

Rimwalkers Short Guide

Rimwalkers by Vicki Grove

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Overview

Grove's coming-of-age book takes a different look at traditional sibling rivalry. Fourteen-year-old Tory lives in the shadow of her younger sister, Sara, Miss Popularity of the sixth grade set. Shy Tory looks forward to spending the summer on her grandparents' farm and hopes she can spread her wings and be appreciated for herself, but Sara hates the thought of going to the country. She will miss her friends, cheerleading practice, the opening of the swimming pool, and the flattering attention of her peers to which she has grown very accustomed.

Also visiting the farm for the summer are two male cousins, Elijah and Rennie, who are searching for their places in life just as Tory is. The three of them team up to solve a family mystery, and they overcome initial obstacles to bond together and take risks in both their physical and emotional lives. The trio excludes Sara, who then makes a dangerous attempt to break into their triangular friendship. The tragic end physically changes Sara, but emotionally changes the others.

About the Author

Vicki Grove was born on December 24, 1948 in Highland, Illinois. Her parents, James and Gretchen Baum, lived in a converted one-room schoolhouse surrounded by acres of corn, clover, and soybeans. Her grandparents and great-grandparents lived in century-old homes just down the road that gave Grove an appreciation of her family's history. When she was in junior high school, her family moved away from the farm to Oklahoma, and she graduated from high school in Miami. She earned B.A. (1972) and M.A. (1973) degrees in English from Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg.

Grove has been an English teacher, a grants researcher, a preschool owner, and an educational assistant at a church. She has devoted her time, since 1983, to professional writing— first fiction and nonfiction for national magazines, and then novels for young adults.

She won the 1987 Putnam Fiction Prize and secured a contract for *Goodbye, My Wishing Star*, published the following year. She has written six more novels since then for Putnam.

Her literary work routinely appears on the Mark Twain List of best books for young readers, and has often been selected for the Junior Library Guild.

Grove is a sought-after guest author at children's literature festivals, has taught writing on the college level, and speaks at writers' conferences.

She and her husband Mike, who teaches music, live in a one-hundred-year-old farmhouse a mile outside the tiny town of Ionia, Missouri (population 117). Their daughter, J.D., and son, Michael, are college students.

Setting

Grove draws on the Midwestern past of her ancestors as she sets this story on a farm on the Illinois prairie.

Her grandparents' bright, friendly two-story farmhouse with the wraparound porch is the model for the grandparents' home in *Rimwalkers*.

Rimzvalkers Grove's great-grandpa's shadowy home with two round attic windows becomes the deserted, decaying, paint-bare house that the ghost inhabits. This fascinating ruin can be seen from the home where the cousins spend the summer.

The farm plays a crucial part in the story as Grove details the sights, smells, and sounds of country life from the pre-dawn chores of feeding musky animals to the shimmer of sunlight on the pond to the twilight chirping of crickets. The cousins gathered on the farm during this summer of change are outsiders in their own home environments; here in the country they take advantage of the fresh start given them to better their fragile and blighted self-perceptions, while also developing ties to the land and their family history.

Community country life, from the Memorial Day decorating of the graves to the harvest celebration, illustrates the way farm families connect to the land and each other through their hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows. These outward emotions mirror the inner struggles of the cousins, whose lives are forever changed by their summer on the farm.



Social Sensitivity

Farm safety is paramount in *Rim Walkers*. The ultimate tragedy of the story results from the dangerous gravity-flow wagon. Grove compares the wagon to a monster on several occasions, and she lets Eli explain the death he witnessed by gravity pulling a young boy down the chute with the grain that suffocated him. When Sara falls in the wagon, she also nearly suffocates.

Grove deals with the death of a neighbor in a sensible manner. Country folk take birth and death in stride, as it is the natural way of life on a farm. When the elderly neighbor dies, Tory and her sister attend the funeral with their grandparents. Because Tory had barely met the old man, she feels no strong bereavement, but she understands the tears of her sister, who knew him as a friend.

