

Search for Senna Short Guide

Search for Senna by K. A. Applegate

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Overview

In Everworld, the gods of ancient mythologies live and rule over their human subjects, brought with the gods when they left the Old World, Earth. The natural laws that David, Christopher, April, and Jalil are used to shift and change in Everworld.

Gravity in particular behaves in mysterious ways. In *Search for Senna*, Everworld is faced with a terrible crisis: it is being invaded by a being that can consume the gods themselves, and they need a way to fight or escape this enemy who is more terrible than even the most terrifying of the gods. This becomes the problem of the four teens because Loki, Viking god of destruction, hoping to escape the invader, is scheming to use their friend Senna, a witch, to open a way back to the Old World so that the gods may return there and rule Earth once again.

An ordinary teenager on Earth, Senna is a magical being in Everworld, seemingly the one person who can open Earth to the gods of Everworld.

Given the brutality that some of the gods inflict upon the people of Everworld, the return of the gods to Earth would be horrible, but can Loki be stopped? In addition, the Hetwan, beings from outside Everworld, have their own secret plans, and the enigmatic Senna is either hiding from Loki or possibly pursuing her own plans for ruling and destroying—while controlling the actions of David and Christopher. Meanwhile, the teens have to find ways to survive in a world where most people want to kill them, as well as figure out how they can live in Everworld and on Earth simultaneously. In this first Everworld novel, the complications are many, danger is everywhere, and only four teenagers stand between Earth and the unprecedented threat from Everworld.

About the Author

Katherine Alice Applegate is simultaneously one of America's most famous authors and one of America's most mysterious.

She guards her privacy, as does her publisher, Scholastic, which has brilliantly marketed her *Animorphs* and *Everworld* series for astounding sales. Applegate was already a well-established writer of books for young readers, mostly romance novels, when she proposed the *Animorphs* series to Scholastic, where the proposal was met with enthusiasm. She wanted to write a series of books that showed how the world might look from the perspectives of different animals; the result has been a series of fascinating novellas for late elementary to junior high school students.

Having moved several times around the United States, the Michigan-born writer now resides in Minneapolis. She has published more than one hundred books, and she has written them at an amazing pace. Begun in 1996, her *Animorphs* series numbered more than forty books plus several spin-offs by 2001. Her twelve-volume series intended for adolescents, *Everworld*, begun in 1999, was completed in 2001. Sally Lodge, in *Publishers Weekly*, quotes Applegate: A series writer has to develop plotting and pacing that become a well-oiled machine.

You don't have the luxury of spending a year on a book and absolutely cannot indulge in writer's block. Yet I knew I had to write in perfect language and choose just the right images, to make sure that my middle readers fell in love with the characters and returned again and again.

The two hundred letters from young readers Applegate receives per week, as well as the one hundred e-mails she receives per day, attest to the success she has had in reaching her intended audience.

Readers love her characters.

In spite of the success of Applegate's writings, they have received scant attention in the press, perhaps because of a prevailing view that books written so quickly cannot be worth writing about, or perhaps because of the immense difficulty in keeping current with all the books Applegate publishes. But despite the great pace at which Applegate has written her books, they tend to be of higher quality than other mass-market writings. The *Animorphs* series provide artful and informative perspectives of characters as animals, whether fleas or birds. The *Everworld* novels offer suspense and tales of adventure with fine introductions to the mythologies of the world.

Applegate does not shy away from the tough questions about growing up and building sound, honest relationships with others. For instance, the non-series title *Sharing Sam* deals with the prospect of a close friend dying and how to love in spite of the pain of the loss of loved ones. In *Everworld*, the relationships among the principal characters are essential to the appeal of the novels. Applegate has mastered the art of

characterization, and this is perhaps the most important reason her rapidly-written works are considered both good literature and entertaining reading.

Setting

In *Search for Senna*, the settings contribute much to the suspense and the fantasyescapism of the story. Everworld as a whole is full of surprises for David, Jalil, Christopher, and April. David says they were all near a pier, where Senna was, then, The clouds twisted as if a tornado were forming. The pier seemed almost to curl, like a pig's tail. I looked at Jalil. His face was turning inside out. Inside out! I could see the back of his eyes, the gray wrinkled brain, the heaving, gasping trachea in his throat.

