The River King Short Guide

The River King by Alice Hoffman

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Characters

Carlin Leander is the centrifugal force of the story, which begins with her arrival at the Haddan school and ends with her swimming the lengths of the Haddan river, symbolically swallowing her indecision and choosing to navigate her life through the town. Carlin's life, and the decisions she makes, touch on every other character in the novel. She is precocious far beyond her fifteen years, wizened by events that stream through her life in her freshman year at the conservative New England prep school where she has earned a swimming scholarship.

From the outset, the reader learns that she is a headstrong and beautiful, fitting all of the cliched descriptions of a romance novel heroine: she is poor, disheveled but strikingly beautiful, stubborn, unlearned in love, and talented. And just as in all the classic romance tales, Carlin is soon to be involved in a love triangle, although the difference in Carlin's case is that she is never the victim of unrequited love: in each case, she is the pursued, somewhat indifferent to the attentions of her admirers. And while she does, in fact, date Harry McKenna, a boy who is specious and whose charm does not flow below his veiny skin, her affections for him never go to the level where there is any chance of him hurting her. She seems almost untouchable, except for by the death of her friend Gus.

Perhaps the novel's chief flaw is that it does not allow the reader to earn a sense of the characters' inner dialogue; even though Carlin is the chief character, she remains as cold to the reader as she does to those around her. We see her mourn her friend's death, after Gus dies, but his death intrudes so early in the novel that we are not able to see the thick, viny friendship that may have been evoked through more dialogue or narrative about Gus and Carlin's adventures together. Instead, their friendship is glossed over, and we are left with the responsibility to make assumptions about how they might have shared time together, what kinds of jokes they may have told one another, what secrets, what lies, and then find out way back to understanding the depths of Carlin's sorrow, and the supernatural need of Gus's ghost to remain by Carlin's side while she mourned the boy's death. Some of the lack of knowledge about Carlin's feelings is understandable, as she has moved from a poverty-stricken background to a wealthy prep school, and hides her background and emotions from everyone around her. Thus, it makes sense to some extent that her feelings are veiled.

What is very effective is the way that Hoffman allows Carlin to freely interact with all of the other characters in the story.

She strikes up a brusque friendship with old Helen Davis, the dying, formidable head of the history department, and Betsy Chase, the new photography teacher. Because she comes from a lower class background, she feels comfortable wandering about the town, outside the gates of the Haddan school, and she easily strikes up surface friendships with various townspeople, including Abel Grey, a policeman who loses his job over his efforts to uncover the lies surrounding Gus Pierce's death, but wins Betsy's love in return.

The number of major characters is a bit daunting; just as the reader begins to understand the nuances of a character, Hoffman either kills him, ships him out of town, or introduces a new cast of protagonists, thus spreading the surface too thin. It is difficult to develop a relationship to any of the characters because of this. It is almost as though Hoffman deliberately chose to only cover the basics of each character, although it is uncertain why she may have done so.

The story delves into what it means to be human, and to be confronted with death as the inevitable fate of all humans, but the humanity of the story is fettered away by constant introductions to new relationships.

This is most noticeable in the cases of Betsy Chase and Gus Pierce.

Betsy Chase is introduced at the very start of the novel; she is a misfit inside a conservative school. From the first description of her meeting and engagement to Eric, also a teacher at Haddan, there is no sense that they will stay together. There is not enough evidence of a spark between them in the first place to explain why they ever came together, and the reader does not learn enough of Betsy's background to be able to conclude what it seems Hoffman is trying to imply: that Betsy's life had up until then been very messy, and that Eric represented some kind of stability in her life. Hoffman creates in Eric a monster, a reprehensibly unfeeling and negative man who invigorates not the least sense of romantic imagination. His ignorance of the wrongdoings of his students, and his failure to assume any responsibility for their feelings or fears, is a harsh critique of the private school system, perhaps not unwarranted. But still, in the end, when Betsy hurriedly leaves Haddan with Abel Grey, it is without surprise, but merely with a question: what did the relationship with Eric offer in terms of character development? It may well be that it was merely a means of getting Betsy to the school in the first place, for it was after she was engaged that she became the photography teacher, but a more in-depth exploration of her relationship with Eric might have presented ripe textual fruit.

