

# Secret of the Andes Short Guide

## Secret of the Andes by Ann Nolan Clark

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## Overview

Secret of the Andes is a story of cultural mystery and personal identity.

Cusi, a modern-day Native American boy, and his guardian, Chuto, tend a herd of prized llamas in Hidden Valley, an isolated valley high in the Andes Mountains. Cusi is unaware that he is a direct descendant of the ruler of the ancient Incas. During the course of the story he is instructed by his guardian in the religion and history of his ancient people, and goes in search of his true identity. Cusi's search leads him to the modern city of Cuzco, where he searches in vain for a suitable family. His quest ends when, reconciled to his identity, he returns to Hidden Valley to assume his duties as the guardian of the Inca treasure and culture.

## About the Author

Ann Nolan Clark, daughter of Patrick Frances and Mary Dunne Nolan, was born December 5, 1898, in Las Vegas, New Mexico. As a child she attended a convent day school where, in addition to her academic subjects, she received instruction in religion and social manners. Grandfather Nolan, a graduate of Dublin University, visited the family twice a year. His animated tales were grand entertainment for Clark, her two older brothers, and a younger sister.

From the convent school, Clark went to public high school in Las Vegas. There she took some college courses and, with the advent of the First World War, was pressed into teaching at a one-room school, a situation she detested and resigned from at the first opportunity. A visit to Tacoma, Washington, yielded a succession of jobs, including elevator operator, defense plant worker, and society editor. Journalism appealed to Clark, but letters from home encouraged her to return to New Mexico.

Her return home meant a return to the schoolroom, this time a small school with many Mexican and Native American students. Later, in 1919, she married Thomas Patrick Clark, whose early death left her with a two-year-old son to support. This son would meet his death as an Air Force pilot in World War II.

The frustration of trying to teach Native American children without material relevant to their culture spurred Clark to write her own texts. Her talent for educational writing did not go unnoticed, and in 1930 she was offered a position as an educational specialist with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She worked for the bureau until 1962, when she retired her post as educational supervisor. During her tenure she traveled widely in Latin America.

In the meantime, Clark did not neglect her writing. Between 1942 and 1978, she published twenty works of fiction, sympathetically depicting the identity problems faced by young members of minority groups. Her characters include young people from Incan, Guatemalan, and Navajo tribes, as well as youths from Mexico and Vietnam. Clark's protagonists struggle to maintain their identities in a world of modern, conflicting cultural demands. Clark also wrote twenty-seven volumes of nonfiction. Her awards included the New York Herald Tribune Spring Festival Award in 1941 for *In My Mother's House* and in 1952 for *Looking-for-Something*; the 1953 Newbery Medal for *Secret of the Andes*; the 1962 United States Bureau of Indian Affairs Distinguished Service Award; and the 1963 Catholic Library Association Regina Medal.



## Setting

*Secret of the Andes* is set entirely in the Andes Mountains, but the action unfolds at several interlocking locales ranging from isolated canyons to the city of Cuzco. The distance between these points and their varying elevations function to emphasize the isolation of life in these vast ranges. In particular, this isolation lends credence to the idea that a historical past is still an active influence in the lives of the present-day characters.

The title, *Secret of the Andes*, suggests that the story concerns the mystery of place. In a sense it does, creating for the reader awesome vistas that reflect the majesty and the grandeur of the Andes Mountains. This dramatic sweep intensifies Cusi's sense of isolation. His loneliness is relieved only by his devotion to the llamas and the presence of an elderly guardian. As the boy's personal unrest grows, the mystery of place gives way to the mystery of personal identity.

He feels compelled to know something of his past—who he is, where he came from, and who his parents were.



## Social Sensitivity

It would be difficult to find fault with the way Ann Clark handles the social issues in this novel. The one aspect that may be considered socially sensitive is Titu's abandonment of his infant son, Cusi. Clark simply presents the fact without making a moral judgment of Titu. Those readers insisting on retribution could say that Titu's eventual death is a just punishment. Others could dwell instead—as Clark does—on the positive relationship between Cusi and his adoptive father, Chuto. As a whole, the novel is remarkably instructive in the powers of love and loyalty.

## Literary Qualities

Much of the intrigue of *Secret of the Andes* comes from the convincing way in which Clark has fit myth, history, and legend into the life of a contemporary hero. The mythic content of the story reveals the Incan belief that the Sun God, Inti, appeared from the waters of Lake Titicaca and then journeyed to the site of Cuzco. Subsequently, each reigning Inca was considered a direct descendant of Inti.

The reigning Incan dynasty came to an end during the early sixteenth century, when the Spanish murdered the line's last legitimate emperor, Atahaulpa, despite the payment of a ransom of gold and llamas. The disappearance and subsequent care of the gold and the llamas constitute the legend that supports Cusi's presence in the mountains; the myth of Inti provides the reason for the boy's tribal quest; and the search for self-identity compels his quest on the personal level.

The interweaving of myth, legend, and personal quest feeds the book's suspense, but the aesthetic pleasures of the story are a result of Clark's ability to meld poetry and prose. Poetry is first introduced by a traveling minstrel who sings at night to the stars. The song that Cusi most enjoys reminds him of the humming of the llamas. The dignity of worship is reflected in Chuto's chants to the Sun. And Cusi's ultimate peace is reflected in the serious, poetic vows that he takes in the final chapter of the book.

