Seven for a Secret Short Guide

Seven for a Secret by Eleanor Hibbert

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Characters

Frederica, who narrates the story, is not clearly differentiated from most earlier Holt heroines. The character remains nearly unchanged from Mistress of Mellyn (1960) onward. Only the social issues with which she comes into contact change. Frederica Hammond is an independent spirit, not unduly concerned with the opinions of others, and is unwilling to be constricted by limits on her life and happiness. As with earlier Holt heroines, curiosity is a dominant feature of her personality and at one point she must be warned, "Sometimes it can get you into trouble." Frederica is not unshockable, but she recovers quickly from shocks and her practical, compassionate nature takes over. She accepts with only brief surprise the news that Rachel Grey is expecting the child of Gaston Marchmont, who has recently wed their friend Tamarisk. She begins immediately to calculate a way out of this disaster. Within moments she sets the plan in action. Frederica is an action heroine. Practical yet passionate, she is ultimately rewarded for the traits that "can get you into trouble."

Crispin St. Aubyn, too, is not essentially different from Connan TreMellyn, although Holt's male protagonists have become more sensitive and less stern over the years. He keeps his problems to himself, which leaves his actions open to misinterpretation. Even as he proposes to Frederica and holds her in his arms, she is filled with "fear and suspicions." Her mind constantly returns to Crispin's violence toward Dorian when he interrupted the older man's attack on her. He is a tender lover, but capable of violent emotion and action. There is the mystery of his first wife's desertion and death, and the murder of Gaston Marchmont, neither of which he can fully explain or clear himself of the implication that he is somehow responsible. When his first wife re-appears and he is seen with her by Aunt Sophie, his character comes into greater clarity. Against all reason, he believes that he can bribe the exwife, a scheming former actress, to leave him alone, and marry Frederica.

What surprises Frederica is not the violation of religious or legal boundaries, but that Crispin would have kept these arrangements secret from her. He is a man defined by secrets until the most fundamental secret, the secret of his birth, is revealed.

There is more drama in the secondary characters of Tamarisk St. Aubyn and Rachel Grey. These are Frederica's childhood friends, each of whom has a well-defined personality. More importantly, they have complex emotional responses and are given the ability to learn and change. Tamarisk, rich and frivolous, must first make an impulsive and ill-advised match with Gaston Marchmont, which teaches her about suffering, before she can meet Luke Armour and learn dedication to a cause beyond herself. As she falls in love with Luke and decides to stay behind on Casker's Island to help with the mission school she retains the gaiety and "comedy turn" of her personality, but replaces frivolity with a sense of purpose that she never had before.

Rachel Grey's fate is tied to Tamarisk's by Gaston Marchmont and her fate has its more melancholy aspects. Marchmont leaves Rachel pregnant and marries Tamarisk. Rachel, an orphan who as a girl slept with her door locked to keep her Uncle Dorian out, has

few reserves against both heartbreak and more intimate betrayal. Frederica arrives just in time to prevent Rachel's suicide and introduce the hope of a solution to Rachel's seemingly insoluble problem. She convinces Daniel Grindle, who loves Rachel and has been rejected by her, that he must marry Rachel and accept her child as his own. This particular incident reveals more about Frederica than about Daniel or Rachel. As she discloses Rachel's secret to Daniel, Frederica thinks, "I was going too far. That sense of the important part I must play — had been chosen to play — in this tragedy was fast disappearing. I was trying to arrange other people's lives.

It was arrogant. It was meddling . . ."

The solution is not without its complications and setbacks. Rachel does not love Daniel as she loved Gaston and Daniel, a gentleman farmer, is not a gentleman. Daniel himself has more difficulty accepting the child than he foresaw. They overcome their problems, though, with a love that matures and deepens over time.

Social Concerns

As she grew older, Holt increasingly integrated contemporary social issues into her novels. Her continuing concern with female independence is illustrated in Seven for a Secret by the narrator Frederica Hammond's dissatisfaction with village life after she finishes her education. Frederica is saved from the fate of governess or paid companion by the offer of a position as an assistant on the St. Aubyn's estate.

More striking though is Holt's integration of a variety of modern concerns about social relations and religious belief. Loveless, mistaken marriages, divorce, and long-term, loving relationships without marriage are all present and are treated with Holt's customary lack of moralizing.