Eric, Helen, Abel, Joey—Abel's childhood friend and police partner—Harry, and all of Carlin's classmates except for Gus are archetypal characters who move the romantic plot along briskly. The reader is not stretched to imagine the emotional lives of most of the characters and can concentrate on the main protagonists. Gus Pierce is the most interesting of Hoffman's characters, presented with the most promise for emotional surprise, but he is simply and quickly killed just as his story begins to bloom. Gus comes from a wealthy family, but he has always managed to shape himself into an outsider. Good looks, good grades, and a family pedigree slide him into a room at the Chalk House, the prestigious boys' dormitory at Haddan, but within days, it becomes clear to the Chalk House boys that tradition and a title mean little to Gus, and their antagonism grows from menacing to deadly in the course of a few months. Interestingly, Gus's death is itself a main character in the story; it shapes all of the events to follow, and Gus in death turns out to be as or more powerful a force than Gus was in life. In death, Gus continues to follow Carlin around campus, haunting her eyes and her sorrow.

He was murdered, and in a vague mirror of the Hamlet's father, the murdered king in Hamlet, his ghost continually haunts Carlin, as if as a nagging reminder that something suspicious surrounded his death. Betsy Chase takes photographs of Gus's room the day after he is discovered floating in the Haddan River, and when she develops them, she sees that in one of the photos, there is an unmistakable image of Gus's ghost sitting on the bed.

Hoffman does not ask the reader to judge whether or not the photo could be real, but assumes its veracity. The photo becomes a litmus test for the characters' individual capacities to face truth. The boy's death is suspicious from its inception, when fresh blood is dripping from his body when he is pulled from the river, and his room is discovered in perfect order with the exception of a carelessly hidden bag of marijuana leaves. Some of the characters are haunted by the thought that murder may be involved, others repelled by that same fact.

Joey, Abel's longtime friend who, unknown to Abel has been accepting money from the Haddan School to keep the police quiet as to any suspected wrongdoings by Haddan School folks, sees the photo with his own eyes and refuses to believe it is anything but a fluke. Gus's ghost represents conscience, and it seems that only those characters who choose to face their fears and their own shortcomings are able to see Gus. In life, he was almost aggressively shy, waving his "I don't belong" flag in the shape of a long dark coat and a defiant smell of a wealthy boy who has not showered. It is to both his detriment, and is a testament to his strength of character, that no one around him understands him. He does not shower because the Chalk House boys turned his shower water off and forced him to stand with soap in his eyes; in response, he decided not to shower at all. He defied the codes that tied these boys together because these codes were full of malice and deceit. That he did not go to the police or tell other students about the harms the Chalk House boys were doing him after his attempts to tell his teachers had been rebuffed is a strong testament to the power of the herd mentality, and to the stolid acceptance outsiders often learn in the face of enduring injustice. Both nature and the nature of man can be as cruel as they are beautiful.

Social Concerns

a world of magical imagery, human I nconcerns may sometimes be overshadowed by larger, overarching concerns for life and death. However, in Hoffman's The River King, the otherworldly events and imaginings serve only to outline, and never subsume, human social concerns. The major theme sitting astride Hoffman's story is the issue of deceit. The story is riddled with lies, from those that the boarding students tell each other, to the lies lovers tell one another, to the lies that the characters tell themselves. Hoffman focuses on the trail each lie follows as it wends its way through a character's life, and deals specifically with the ways in which lies affect the character's psyche, as well as how lies affect relationships between the liar and the lied to.

Deceit takes on varying shades and nuances in the sub-plots of the story. Carlin Leander and Gus Pierce, two students new to the Haddan Preparatory School in Haddan, Massachusetts, lie to the other students and to one another about their family history, afraid that their lower class upbringing will encourage disdain from the other students, and uncertain of the other. The two might have found honesty with each other, but Carlin was lured from their friendship by Harry McKenna, the consummate prep school student, whose wide grin and shifting eyes carved a rift between Carlin and Gus. It was not until after Gus's death that Carlin learned the truth about his life, and about the strength of his feelings for her, and his for her.

