

Raspberry House Blues Short Guide

Raspberry House Blues by Linda Holeman

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Overview

The quest motif in *Raspberry House Blues* is to find the birth mother who had given up her newborn daughter in a Winnipeg hospital. Poppy, sixteen, emotionally rejects Denise, the mother who had adopted her, and flies from Canada's west coast to the center of Canada where she stays in a raspberry-colored house with her adoptive, now remarried father. Poppy brings her "M" book which contains pictures, cut from magazines, of women Poppy thinks resemble her never-seen fantasy mother. In Winnipeg, Poppy finds she has another mother, her stepmother Calypso, but she continues to search for her birth mother and circumstances suggest to Poppy that an accidental meeting may have brought her into contact with her real mother.

About the Author

Linda Holeman, who was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on December 24, 1949, the second of five children of Leon and Donna Freeman, dreamed of being a writer in England because she did not believe there were Canadian writers. She believed that a writer was someone magical who lived in a place like England.

Following high school, Holeman completed a bachelor of arts in sociology and psychology from the University of Winnipeg in 1972 and then took a one-year teacher certification program at the University of Manitoba. Married during the second year of her bachelor of arts degree, Holeman and her husband, Jon, "spent a year in Europe doing the '70's hippy-van thing, traveling around, stopping and working on farms" following her teacher education program.

After returning to Canada, the couple spent two years teaching at South Indian Lake in northern Manitoba for a couple of years before returning to Winnipeg in 1976. Five years followed with her working as a second grade teacher with two more years as a resource teacher.

The transition from teacher to writer was a slow one. Holeman quit teaching when she had her second daughter in 1984. While at home, she started to think about writing but was not yet sure what to do with the whole idea. By 1989 she started asking herself what direction the rest of her life was going to take. Writing and the idea of being a writer was always in the back of her mind, and she sensed that this was the thing she really wanted to do. But the idea of sitting down and actually writing terrified her.

After a little coaxing from her husband and a couple of weeks later, she decided to start the writing process.

One day she got out of bed around five o'clock in the morning with a story in her head that came from a show she had seen on television about how, in some Asian countries, if a woman's husband dies, she becomes his brother's wife. That early morning rise led to a couple of scribbler pages of this woman's story, but the manuscript continued to grow, ultimately becoming a historical novel of more than 700 pages. While Holeman never sought to have the work published, she felt it was part of a learning process. She also started attending workshops in order to improve her writing skills.

Holeman recalls a significant aspect of a writing workshop she attended after purchasing Martha Brooks's *Paradise Cafe*: I bought her *Paradise Cafe*, and I was so blown away by these stories that I thought, "I think this is how I feel." Also, as I was writing things, they were coming out in young adult voices that I wasn't expecting, and that was shocking me. For example, I started to write "Saying Goodbye" from the point of view of a woman who has lost her husband. But, as soon as I started writing it, it was a girl who'd lost her dad.

In 1991, Holeman, having seen an announcement in *Canadian Living* magazine for their annual writing contest, sent them a story, "Sweet Bird of Youth," another piece that, according to Holeman, had started out as a woman's story. Much to her surprise, the story won. Holeman then submitted two stories in a YA short story competition sponsored by a Saskatchewan publisher, Thistledown Press, and in the spring of 1992, she learned that one, "Saying Goodbye," had been selected as the runner-up and would be published in *The Blue Jean Collection*. Again, the external affirmation provided Holeman with the impetus to continue writing.

Since the publication of that volume, Holeman has produced another two collections of short stories, both for adults, a juvenile novel, and three novels for adolescents. In addition, each of Holman's titles has received critical recognition in the form of being shortlisted for prizes or being named to honor lists.

Setting

Although *Raspberry House Blues* begins in Vancouver, British Columbia, it very quickly switches to and remains in a section of Winnipeg, Manitoba, one known locally as the Wolseley area. This setting is in total contrast to Poppy's well-ordered, predictable life in Vancouver. According to Holeman, placing a young protagonist in an unfamiliar situation is imperative to the plot. The other characters—Eric and Calypso, Becca, Mac, Linnea and even old Mr. Hartley—lend themselves to the area as well. Especially well-situated is Calypso, whose character cannot survive in the affluent atmosphere. Holeman comments that Wolseley fits perfectly with the slightly off-beat characters and their lifestyle choices.