The search for the truth about the ghost is a uniting factor among the teens, but it is never a strong element in this coming-of-age story. Fear of the ghost is not as real as a feeling of sadness for the death of the young boy and the knowledge that he wanted so badly to be a part of a group, just as each of the teens wants.

Literary Qualities

Rimwalkers is narrated in the first person by Tory Moore as she recounts the story of that special summer almost twenty years ago that changed so many lives. She sees the events of that distant adolescent summer with the clarity that comes from maturity, yet her adult recollections of youth are charged with the poignancy and angst of growing up and finding her inner self. Vivid descriptions and sensory details make the farm setting, an area as "old as bones," take on a personality of its own with its heavy-dewed mornings and its warm golden light of day.

Her images evoke memories of the reader's own childhood imaginings.

Farm machinery takes on the form of huge, dangerous monsters, and for Tory, lost in the corn field, the tall stalks became people closing in on her.

Rimwalkers also abounds in symbols.

A huge spider building a web across the doorway to Tory's barn loft hideaway could be Tory herself, dangling by a thread, twirling, able to face only one thing at a time, which makes her turn her back on all behind her. The spider in the story could rebuild her web, just as Tory could rebuild her self-esteem after blaming herself for her sister's accident. Walking on rims of the stalls, the wagon, the bridge, and the rotten beams of the old house represents the precarious balance necessary for people to successfully navigate through life.

The story would not be complete without the epilogue. Tory, now in her early thirties, briefly recapitulates what has happened to the participants in the life of that long-ago summer.

She tells of Rennie's death as a fire fighter at age twenty-six, in her sensitive manner, so that one feels bereavement and pride at the same time.

Tory, herself, never married—no surprise—and became a geologist, embracing the land and learning its secrets. Eli became the ultimate risktaker, a farmer, and had one son. Sara, now married with three children, recovered from her ordeal with only occasionally slurred speech and a much quieter manner. These details give closure to the story, yet also open another door.

Grove touches on the supernatural with the ghost of a long dead child in the decaying house. The ghost appeared rarely, but had been seen many years earlier by Gram and her cousins one special summer when four youths spent time together. Now Tory, her sisters, and her cousins have seen it.

Will the four cousins in the next generation see it, too? This element of the supernatural is never explained fully, although Grove offers a hypothesis that a group of young

people with combined energy could resurrect the warm memory of the child and make him seem almost real.



Themes and Characters

Grove lights the inner core of her superb characters with distinct and rounded personalities so that the reader can see why the characters make their individual choices.

Fourteen-year-old Victoria Moore is an outsider at her school. She is an excellent student who excels in science. Her bug collections and rock collections give her a sense of achievement as she catalogues each addition.

Her attempt to change her image while she is spending the summer at the farm initially fails until she faces the fact that her pose as a scientist studying collected specimens is a way to hide from herself.

Tory's sister, Sara—outgoing, self-centered, and vain—has made cheerleader for seventh grade in the fall, and she translates most conversations into cheers. She admits, for example, that all the cheerleaders want to be captain. "We all do. Give me a D! Give me an O! Give me a D! O! Do!" The reader tires of Sara and her childishness, just as Tory resents the way Sara always clamors to be the center of attention.

Quiet Elijah is also fourteen. Tory met him five years earlier, and they had hit it off wonderfully then. After a moment's awkwardness at the farm, they again realize a kinship of two souls who know what it is to be outsiders. Elijah has been raised on a farm, and he understands the dangers of farm life and the quiet contentment of belonging to the land. His common sense is his strength, but he longs for a moment or two of wildness.

Rennie is sixteen and has dropped out of school. He has been in trouble at home and has been sent to the farm by his single mother as a place to learn new responsibilities. He walks with a strut, as if he is in command at all times and knows where he is going, but he runs away when he is unsure of what he is doing. Although he presents his father in a favorable light to the other cousins, he finally tells them the truth—that his father never liked him, has remarried, and now has a new family. His father has taken his new children on the dream vacation in the Colorado mountains that he had always promised Rennie.