Betsy Chase arrives at the Haddan School full of self-deceit: she is betrothed to Eric Herman, a man who from the outset of his introduction is described as "a man who drew people to him without trying, and Betsy wondered if perhaps she had simply happened to be in sight at the very moment he decided it was high time for him to marry." Hoffman never gives the reader any sense otherwise, as Eric remains cold and closed throughout the novel, never learning any lessons, never wavering in his unemotional tide. Betsy has an illicit affair, but it still seems as though it is more of a lie to herself than to Eric, for when she decides to leave Eric and the school to be with Abel Grey, her lover, Hoffman describes Eric as being relieved. Betsy learns to follow her heart; Abel learns to allow fate to work its way; and Eric just closes the door. He never discovers the deceit, and also never comes to atone for the blase deceit he has practiced by failing to heed the complaints and fears that his students, particularly Gus, try to share with him. He is as stone-faced as the Haddan school buildings, as though he is a template of immovability against which all the other characters show mutability and growth.

Lies pervade every part of the story: Joey, Abel's police partner and long-time friend, has lied to Abel for years by not letting him know about the bribe money that the police department accepted annually from the Haddan School. Carlin and Gus and many other students sneak out at night after curfew. Helen Davis hid from the world the fact that she had an affair with the headmaster of the school, and also that she was dying of a heart disease. Abel Grey's brother tricked him into getting his family's gun down from its

hiding place and then used it to commit suicide. Abel's mother hid from Abel and even from Abel's father the fact that his father was not raised by his natural parents, but had been discovered in the marshes of the river, a baby discarded by the Haddan School's former headmaster's wife before she committed suicide. The former headmaster had lived an illicit life, constantly engaging in affairs.

The pharmacist in town plays a role in the story as a kind of semi-omniscient character: he is the keeper of secrets and lies for the whole town, a repository of sin and emendation. That he chooses not to reveal his knowledge to others is both a boon and a bust; in a town as small as Haddan, secrets let out will travel fast, but secrets held too tightly can sometimes lead to misfortune.

The small town of Haddan, Massachusetts, has been divided in half, right down the middle, thanks to a freak storm in its long-gone-by history. This strange line, supposedly running down the center of Main Street, separates the natives from the silverspooned attendants of the prestigious Haddan School. Those born in the village loathe and fear the students, and the students are usually far too self-involved to give the town much thought. However, on Halloween night, a mysterious death of a Haddan student—one who had befriended many of the townspeople—brings the two sides ineluctably together, and through the course of dealing with the death and the investigation surrounding it, strange alliances are wrought and revealed. Abel Grey, a Haddan boy born and bred, is one of the policemen who has to recover the body from the river.

Although he and his partner, Joey, have always hated the Haddan School and everyone associated with it, Abel is drawn into the life of the school, first by the fact that his own brother had shockingly died at nearly the same age as Gus, and soon thereafter by an sudden and undeniably love for Betsy Chase, the new photography teacher at the Haddan School.

When Abel sees Gus's body, and immediately recognizes some elements about the body that are inconsistent with the notion of suicide, he becomes obsessed with unwinding the mystery of the boy's death, not only for the sake of justice, but also as a symbolic means of working through his own brother's suicide. It is as though Abe believes that if he can show that Gus did not die of suicide, then it will take away the pain of what his brother did to himself. The pull of these emotions ties Abel to the very school he had only previously been associated with in terms of his robbery escapades as a youth. The town and the school are no longer able to stay out of one another's affairs, despite the efforts of many citizens of each. Abel is almost a one-man force, bent on uncovering the truth in the face of money and fear and class struggle. As he does so, he falls in love with Betsy, who is affianced to one of the highest insiders at the Haddan School. As she returns his affections, then refutes him, and ultimately reciprocates his love, Abe learns about the dangers of judging people, not only on outward appearances, but judging them at all. His lifelong friend turns out a turncoat, accepting bribes to conceal the very truths Abe is seeking to unearth; some of the Haddan students turn out to be the most genuine allies he has, and Gus, the dead boy, teaches him a lesson beyond the grave in sticking to one's instincts and refusing to take the easy way out of a situation when his conscience begs him to act otherwise.

People who try to take the high ground in this novel are punished, usually unmercifully, and there is no rhyme or reason to the punishments. A young boy refuses to perform a wrongful deed as an initiation rite, and he ends up dead; an officer seeks to reveal the truth about a murder, and he ends up fired; another student, Carlin, refuses to abide the silent rules of behavior of her peers, and she winds up revered and admired. If there is any theme that rings the most true in The River King, it is that life attests to no rhyme or reason, that nature in its bounty and its terror is the only constant truth.