Wolseley, an older area of Winnipeg, is bordered on its south side by the slowly meandering Assiniboine River. When Poppy's father, Eric, drives her from the airport to the raspberry house, Poppy has her first glimpse of the Wolseley area and provides her first impressions: "All I saw were lots of tall older houses, crowded side by side in narrow yards. There were little kids everywhere. And trees, huge old trees lining the narrow boulevards. Looking straight ahead, I could see that the trees met over the top of the street, creating a canopy of green."

Poppy arrives in Winnipeg during the period when the canker worms, which feast on tree leaves, are at their peak numbers.

Holeman effectively captures what it is like to travel down tree-lined streets at this time. Poppy, who has never experienced such infestations in British Columbia, finds herself ambushed by "webby things" that hung from trees as she rode her bike along the street. They were sticky and thin and caught in her hair and on her clothes and sometimes swung across her face, going into her mouth and nose.

Two houses also form significant parts of the setting. One is the chaotic raspberry house of the title, which is inhabited by Eric, who, with Denise, had adopted the infant Poppy. Now divorced, Eric lives with his second wife, Calypso, and their toddler, Sandeep. The second house is the orderly, finely furnished home of Poppy's fantasy mother, Becca Jell, and her housekeeper Rakel.

Social Sensitivity

Raspberry House Blues focuses on the issue of absent mothers and the search for them. When Poppy is left behind by her adoptive mother, she decides to leave and live with her father and his wife. Here she searches for her biological mother. The issue of absent mothers often leads children, young adults, and adults to seek them out in an attempt to discover who they are.

Poppy feels that if she finds her birth mother her life will magically change into a fairy tale. Because she is so bent on finding her real mother Poppy overlooks her relationship with her adopted mother and does not recognize the family she already has with her father and her stepmother.

Some readers may object to the idea of adopted children being able to find their birth parents. However, in the novel, Poppy is too young to initiate such a search and, at the novel's end, when Eric, as an adoptive parent, offers to conduct a nonspecific search on her behalf, Poppy declines his offer.

Literary Qualities

Holeman has made the self-observation that she leaves her grown-up world behind and travels back decades when she writes for young adults.

Her writing is suffused with sensory images. She pays attention to details and likes to create atmosphere, and surround people by atmosphere. Consequently, when Poppy goes for a walk in the neighborhood, Holeman does not simply report that Poppy took a walk. Instead, Holeman recreates the experience in sensory terms: The midday sun was hot, and I had to keep dodging to avoid sudden encounters with swinging worms. . . . That's when I realized that what I was hearing was the rhythmic chewing of the cankerworms as they ate their way through the leaves. I noticed that a lot of leaves were no more than tattered rags fluttering forlornly in the hot breeze.

Holeman's particular interest in smells finds expression in the novel, especially as they relate to Poppy's relationship with Mac, for she frequently comments on her awareness of his smell. For instance, when they formally meet for the first time, she comments that "I think I smelled soap."

But Holeman's observations about odors are not limited to just the obvious, such as Sandeep's dirty diaper smell, but extend to the unusual, such as Poppy's describing the dining room in Becca Jell's house, where she observes that "the room smelled like it was never used."

Holeman also uses foreshadowing. At one point, Poppy comments that she should just walk around looking for someone who looks like her. She becomes acquainted with Becca Jell, and one and one quickly become six. The foreshadowing of this meeting is not subtle and some readers will be certain of the story's outcome before the end of the book.



Themes and Characters

Holeman's young adult books are character-driven and all deal with the protagonist's struggle to find her place in the world.

