Rabbit Hill Short Guide

Rabbit Hill by Robert Lawson

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Overview

Robert Lawson's Rabbit Hill is a splendid fable that reinforces the notion that people (and animals) must learn to live together in harmony. Written at the end of World War II when the peoples of the world looked forward to a time of peace and prosperity, the story of the coming of the "new folks" to live among the animals of Rabbit Hill symbolizes the optimism of these postwar years. Lawson does not, however, allow the development of his theme to rest on sentimentality and false hope. The cemetery where Mother Rabbit's grandchildren are buried serves as poignant reminder that the recent past, dominated by the animals' experiences with "bad folks," must not be forgotten.

When Little Georgie is hit by an automobile and is taken in by the humans for uncertain purposes, the animal community confronts a new crisis in their relationship with encroaching human society. Lawson's fable drives home the point that a harmonious world can only result when individuals adopt basic, communal virtues without relying on the workings of fate or chance. Although this fable looks at the future optimistically, it is an optimism tempered by common sense and realism.

About the Author

Robert Lawson was born October 4, 1892, in New York City. Between 1911 and 1914 he attended the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts. In 1922, after serving in World War I, he married Marie Abrams. Between 1914 and 1930, with the exception of his military service, Lawson worked as a magazine illustrator and commercial artist.

After 1930 he shifted his attention to writing and illustrating books for young readers. Lawson died on May 26, 1957.

Lawson made his initial reputation as an illustrator of children's books but went on to write and illustrate sixteen books of his own during the 1940s and 1950s. Lawson was admired for his ability to construct entertaining fables with vivid animal characters. His work won numerous awards, including the Newbery Medal for Rabbit Hill, perhaps his best-known work.

Setting

Rabbit Hill is set in rural Connecticut.

The inhabitants of the animal community anxiously await the arrival of the "new folks" to the house on Rabbit Hill.

They are fearful because there has been a series of "bad folks" living in the house, who brought traps and poisons to terrorize the animals. But for the moment the signs are good. The gardener, Tim McGrath, has been surveying the lawn and garden and the carpenter, Bill Hickey, has been looking to repair the tool shed. The animals associate these activities with the prospect of a healthy lawn and generous garden, which would benefit everyone. Mother Rabbit, however, has lost several of her grandchildren to human s and remains pessimistic that the "new folks" will only bring more pain and danger. This early tension between positive prospects and potential disaster continues through most of the story.

The effective merging of the setting and the conflict is the primary strength of Lawson's Rabbit Hill. The primary theme of community relationships issues from the successful resolution of the initial tension.

Social Sensitivity

The animals on Rabbit Hill have developed a community in which all members are aware of and sensitive to the needs of the others. For example, the relationship between the fieldmouse, Willie, and the blind mole, evident in Mole's statement, "Willie, be eyes for me," suggests a cooperation that transcends differences. When preparing to enjoy the "new folk's" garden, they agree on a suitable division according to the needs of each and then enhance that agreement with a commitment to wait until Midsummer's Eve to take anything from the garden. In fact, the central tension of the book pivots on whether the "new folks" fit into this welldeveloped community structure. These "new folks" demonstrate that they are willing to take part by saving both Willie and Little Georgie and by sharing their garden with the animals. The animals respond with their own commitment to protect the garden.

Literary Qualities

Lawson has been praised for his ability to capture simple American virtues in his stories. He achieves this by making each animal a distinct and memorable character. Lawson's language so distinguishes and defines his characters that they become a delight to the reader.

Father Rabbit, with his purple passages of Southern eloquence—"This news of Georgie's may promise the approach of a more felicitous and bountiful era"— presents the image of the aristocrat, which contrasts neatly with his daring decisions to lead dogs on a chase or to take them off the trail of Red Buck. And Porkey, the eccentric woodchuck, speaks in broken sentences and tears at the grass as he stands his ground to defend his burrow. Perhaps most distinctive of all is Uncle Analdas, the doomsayer of the Hill, who rouses the animals to rebellion when Little Georgie is taken by the "new folks" following his automobile accident. These characterizations establish that the Hill is a diverse community, in which harmony comes only through the effort of each citizen, be it the determined self-reliance of Porkey and Analdas or the ability to change one's habits like the Grey Fox.