The rhythms are reminiscent of medieval Gregorian chants in their successful blending of content and mood.



## Themes and Characters

Two classes of characters populate this story: those who are alive in the present time and those who belong to Incan history and mythology. Among the historical figures are the Spanish explorers and the last emperor of the Incas, Atahaulpa. The Incas considered Atahaulpa a descendant of Inti, their first ruler, who in turn was a direct descendant of the Sun God. Titu, Cusi's natural father and a descendant of Atahaulpa, abdicated and left his infant son in his place.

Cusi and Chuto are the main presentday characters. Misti, a pet llama, could be considered a minor character since she seems responsible for some of Cusi's important actions. Other characters, such as Cusi's natural parents, make only cameo appearances.

Chuto was also Titu's mentor at one time, and the old man believes that his strictness as a teacher contributed to Titu's rejection of Hidden Valley. A wise foster father, Chuto is determined not to make the same mistake with Cusi. He hopes to create a situation that will not drive the boy away, but will instead nurture a loyalty to the Incan people and a desire to accept the sacred responsibility that Titu rejected.

Cusi is curious about the history of the Incas, but he is primarily driven by his need to solve the mystery of his own personal identity. Early in the novel, Cusi and Chuto journey to a secret canyon where Chuto instructs Cusi in the ancient tribal rituals of greeting the sun. Later they journey to the Salt Pits, stopping at the ruins of the Sacred Baths along the way. Here Chuto gives Cusi further instruction in Incan mythology, hoping to instill in him pride in the tribe's glorious past. But Cusi's thoughts turn to his personal identity.

When Cusi finds a pair of golden sandals on the altar of a ruined temple, Chuto decides it is time to send the boy to the holy city of Cuzco. On the way to the city, Cusi passes through a mysterious town where his mother and father appear to him in disguise, urging him on to Cuzco.

The wonders of Cuzco do not dull Cusi's determination to find a family. He considers, but rejects, a beggar, some monks, a wealthy lady, and an old woman. Eventually, he decides to join a group of Spanish peasant children who are in the city for a holiday. They are a happy lot, quite willing to accept Cusi as an addition to their large family. The attachment, however, is cut short by the family's visit to a fortune teller. Her message to Cusi reads, "Grieve not if your searching circles." He realizes that he can never belong to the Spanish family, and that he must return to Chuto and to Hidden Valley.

Chuto desires nothing more than Cusi's return to Hidden Valley, but the old guardian's failure with Titu has left him afraid to hope for success. Almost ruthlessly, he spurns the boy's repeated testimonial that he loves Chuto and never wants to go away again. Chuto counters that Cusi is too young to know what he wants, and says, "Son of my choice . . . I . . . falter because I love you."





Give me time to open this door to you."

Cusi is willing to wait. He is as determined to claim the royal destiny as Titu had been to reject it. Finally, Chuto acquiesces, administering the sacred oath and securing the Incas' sacred line of continuity.

Much of the interest found in *Secret of the Andes* lies in the interweaving of the past and the present, the literal and the symbolic. On the literal level, Clark has spun a gripping tale of a mysterious civilization. On the figurative level, she has revealed a rite-of-passage narrative that young adult readers will find universally applicable.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Cusi often confides in his pet llama, Misti, telling her about his personal problems. Why do you think he does this? Have you ever had a pet that you felt closer to than you did to the people around you? Can you explain why?
2. Why does Chuto at first reject Cusi's decision to return to Hidden Valley?
3. What does Cusi mean when he calls Chuto "father of my heart"? What importance does this speech have in establishing believability in Cusi's return to Hidden Valley?
4. At the end of the book, Cusi takes a life-long, presumably irrevocable, vow to secrecy. Do you think Cusi is too young to make such a commitment?
5. Is there any reason to believe that Cusi will succeed where his father, Titu, failed?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Llamas are said to be highly intelligent but very temperamental. Research the nature of these animals and compare your findings with Clark's presentation. Would you call Misti typical of the breed?

2. In *Secret of the Andes*, the Spanish explorers are not men of their word.

Research the way the Spanish explorers dealt with the Incas. On the basis of what you find, would you say Clark has fairly presented both sides? Why or why not?

3. Ask your teacher to help your class arrange a choral reading of the poetry in *Secret of the Andes*. You will want to use some solo parts and some choral parts.

You may wish to find some Indian flute music to use in the background.

4. Research and report on the ruins of Machu Picchu. Could the Ayllu where Titu lived have been a smaller but similar place? Is it possible that more villages lie under the jungle growth of the Andes?

5. Would you classify this novel as mythology, fantasy, historical fiction, or modern fiction? Is it possible that a story could belong to all four of these genres?

If so, can you find examples to support your position?

## For Further Reference

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Clark, Ann Nolan. "Newbery Award Acceptance." *Horn Book* 29 (August 1953): 249-257. This article details Clark's models and the sources for her fiction.

Massee, May. "Ann Nolan Clark." *Horn Book* 29 (August 1953): 258-262. This companion piece to the Newbery speech is a biographical sketch that details the experiences that shaped both Clark's life and her writings.



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