Poppy's search for identity in *Raspberry House Blues* is through the physical and emotional search for her birth mother. The absent mother is a theme that permeates several of Holeman's titles. This is because she believes there is a great deal of importance placed on a strong mother figure in a young person's life. Mothers are the most important characters in *Raspberry House Blues*. Of course, Poppy's birth mother never makes an actual appearance in the novel, but Poppy's surrogate physical manifestation of her is found in the "M" book Poppy creates, a scrapbook that contains pictures of actresses and models who physically resemble what Poppy thinks her mother would look like. Denise, the woman who, with Eric, adopted Poppy and has raised her alone for the last nine years, is present at the beginning of the novel, but then she goes on holidays and only appears via onesided phone calls and in Poppy's increasing memories. Becca Jell, the aging actress and Poppy's fantasy birth mother, is the third of the mother quartet, with the last one being Calypso, Poppy's hippie stepmother.



Topics for Discussion

1. Raspberry House Blues has been published in both Canada and Scotland.

However, the two editions have different cover art. You can view the two covers at Linda Holeman's official Web site, www.lindaholeman.com. How does the difference in the covers affect your impressions of the book's contents?

Which do you prefer? Why?

2. First impressions, although sometimes erroneous, often last. On the basis of the contents of the first two chapters of Raspberry House Blues, would you have wanted Poppy as a friend? Did your attitude towards her change? Why or why not?

3. Poppy's goal in coming to Winnipeg is to find her birth mother. Do you agree that adopted children/adults should be able to locate their birth parents? Why or why not? Conversely, should parents who have given up their children for adoption be able to find their children when these children become adults?

4. Linda Holeman observed that "there is a sense of aloneness in being a young adult—that feeling of being on the outside, even if you are in the midst of a group of people you consider to be your friends." Certainly Poppy experiences that feeling of aloneness many times in Raspberry House Blues. Identify a number of these instances, and explore how Poppy coped with her sense of being alone.

5. During one of Poppy's angry moments with her adopted mother Denise, Poppy hurls the following accusation at her: "All I know is that there's someone out there who does care, more than you'll ever know. Because you aren't capable of real mother love." Later, when Poppy is talking to Becca Jell, she says of her adoptive mother, "She didn't create me, so she doesn't necessarily have those real mother feelings toward me." What do you think Poppy meant by "real mother love" or "real mother feelings"?

In personal terms, how would you describe the two phrases' meanings? Does the story support Poppy's claims?

6. Calypso makes quilts, and one of the designs she uses is called "Rescue the Perishing." Calypso describes how to make such a quilt. "For the Rescue the Perishing quilt, you take pieces from their original design and fit them in a new design. It takes some playing around, sort of like a puzzle. Sometimes all that's missing is one small detail." She picked up a block, turned it upside down, and set it back down. "And then, bingo. You turn a square a different way, and everything falls into place."

What does this quilt pattern metaphor tell readers about Raspberry House Blues?

7. Holeman's writing is filled with sensory images that appeal to all of the readers' senses. For example, when Poppy is in Becca Jell's house, she passes through the dining room and describes an unusual odor to the reader. "I realized what the other



smell was. Emptiness. The room smelled like it was never used." What would the odor of emptiness be like? Find other examples of Holeman's most imaginative uses of words.

8. How is Becca Jell's statement, "We all show love in different ways," true for the characters in *Raspberry House Blues*?

9. Mac tells Poppy about *The Odyssey*, an epic from ancient Greek literature. How is Poppy's odyssey like that of Odysseus?