Themes and Characters

The "new folks" in Rabbit Hill function more as a single character than as individuals, although the cook with her peculiar friendship with Pewy, and the man with his strong-smelling pipe are somewhat individualized. In general, however, the humans are simply a presence that forces the animal community to confront their own hopes and fears. Within this context, each of the animals expresses its own temperament. Porky shows a stubborn resolve not to move his home; Father Rabbit constantly returns to memories of better times. The "new folks" make a considerate gesture, leaving Porkey's home untouched, but this soon gives way to their mysterious treatment of Little Georgie.

Little Georgie is a pivotal character for he represents hope for the future. He is carefully balanced against Uncle Analdas whose age gives him wisdom, but also an excessive pessimism toward the dangers that accompany any new enterprise. Together Georgie's experience with the automobile, his mysterious treatment by the "new folks," and Analdas's plots to get revenge enhance the final resolution of the plot.

In this fable, Lawson makes the point that social harmony is possible, even among potential enemies, if the members of a society subscribe to the basic virtues of trust and honesty. When the "new folks" take Little Georgie into their home, the animals misunderstand their intentions and harmony is threatened.

This episode indicates that the preservation of social harmony requires constant affirmation and work. The garden serves as a reminder that the needs of the animals and those of the "new folks" could still come into conflict. The agreement to share the garden is a recognition that these potentially contrary needs can find resolution.

Topics for Discussion

1. How does the conflict in this work relate to the experience of World War II?

2. What examples can you find that developing a harmonious relationship between man and animals is difficult?

3. What role does Uncle Analdas play in the animal community?

4. Explain the mixed reaction Little Georgie gets for jumping Deadman's Brook.

5. Why does Lawson take so much time dealing with life during the period of "bad folks"?

6. Explain Lawson's decision to include references to the rabbit cemetery in a work which is largely optimistic and intended to uplift the audience.

7. Discuss Tim McGrath's reference to the "new folks" having "beginner's luck."

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Rabbit Hill was written at the end of World War II as the world prepared to live in harmony. Discuss ways in which this work deals with the way people must think in order to achieve this goal and the symbols that Lawson employs to capture this "post war" task.

2. Little Georgie plays a central role in Rabbit Hill. What role is this and how do his experiences add to the development of the theme of trust? Contrast Little Georgie's role with that played by Uncle Analdas.

3. Rabbit Hill is a fable. What does this term mean exactly, and how does this work use the characteristics of fable?

4. The reader of Rabbit Hill quickly begins thinking of the animals as people. How does Lawson achieve this effect?

5. What virtues does Lawson suggest are necessary to the coexistence of different societies?

6. Select a character in Rabbit Hill and discuss his or her contribution to the development of Lawson's theme, specifically that different communities can exist together if the members of both live by basic virtues.

Related Titles

The Tough Winter (1954) is a splendid sequel to Rabbit Hill. It brings back the characters of the original work and expands its theme by showing the residents of the Hill facing the problems of a winter made more difficult by the absence of the "new folks."

For Further Research Burns, Mary Mehlman. "Robert Lawson." In Twentieth-Century Children's Writers, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1983. This article provides a bibliographical review of Lawson's work with some discussion of his books and illustrations.

Inman, Sue Lile. "Robert Lawson." In The Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 22, edited by John Cech. Detroit: Gale, 1983. This is perhaps the most complete discussion of Robert Lawson's career and achievements.

Lawson, Robert. "Robert Lawson." In The Junior Book of Children's Authors, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz, and Howard Haycraft. 2d ed. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951. This is a brief biographical listing, of note because it was written by Lawson himself.

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