Techniques

Rich description fills the pages of The River King. Hoffman surprises the reader with rich descriptive choices, erring on the side of whimsy when faced with a chance at metaphor and simile. In describing the Haddan River, Hoffman writes: It did not stop until it branched in half— one section mixing with the dark waters of the Charles, to then flow into the brackish tides of Boston Harbor, the other end meandering through farmlands and meadows in a thousand nameless rivulets and streams. Even on windy nights, it was possible to hear the current almost anywhere in the village, and perhaps that was why most people in Haddan slept so deeply. Some men in town couldn't be roused even when an alarm bell rang right beside their heads, and babies often didn't wake until nine or ten in the morning.

Hoffman is at her best when describing the landscape. She creates vivid portraits of the meadows and leaves and homes, infusing the non-human elements of the story with rich life and humor.

The River King revolves around triangles.

First there is Betsy Chase, a young photography teacher at the Haddan School who has gotten herself engaged—almost accidentally—to a fellow faculty member, even as she is inexorably drawn to Abel Grey, a town policeman. Then there are Carlin Leander, a scholarship student, and her best friend, Gus Pierce. While Carlin is able to fit in, even attracting the interest of the most popular boy on campus, Gus is a defiant outcast, a tall skinny kid in a long black overcoat "who viewed his own life as a prison sentence and experienced his existence much as a condemned man might."

Carlin's romance with the charismatic, cruel Harry McKenna creates a rupture between her and Gus, and fuels a mean-spirited practical joke with horrific consequences.

In the aftermath of tragedy, each character's heart, conscience, and courage is tested in unexpected ways.

Hoffman makes liberal use of symbolism throughout The River King. The setting is a means through which Hoffman describes both the tenor of events to come, and the tenor of characters' emotions. Hoffman begins each chapter by describing the weather, and then allowing the mood of the weather to temper the moods of the characters. In some instances, the actions of the characters seem to precipitate the fury of the weather, creating something of a chicken-egg syndrome—are the actions of the people totally controlled by the weather and its elements, or does the weather gain in fulmination and fury as the characters act in unnatural ways?

Furthermore, the animals tend to exude the inner, masked emotions of the characters in the story. Plants become sentient beings, as roses prick the thighs of girls sneaking out of dorm room windows. The swans bite at the heels of characters who seem to be

carrying around the darkest secrets. And the River laps lasciviously at some characters, while embracing others.

Nature has a say in everything that happens in the story, often becoming the central character in the swirling tale of lies and deceit.

Themes

In Hoffman's fictional universe, nature reflects human passions and sorrows.

Thwarted desire is echoed in spectacular thunderstorms; grief makes flowers change color; animals are drawn to lonely people; and rivers reveal their secrets.

At the beginning of each chapter, Hoffman describes a sweeping physical change in the weather and the landscape; this natural occurrence directly influences the moods and stratagems of the characters in the story.

The cool winds and freshness of October make the Haddan girls swoon with love.

The storm that ravages the newly built Haddan School dooms the school to a fate of tragedy and mishap. The black rain forebodes a black mood amongst the Haddan folk, foreshadowing the events to come.

In her recurring themes of love, marriage, family, and friendship, she infuses wonder in the everyday, subtly shifting from natural events to those of the supernatural. Although Hoffman's characters cope with illness, suicide, physical and mental abuse, broken hearts, and shattered dreams, there is a soothing element, a presence of higher spirits and the wonder of nature, while superstition and miracles add a dimension of whimsy and hope.

The animal and plant imagery in the story reflects the characters and plot, as well. The roses, especially, express the sorrow of Anne Howe, the wife of the former headmaster of the school, who years earlier committed suicide in the rafters of one of the dormitories at Haddan. As Helen Davis, a teach who had had an affair with Anne's husband, is dying, she reaches some kind of peace about the mistakes in her life, and for the first time since Anne's death, she smells the roses that are in almost constant bloom on the walls of the house where she lives. After she dies, the smell of roses overtakes her rooms, as though the forgiveness was overflowing and carrying Helen to a place of peace in the afterlife. The swans attach themselves to certain characters, and attack others, as sort of a litmus test of good versus evil. And the cat that belongs to Helen Davis ties together the lives of the characters by finding a home both with Helen at the Haddan School, and with Abel Grey, in the town proper, thereby foreshadowing a bridging of the gap between the people of the town and the denizens of the school.