Later, David revives and discovers himself in a bad situation: "I was hanging by my arms. My back was against a stone wall.

Stones as big as cars. Chains were attached to my wrists with shackles. The chains and shackles could have held King Kong." This is his unfriendly introduction to Everworld.

At first, David and his companions are in a weird version of the culture of the ancient Vikings. There are both real-life Vikings and ancient Norse gods and other supernatural beings, including Loki and a giant wolf. Eventually, Harald Goldtooth, one of the Vikings, explains a little about what happened: "When Everworld was born, the gods left the Old World and came to this new place. And they carried their people with them; Zeus and his children, Huitzilopochtli and his foul brood, Odin and his own. All the gods." This means that Everworld is a place where ancient religions and mythologies are true; it is where gods and heroes live as they did in ancient stories.

Contrasted with the Everworld setting is the real world. The four teens find that when they go to sleep in Everworld they are back in their old lives on Earth. In fact, they are living two lives, one of everyday experiences at home on Earth and the other of fantastic adventures in Everworld.

Social Sensitivity

In *Search for Senna*, Applegate incorporates parts of two ancient mythologies into her tale of adventure. One is that of the ancient Norse, the Vikings, who populated much of the North Atlantic and terrorized Europe and central Asia during the Middle Ages. Although Applegate works significant aspects of the Norse tales into *Search for Senna*, her purpose is not to explain Norse religious beliefs, but instead to tell a thrilling adventure in which the tales are a part.

Thus, she does not explain much about such figures as the giant wolf, although anyone familiar with Norse mythology will recognize not only the gods and the wolf, but the snake, as well.

Ancient Aztec beliefs receive fuller coverage in *Land of Loss*, the second novel in the *Everworld* series. In *Search for Senna*, the Aztecs first appear to be the victims of a Viking raid intended to acquire the ransom needed to release their favorite god. The Vikings do not realize that they are part of a larger plan that includes their destruction.

As in the mythology of the Norse, the gods are not always mindful of the welfare of human beings, and people are often pawns in a game they do not realize exists. For the purposes of the plot in *Search for Senna*, the Aztec culture is only sketched from the perspective of David, who is mindful of strengths and weaknesses, of walls and warriors. The Aztecs are no match for the large, well-armed Vikings, but *Search for Senna* is the story of people caught up in events larger than themselves. Just as David, Jalil, Christopher, and April are part of a plan that they do not yet understand, involving Senna, Loki, and others, so, too, are the Vikings and Aztecs caught up in the plans of their gods. It is enough to know that the god Huitzilopochtli demanded blood sacrifices, and that at his worst Loki never demanded what the Aztecs were expected to give.



Literary Qualities

Applegate likes to experiment, and her novels tend to be lively exercises in ideas and techniques. In the case of *Everworld*, she creates a place where all the world's ancient mythologies coexist, and she has fun creating adventures that involve mixing the mythologies. For the *Everworld* series, she creates four adventurers who are snatched from fairly ordinary teenaged American lives, although Jalil's psychological problems are somewhat out of the ordinary. Through these characters she experiments with techniques of narration by having each one narrate novels. The personality of each narrator shows through in the telling of each book, so that *Everworld* is described through David's love of action and interest in logistics in *Search for Senna*, through Christopher's acidic humor and tendency to see below the surface of events to find what is really going on in *Land of Loss*, through April's good sense and practicality in *Enter the Enchanted*, and through Jalil's analytical mind that orders events to find the logic of their organization in *Realm of the Reaper*. The cycle of narrators is repeated through the subsequent novels, but Senna narrates the ninth, *Inside the Illusion*.

This can be disconcerting. David is an engaging narrator, and losing his storytelling voice for *Land of Loss* is disappointing, although Christopher manages to make *Land of Loss* his own novel. Once the reader gets used to the rhythm of the shifting narrators, however, Applegate's experimentation becomes fun.