Gram and Grandpa are secondary characters who represent the adult view of the world and the orderly manner in which life stretches out. As soon as the older cousins learn the routine of morning chores, Grandpa lets them take over these responsibilities, and he moves on to more complicated tasks. Gram is the holder of the key to the past. In a serious discussion where she takes on trancelike characteristics, Gram tells Tory about the death of Americus, the young boy Tory believes is the ghost who appears at the round window of the abandoned house.

Tory discovers the strengths and weaknesses in others as she lives through the summer in companionship with such varied personalities, and she also holds up to



herself the same mirror of examination to better see her strong points and frailties. She learns that if she wants to take control of her life, she must loosen the sibling bond. She is no longer content to be responsible for Sara's happiness by being just in large measure a devoted audience to her younger sister.

The three older cousins form a close bond that is cemented the day they rimwalk on an old condemned bridge.

High above the river, Tory jumps on the railing and walks as if she is in control of her own destiny. Rennie has taught her to take risks, Elijah has taught her to look ahead, and she has taught them to search for the truth, just as she has been forced out of hiding to confront life.

Tory learns the Damoclean nature of risk-taking when Sara falls in the gravity-flow wagon and is nearly suffocated by grain. Having shunned Sara all summer, Tory is overcome with guilt and wonders if her neglect caused her sister to try a dangerous stunt like rimwalking the wagon to prove she could fit in with the others?

Tory here takes another hesitant and painful step towards maturity through learning how much responsibility she must take for the choices someone else makes.



Topics for Discussion

1. What was the sisters' relationship at the end of the school year? How did it change during the first week of summer vacation at the farm?

2. What is Tory's first impression of Rennie? Why does he call her Tory?

Does her opinion of him change during the first week of the visit?

3. Who sees the ghost of the little boy first? Who sees it more often? Are the cousins afraid of it? Why? What does each of the cousins feel toward the ghost?

4. Recount the story of the ghost as told by Gram. Why did Grandpa and the hired man bury the bones in the cemetery and not tell Gram?

5. Of what importance is the scene with old Mr. Effingham? Why did the girls pretend to like the candy? Why did Mr. Effingham continue buying the same candy when he couldn't eat it?

6. How do Tory's parents react to the accident? What do they ask Tory when they call from Ireland? Do their questions surprise Tory? Why?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find the different descriptions of the yellow light that surrounded the farm that summer. How is this light different from the light in Milwaukee where Tory lives? Is the light derived from the land? How is it used as a symbol in the novel?

2. Recount the legend of Americus.

What explanations does Grove give for his ghostly existence? Do you think any of these are possible? Why?

3. Rennie is the first rimwalker.

How does he influence the others to take up this dangerous activity? Why is it important that each one rimwalk that bridge?

4. Tory learns that she is not responsible for her sister's happiness. How did she learn this? Show the gradual changes in the relationship between these girls.

5. Was the epilogue necessary for this book to be complete and satisfying to the reader? What type of careers would you have picked for each of the cousins? Why?

For Further Reference

Cole, Margaret. Review. *School Library Journal* (October 1993): 151. The reviewer believes that the true magic in this book is not from the ghost but from the special friendship between the teens that helps them believe in themselves.

Review. *Kirkus Reviews* (October 1, 1993): 1274. The reviewer writes that Grove seamlessly interweaves the themes of sibling conflict and personal growth through taking risks.

Review. *Publishers Weekly* (September 27, 1993): 64. The reviewer finds something for everyone in "this modern coming-of-age story with gothic undertones."

Review. *VOYA* (December, 1998): 291.

The reviewer ranks this novel a must-read for young adults.

Triner, Jeanne. Review. *Booklist* (October 15, 1993): 430. This positive review presents the setting as "richly drawn, making the farm and its magic real to even the most urban reader."

Related Titles

All of Grove's books focus on the problems teenagers face as they hit the critical, highly stressful years of middle and late adolescence. These problematic situations include strained parent-child relationships, tensionfraught sibling bonds, and troubled peer friendships. Also present in Grove's novels is a strong sense of fairness even when social ills can only be recognized and not changed. Her books feature young people taking steps—baby, tentative, and giant —towards maturity.



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