As mentioned in the section above, the power of deceit is a theme running through out the novel. Deceit, it seems, can be used for good and for evil; in some instances, the very same act—adultery—is devastating when kept in the closet in one case, but salutary for the very same reason in another case. Hoffman also shows how deceit, once propagated, winds its way inextricably through the events that follow it. Whether or not an atonement will be a necessary concomitant of the lie, the lie will play out to some end, never resting in its own eddy.

In her novels, Hoffman leads the reader to consider the powerful influences that fate, love, and nature have on our lives.

Adaptations

There have been no adaptations of this novel. There is, however, an unabridged version of the book available as an audiotape.

It is put out by Brilliance Audio.

Key Questions

The River King tells a tale of murder and deceit that might be no more than that, but for the fact that Hoffman weaves a thread of the supernatural into the story. She has a subtle, imaginative way of interlacing the natural with the supernatural that allows the reader to make the leap of faith without too much turbulence. Along the way, Hoffman never strays from her chief goal of understanding the social mores of truth and lies, and the consequences they can have within a small-knit community.

1. Hoffman dedicates much of the novel to describing The Haddan School campus in detail. In what ways do the school's physical descriptions mirror actual events in the novel? Is Hoffman's description of the Chalk House foreboding for its inhabitants?

2. The line between past and present, living and dead, is often blurred in the story, creating a mystical atmosphere in which anything seems possible. How does Annie Howe "live on" at the Haddan School? What mystical or supernatural qualities did Annie Howe display while she was alive? Are there any ghosts in the novel, and if so, how do these ghosts from the past inform the state of things in the present?

3. How are Carlin Leander and August Pierce different from the other students at the Haddan School? What does each do in an effort to mask that difference?

4. Almost every major character, Carlin Leander, Abel Grey, Betsy Chase, Dr.

Howe, is forced at some point to deal with the death of someone close to them. What do you believe is the best way to deal with such loss?

5. Who in the novel might aptly be titled "the River King"?

6. Thanks to the deceitful actions of Abel Grey, Harry McKenna gets expelled from The Haddan School and loses his admission into Dartmouth, despite the fact that he did not actually cheat on his exam. Is this fair? Does Harry McKenna deserve a more severe punishment for his role in Gus Pierce's death?

7. Haddan is divided between the haves and the have-nots or, the Haddan School students and the Haddan town residents. In what ways does the symbolic distance between the two become greater over the course of the novel? In what ways does it become shorter?

8. Both Abe and Carlin Leander feel guilty for the death of someone close to them— in Abe's case, his brother Frank, and in Carlin's case, Gus Pierce. In what other ways are the two characters alike?

9. What effect does the revelation about Abe's true grandparents have on Abe?

10. Death imagery abounds in the second half of the novel. The last paragraph, however, contains a more hopeful image of Carlin swimming in the river one late

afternoon. This parting sequence provides a positive contrast to the mostly dark images found up to that point: "the fish had grown used to her, and they swam along beside her, all the way home." Why do you think Carlin decides to swim in the river every day?

Why, in your opinion, does Gus stop "visiting" her?

Literary Precedents

Alice Hoffman writes in the genre of the romantic mystery novel. However, her writing often transcends any specific genre, spilling over into the thriller category. She has followed a long line of dreamers: having started from the traditional fairy tales such as Mary Poppins, she graduated to J. D. Salinger and Emily Bronte, each of whom blends the dream world of fiction with a gritty realism that captured the often catastrophic marrow of the social structure of each's time. A Catcher in the Rye and Wuthering Heights remain among her alltime favorites. In fact, Wuthering Heights inspired one of her novels, Here on Earth, which was later adapted into a motion picture.

Fairy tales were popular in part because they were deeply entrenched in the oral tradition of story telling. Passed from generation to generation, they likely altered in tone and substance many times before they were transcribed onto the written page.

Precedents to the romantic novel include some long poems of the romantic poets of the nineteenth century—Donne, Keats, and Shelley, to name a few. These romantic poems explore dream reality and ideas associated with ideal love.

Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus (1818) an early gothic story in which the monster has fleshed-out human emotions. Bronte, of course, wrote Wuthering Heights, published in 1847 under the name of Ellis Bell. The novel tells the story of Heathcliff, the mysterious young rake who is dealt repeated emotional blows through love and through his stature as poor gentry. The novel follows a complex depiction of what such cruelty can do to a person's psyche, and how one's environment exerts an indomitable influence on the choices one makes in life. Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (1865) relates the adventures of a young girl who falls into a magical land where cats disappear, bunnies wear top hats, and things are really quite scarier than you'd think. It is a bildungsroman for girls.