Applegate paints remarkable scenes with her words. Take, for instance, narrator David's description of the fearsome city of Huitzilopoctli: The city looked ancient and modern all at once. The walls of shining white stone were perhaps a hundred feet high. I saw no towers. It wasn't a castle built for defensive war; it was a wall raised against the jungle that pressed in all around the wall, a sea of dark, almost black-green that flowed down from distant mountains.

Green, unbroken green, as far as the eye could see.

This offers an impressive view of an ancient Mezo-American city, but notice how Applegate stretches beyond merely putting her words into David's mouth. Instead, the description is vintage David, bearing the hallmarks of his character. The man-of-action of the young adults who have been sucked into *Everworld*, he thinks in terms of strengths and weaknesses. He is the one who most easily adapts to new weapons.

Thus, his description of Huitzilopoctli is one of offense and defense, and the picture he paints is of a city defending against the jungle. This is typical of Applegate's achievement in the *Everworld* series—sharp, inspiring descriptive passages expressed in terms that are in keeping with the personalities of her narrators.

Applegate is a keen observer of telling details. Note her description of the wolf: "It was a huge gray beast the size of an elephant, but it moved with the easy grace that comes from tremendous strength. It watched us with yellow eyes that burned with more than canine intelligence. The same eyes that had gloated as it snatched Senna from the end



of the pier." There may be a touch of Animorphs, here, in her description of an animal that has human intelligence, but her words convey the size and menace of the beast. It is more than a giant animal—it thinks, and its shining eyes betray its intelligence.

Such descriptions combined with dire events make *Search for Senna* a rich, full experience, reminiscent of the organization of the Oz stories of L. Frank Baum, which feature a large, strange place with bizarre creatures, new adventures, and threats everywhere to life and limb. In *Search for Senna*, David, Jalil, Christopher, and April wander through Everworld much as Dorothy and the other characters wandered through Oz, sometimes lost, sometimes thinking they knew where they were going.

On the other hand, the Everworld books have a harder edge to their narratives. In *Search for Senna*, people die. When the Vikings charge the Aztecs, they confront an ancient, frightening god: He was shaped like a man. Blue, the blue of the sky late on a summer day. His face was striped horizontally with bands of blue and yellow. Around his eyes were glittering white stars, stars that seemed real and hot and explosive. Iridescent feathers grew from his head, spreading down across his shoulders and back. In his left hand he held a disk, a mirror that smoked and burned. In the right hand was a snake, a twisting, writhing snake that breathed fire and almost seemed an extension of his hand. His other hand, the one that held the mirror, dripped red. It dripped red and you knew, knew deep down, that it could never, would never be wiped clean.

Everworld is home not just to the bizarre, but to true horrors. David looks up at the gigantic god and notes, "This was the heart and soul of evil. This was corruption and filth and torture and madness." Passages such as this make for excellent cliffhangers, and Applegate manages to end her chapters with good ones, and the novel, first in a series, with a magnificent one.



Themes and Characters

The principal characters of the Everworld novels are David, Jalil, Christopher, April, and Senna. David Levin narrates the first novel, *Search for Senna*. He is about sixteen years old and says, "I have a rep as a fairly tough guy." He likes being "tough" but dislikes the fact that other people expect him to be stupid because of it. As he tells the tale of *Search for Senna*, he reveals a good, logical mind—one that is well suited to military logistics. Whether his companions like it or not, they often need his ability to spot weaknesses in an opponent's defenses, as well as his talent for finding something to do when all hope appears lost.

Ever the man of action, David is eager to knock heads and defeat foes. As he works an oar of the *Dragonshield*, a Viking longboat, he notes, "And it occurred to me then that at that moment I was as happy as I've ever been in my life." Yet, although he loves physical activity, he is introspective enough to be an interesting narrator. "Maybe a hand was guiding me," he says, "and all of us. Maybe, even, it was Senna's own hand. Life's so much easier if you think that way. So much easier to blame some unseen force." He realizes his weakness for Senna, and the fact of this realization suggests that he may eventually overcome this weakness, no matter how much he enjoys being the hero protecting the fair damsel. David also knows his limitations. For example, he observes that Sven Swordeater is a man, "And I'm a boy." Tough guy or not, David realizes that he has yet to become what Swordeater is already. This is one of David's strengths: not only does he spot the weaknesses of others, but he also knows his own and is able to judge what he can do and should not try to do.

