who is delving into the psi question for the first time. It is, however, a thought-provoking study of why and how such phenomena might fit into—or outside of—our ordinary sensory reality.

Related Titles

Although there are no closely related other books, the Johnsons have written many novels which take place in the Rocky Mountain region. *Finders Keepers* (1981) and *A Memory of Dragons* (1986) are both set in the near future, with ecological damage and political turmoil complicating their plots. The latter novel also deals with a father-and-son relationship, but a more negative and tragic situation than in the story of Tristan and his father.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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