10. When Poppy asks Mac to help her break the lock on Becca Jell's mother-of-pearl box, he cautions, "This might be a Pandora's box, Poppy." In Greek mythology, who was Pandora? Why is Mac's image appropriate?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The expression "perception is functionally selective" means that we often see what we want to see. For example, if individuals are hungry, they will be more aware of food advertisements or cooking odors than they would be in those instances when they had just had a full meal. Trace throughout *Raspberry House Blues* to see how Poppy deceives herself by seeing only what she wants to see.
2. The setting for *Raspberry House Blues* is real, in that the city of Winnipeg actually exists and the streets and parks named in the novel are also real places. Obtain a map of Winnipeg and trace where Poppy goes.
3. Research the style of music known as the blues. How is the book *Raspberry House Blues* like a blues song?
4. Calypso is a vegan, a person who has a very strict dietary pattern. Investigate what a vegan will and will not eat. Create a day's meal plan for Calypso.
5. Calypso also lives what might be described as a "green" lifestyle. For instance, Calypso, as the result of conscious decisions, does not own a car, will not dress toddler Sandeep in disposable diapers, nor will she eat honey because bees' homes are destroyed in the process of extracting honey from their hives. Explore what it means to live "green." If you were to choose to live in this "green" fashion, what changes would you have to make in your personal way of living?
6. Poppy created an M (for Mother) book which contained pictures, cut from magazines, that Poppy thought resembled her idea of what her birth mother looked like. Recreate Poppy's M scrapbook.
7. Create a guidebook for your state or province that would explain how someone who had been adopted could go about searching for his/her birth parents.
8. At one point, an exasperated Poppy says, "This raspberry house was a madhouse," and later she yearns to go to Becca Jell's home on Palmerston Avenue. Although in the same neighborhood, the two houses are quite different in many ways. Create a chart that lists the houses' differences under various headings such as size, furniture, other furnishings or amenities, atmosphere, food, inhabitants, yard and plants, and other details you can think of.
9. *Raspberry House Blues* concludes with the opening of Poppy's telephone conversation with her adoptive mother, Denise: "'Mom?' I said. 'Hi. I was just thinking about you.'" Continue the conversation, providing one or both sides.

For Further Reference

Ellis, Sarah. Review of Raspberry House Blues.

Quill & Quire (October 2000): 45. This entry is a longer positive review by an award-winning writer for juveniles.

"Holeman, Linda." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 102. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp.

112-114. Brief biographical and bibliographical information is followed by a Sidelights section which discusses Holeman's writing through to *Promise Song*.

"Holeman, Linda." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*. Detroit: St. James Press, 1999, pp. 381-382. In addition to brief biographical information and a critical overview of Holeman's books, this article also provides Holeman's commentary on her own writing.

Jenkinson, Dave. "Profiles: Linda Holeman."

Resource Links (October 1996): 8-11. This source contains an interview with Holeman about her life and writing career. The contents predate Holeman's writing YA novels.



Related Titles/Adaptations

As identified in the sixth edition of Alleen Pace Nilsen's and Kenneth L. Donelson's *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, "achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults" is one of the developmental tasks that must occur during the period of adolescence. A common theme in literature for adolescents is the fractious parent-child relationship, but a teen's achieving a new, emotionally independent relationship with a parent or parents can be exacerbated when a parent is not present, either physically or emotionally.

In Linda Holeman's *Raspberry House Blues*, Poppy is seeking the birth mother she has never known. However, one can have a birth mother present and still not know who she truly is. Such is the case in Gayle Friesen's *Janey's Girl*. Although Torontonion Claire Harrison, fourteen, has lived with her single parent mother, Jane, for her entire life, it is not until the two return for a summer holiday visit to the maternal family farm near Smallwood, British Columbia, that Claire truly "finds" her mother. In Martha Brooks' *Being with Henry*, seventeen-year-old Laker Wyatt had a mother that he physically lost when Audrey kicked him out of the house for physically assaulting Rick, her new husband and Laker's unwanted stepfather. Laker's time spent with Henry allows him to gain the necessary self-knowledge which permits him to rediscover his mother emotionally. Fathers can also be the missing parent, and such is the case in William Bell's *No Signature* in which "Wick" Chandler begins a quest to discover the father who abandoned him when he was seven years old, a journey which ultimately leads to Wick's gaining new knowledge of his mother.

Related Web Sites

Deakin, Andrea. "Linda Holeman."

ACHUKA <http://www.achuka.co.uk/can/holeman.htm>. Accessed November 26, 2002.
Using a question and answer format, this interview focuses on biographical concerns.

<http://www.lindaholeman.com>. Accessed October 22, 2002. This official Web site of Linda Holeman is divided into three major sections: Books for Young Readers; Fiction for Adults; and Biographical Sketch. The "Books for Young Readers" section, which has separate entries for each of her juvenile titles plus links to "Reviews and Honours," also has answers to six frequently asked questions.



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