According to David, Jalil doesn't believe the truth should offend anyone but offending people is something Jalil does very well.

It will take until the first novel Jalil narrates, *Realm of the Reaper*, to reveal exactly why he is at once very intelligent and thoughtless, but in *Search for Senna* he has a tendency to state the obvious and to unnecessarily point out other people's flaws to them. He comes from an upper-middle-class family, and is a sharp-minded high school student. In spite of being thin-skinned and choosing bitter words to express himself, he points out significant aspects of the environment that are clues to what may be happening. For instance, he asks, "Why does a Norse god speak English?" It may irritate David that Jalil does not have answers for his questions, but formulating the questions is important for seeking the answers. It also shows that Applegate is alert to the contradictions in her story and sensitive to the powers of thought in her teenage characters. Thus, Jalil is not only an interesting character, he serves to ask questions readers themselves may ask, and he serves to provide foreshadowing—that is, he asks questions that will eventually be answered.

Christopher is somewhat similar to Jalil in that he is intelligent and tends to irritate David, but Christopher's remarks tend to be sarcastic attempts at dry wit. Whereas Jalil asks questions, Christopher tends to make observations such as "Hell of a coincidence having two different universes where so much is the same." He tends to be better at



figuring out what is going on, but spends too much of his time thinking of himself as a rival to David, especially for the affections of Senna.

April just happens to be better prepared for adventuring in Everworld than her companions. When sucked through a vortex into Everworld, she had her backpack, which has some useful supplies. She tends to be introspective and makes remarks such as "Maybe dreams are memories of another universe." One of April's functions in Search for Senna is to stand apart from Senna's influence and offer some common sense when the boys lose their own common sense to the schemes and controlling power of Senna."

The device of having the characters sleep and dream that they are living their former lives on Earth until reawakening in Everworld offers a chance to explore the personalities of each character deeply, because the characters have time to reflect, and also because their behavior when they are under great stress is contrasted with their behavior when they are living the somewhat boring though stressful lives teenagers on Earth normally live.

David's reaction to the way of life on Everworld is "Real seemed unreal. Familiar was strange. I'd gone to sleep in living color and woken to black and white and all the shades of gray." He thrives on the challenges of Everworld and likes Everworld better than Earth. The others are not so sure; Everworld is an uncomfortable place far from the showers, beds, and foods they like. The switching from Everworld to Earth and back again confuses them, although Christopher soon realizes that returning to Earth is a valuable opportunity and he studies books about the figures he is meeting in Everworld, remembering his reading when he wakes up in Everworld.

The crux of Search for Senna is Senna herself. She appears to be an ordinary teenager—April's half sister. But in Everworld Senna is a different person, becoming diffident and remote in her personality. Further, she exerts a greater than usual influence over the boys. David is in her thrall, focused more than anything on protecting her. Christopher resists but cannot break from her influence, wishing to be first in her affections. Jalil finds her annoying, as he does just about everyone. April realizes that Senna's influence is more like mind control than the ordinary effect a pretty girl has on a young man. Who Senna is and why the gods view her as the key to their survival are central mysteries of the Everworld series.

The villains, drawn in broad strokes and vivid colors, are part of the fun of Search for Senna. For instance, there is "Great Loki," god of destruction: "His hair was blond, long, and combed. His face was thin, cruel but not stupid. He was handsome in a way.

Handsome like a poisonous snake can be beautiful. But he was nervous, too, drumming his fingers on stone. Rocking just slightly back and forth. Yeah, nervous.

Afraid despite his power." David notices Loki's fear, which means Loki has a weakness of some sort. Even so, Loki is a formidable figure, for "the man [Loki] and the wolf were each impossibly large."