Hoffman's novels follow a branch of fairy tales that moved into the style known as the Gothic novel, which are commonly referred to as "romantic mysteries." These are books whose plots include the solving of a crime— usually murder, but not necessarily—by either an amateur sleuth or a professional private investigator. However the most cogent element at the center of the story will always be a love story. The hallmarks of the Gothic include such fanciful transfigurations as curses, apparitions, wicked tyrants, desolate landscapes, destructive forces, and demonic spirits.

Related Titles

No other of Hoffman's books is related to The River King. However, many of them take on similar themes involving magic and gothic elements. Alice Hoffman has published a total of thirteen novels, one book of short fiction, and three books for children.

Hoffman's first novel, Property Of (1982), was written at the age of twenty-one, while she was studying at Stanford, and published shortly thereafter by Farrar Straus and Giroux. It tells the story of a lonely outsider who wants desperately to belong.

As she determinedly tries to become the "property of" a local gang's brooding leader, she deals with the power of gang mentality and the problems of loving someone who claims to be indifferent toward emotional love.

Hoffman's work has been published in more than twenty translations and more than one hundred foreign editions. Her novels have received mention as notable books of the year by the New York Times, Entertainment Weekly, The Los Angeles Times, Library Journal, and People Magazine. Ms. Hoffman has also worked as a screenwriter for nearly twenty years and is the author of the original screenplay Independence Day, starring Kathleen Quinlan and Diane Weist.

Hoffman's short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in the New York Times, the Boston Globe Magazine, Kenyon Review, Boulevard, Redbook, Architectural Digest, Gourmet,Premier, Self, Southwestern Review and many other magazines as well as the anthologies Family and Thirty-Three Things Every Girl Should Know.

Many of Hoffman's novels deal with issues of extraordinary circumstances. Local Girls (1999) evokes the world of the Samuelsons, a family torn apart by tragedy and divorce in a world of bad judgment and fierce attachments, disappointments and devotion. Hoffman charts the progress of Gretel Samuelson from the time Gretel is a young girl until the time she finally leaves home, using Gretel's perspective as well as the alternating voices of a trio of women: her best friend Jill, her romance-addicted cousin Margot, and her mother, Franny, whose spiritual journey affects them all.

Practical Magic (1994) is a tale of two sisters, Gillian and Sally Owens, brought up by the two elderly guardian aunts in a world of spells and exotica from which they eventually escape—one by running away, the other by marrying—but which never escapes from them.

Other novelists whose works involve themes of magic and enchantment include Peter S. Beagle and Barbara Kingsolver. The Last Unicorn, by Peter S. Beagle (1994), is one of the true classics of fantasy. Beagle writes a shimmering prose-poetry, the voice of fairy tales and childhood: The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone. She was very old, though she did not know it, and she was no longer the careless color of sea foam but rather the color of snow falling on a moonlit night. But her eyes were still clear and unwearied, and she still moved like a shadow on the sea.

The unicorn discovers that she is the last unicorn in the world, and sets off to find the others. She meets Schmendrick the Magician—whose magic seldom works, and never as he intended—when he rescues her from Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival, where only some of the mythical beasts displayed are illusions. They are joined by Molly Grue, who believes in legends despite her experiences with a Robin Hood wannabe and his unmerry men. Ahead lie many more magical characters along the unicorn's journey to discover her kin.

There is no one in contemporary literature quite like Barbara Kingsolver. Her dialogue sparkles with sassy wit and earthy poetry; her descriptions are rooted in daily life but are also on familiar terms with the eternal. With Prodigal Summer(2000), Kingsolver recounts three intricate stories, all set in an isolated pocket of southern Appalachia.

Like Hoffman's writing, Kingsolver's is replete with lush and symbolic physical description. The summer of the novel is "the season of extravagant procreation" in which bullfrogs carelessly lay their jellied masses of eggs in the grass, "apparently confident that their tadpoles would be able to swim through the lawn like little sperms," and in which a woman may learn to "tell time with her skin." Prodigal Summer recounts the story of a wildlife biologist observing the coyotes in an isolated mountain region. She meets a young hunter, and their encounters lead to two other narratives: the story of an newly widowed entomologist; and the story of a tumultuous relationship between a traditional farmer and an organic agricultural devotee.

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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