Loki and the wolf are taken from ancient Norse mythology. Loki was a villainous figure, a trickster who contrived the death of Baldur, the most beloved of the gods, and who eventually helped bring about the destruction of Asgard, the heavenly home of the gods, as well as the destruction of Earth. The wolf who snatches Senna and who appears with Loki is a reference to Fenris, a gigantic wolf who is placed in dwarf-made chains and imprisoned in the ground by the gods, but who is released by Loki and who eventually kills and eats the chief of the gods, Odin, during the last battle that destroys the world. Both are evil figures.

But what of the good gods? In Norse mythology, Thor is sympathetic to human beings, but in Everworld he has been imprisoned. "With Thor lost to us, who else will save us from the Hetwan?" asks Thorolf, a Viking. Thor and Odin are absent; the Vikings must find a way to free them. "My father [Harald] says you [David] come from the Old World. The world of before," says Sven Swordeater. The Vikings may be forgiven if they hope David and the others can help.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does David feel insecure?
2. Why does David feel happy while rowing the Dragonsshield?
3. What does Christopher contribute to the adventure? What does this say about his personality?
4. What does April contribute to the adventure? What does this say about her personality?
5. What does Jalil contribute to the adventure? What does this say about his personality?
6. What is David's attitude toward each of his companions: Christopher, April, and Jalil? What does this tell about David's personality?
7. Why does Huitzilopoctli frighten David more than Loki does?
8. Why do the adventurers fall slowly into a pool? Could this be foreshadowing anything? Is it like any common part of human experience?
9. Why does Applegate seem to be beginning a new story more than ending one in the final passages of Search for Senna?
10. What advantage does David have as a storyteller over Christopher, April, and Jalil?
11. Why would Applegate make the gods huge in Search for Senna?
12. Which passages are dreamlike in Search for Senna?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Exactly who is the giant wolf in Norse mythology? Is he like the wolf portrayed in Search for Senna?
2. What is the relationship between Loki, the wolf, and the snake in Norse mythology? Does knowing this relationship help clarify their relationship in Search for Senna?
3. What part do blood sacrifices play in Aztec religious beliefs? What did their neighbors think about these practices?

Would their neighbors have welcomed the Viking attack on the Aztecs?
4. What are some cliff-hangers in Search for Senna? Where does Applegate use them? How effective are they?
5. David looks for descriptions of Viking longboats in Search for Senna. What were they? What did they look like? David is particularly interested in how to make them sail best; how effective were they in sailing the ocean? What in their design affected their effectiveness?
6. Why would the Vikings miss Thor in particular? What is he like in Norse mythology?
7. What are the best descriptive passages in Search for Senna? What makes them the best?
8. Some of the Vikings in Search for Senna live on farms. What were real Viking farms like? Do the ones in Search for Senna resemble the real-life farms?
9. April thinks that Senna has a witchlike power over the boys. What are some examples in folktales and mythology of girls or women who could supernaturally control boys or men? (You might start with The Odyssey.)
10. How does Search for Senna compare with the best books of the Animorphs series? Does the fact that Search for Senna is intended for an audience older than that of the Animorphs books affect its quality?

For Further Reference

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"K. A. Applegate." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Vol. 37. Detroit: The Gale Group, 2000. A biographical essay with comments on Applegate's life and work.

Lodge, Sally. "Scholastic's Animorphs Series Has Legs." In *Publishers Weekly* 244, 45 (November 3, 1997): 36-37.

Review of *Search for Senna*. In *Publishers Weekly* 246, 25 (June 21, 1999): 69. The reviewer says, "With her blend of accessible story and mythological cast of characters, Applegate is sure to attract a host of new fans."

Related Titles

The subsequent Everworld novels continue to introduce mythologies, and in the process, Applegate creates a new mythology of her own, in which human endeavors are placed in a vast cosmic scheme in which everyone is important, even though in any individual novel they may seem like pawns.

Land of Loss focuses more on Aztec mythology than Norse mythology and introduces the Coo-Hatch, aliens from yet another world. Enter the Enchanted tells of the survival of Arthurian culture in Everworld and shows that the various cultures and their gods know about each other and mix with each other. Realm of the Reaper delves more deeply into Norse myths about life and death and the underworld. Once the teens meet Merlin in Land of Loss, the grand contest of universe-shaking powers begins to reveal itself, and dreams do seem more real than real life.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996