Especially interesting is the depiction of the relationship between Frederica's father and Karla that Frederica finds when she travels halfway around the world to meet him. Karla is the woman with whom he has shared happiness and tragedy, but they have chosen not to marry. Frederica is not at all shocked. The relationship is given another layer of interest by Karla's status as "half native, half AngloSaxon." The subject of miscegenation is not mined, but Holt touches interestingly on colonial attitudes and the questionable role of religion in colonialism. The portrayal of Luke Armour and his fellow missionaries allows an exploration of two types of proselytizing, one, stern and aesthetically dry, the other, humane and filled with beauty. Even the rejection of marriage by Frederica's father holds the implication that true love does not need religious sanction, though they are protected from disapproval by the native culture they live in and, ironically, by Karla's half-caste status. In an event that offers a parallel to this gentle rejection of the institution of marriage, Frederica leaves England because of the discovery that the first wife of Crispin St. Aubyn, whom she has come to love, is not dead. Crispin wishes to marry anyway, insisting that the wife who used and deserted him can be bribed. Frederica leaves rather than staying to be tempted. She returns to him, however, before she learns that his first marriage has been voided because his wife was already married.

The question of whether she returned to marry him despite the prohibition or to face up to the temptation is left open.

The connection between religious zeal and corruption is made in the portrayal of Mr. Dorian, the uncle and guardian of Frederica's childhood friend, Rachel. Both girls are made uneasy not only by his zealotry but also by the undue interest he shows in them, especially when they are praying in their nightgowns. After he attempts to attack Frederica, from which she is saved by Crispin St. Aubyn, Dorian commits suicide from fear of exposure.

Frederica's Aunt Sophie explains, "He wanted to be a saint, but he had certain instincts. He tried to suppress them and they came out this way."

Techniques

Secrecy is the dominant theme of Seven for a Secret, and those secrets are enclosed in, and closely associated with, a series of houses. Interestingly, as the covers of Holt novels have moved from showing a windswept, forbidding mansion toward portraits of the imposing heroines, the houses in the novels have proliferated to carry a complex symbolic load. Lavender House, actually a cottage, houses the "genteel poverty" left to Frederica's mother after her profligate father's death and her husband's desertion when the child was one year old. The bitterness and anger never leave her mother. They are fueled by the view of Cedar Hall, the grand house where she was raised, which she sees constantly from her windows. The Hall now houses the nouveau riche Carter family.

The contrast between the two residences exerts an effect that is nearly physical.

After a dispute with Mrs. Carter about who will arrange flowers in the church, a dispute won by Mrs. Carter, Frederica's mother has a stroke. Her illness precipitates Frederica's move to Wiltshire and her Aunt Sophie. Frederica moves to her aunt's comfortable cottage, The Rowans, but this modest dwelling is overshadowed by St.

Aubyn's, the mansion where Crispin and Tamarisk have been reared by a series of nannies and governesses. The Rowans houses the secret of the real character and whereabouts of Frederica's father and his relationship with her aunt before his ill-advised marriage to her mother. The answers to these mysteries are gradually revealed to Frederica, shaping her impressions of the father she never knew.

Bell House, "red brick and gracious," has an external appearance that belies its suffocating atmosphere of religious mania and perverse sexuality.

Their experience with the owner of Bell House forces both Rachel and Frederica to grow up quickly and gives Rachel's life a sad spin, which she finds hard to overcome. St. Aubyn's saw the neglected upbringing of Tamarisk and Crispin, an upbringing involving parents so unfamiliar with their infant son that another baby could be exchanged for him when he is killed in a bizarre accident.

In contrast to all of these is the house on Casker's Island where Ronald Hammond and his friend Karla live. It is a cool, light and open, native-style home surrounded by flowers. The profusion of flowers on the island and Tamarisk's successful introduction of flowers into the dour religious atmosphere of the mission offer a bright contrast to the incident that caused Mrs. Hammond's stroke.

The central secret and solutions to the remaining mysteries are found in the house that Frederica calls "The House of the Seven Magpies." This cottage is home to the sisters, Lucy and Flora Lane, both Crispin's former nannies. Lucy, the earlier nanny, is aloof and bitter. Her character is attributed to the fact that she must care for her sister, Crispin's second nanny, whose mind became mysteriously unhinged many years earlier. Slowly it

becomes apparent that the cottage and Flora's confused mind can provide the key to the mystery of Crispin's birth, "the secret never to be told," the death of the true heir to St. Aubyn's, and Gaston Marchmont's death. The solutions to the mysteries are not widely shared and any need to make painful decisions about blame or punishment are rendered moot when the cottage burns and Flora dies.

In the final act of the novel, Crispin and Frederica, now happily married, find in the ruins of the Lanes's cottage the picture of seven magpies that hung in the nursery. This picture and its cautionary rhyme were a daily reminder to Flora not to reveal the secrets of the cottage. They destroy the picture and all of the need for secrecy that the picture and house represent.

Themes

Seven for a Secret is about the destructive power of secrets and the healing power of honesty and love. The title refers to the children's rhyme that ends, "And seven for a secret/never to be told." The poem and the picture of seven magpies that illustrates it help suppress the truth about the novel's principal secret: the death of a child under extraordinary circumstances and the substitution of another child. If a secret is breached by an unscrupulous person, such as Gaston Marchmont who marries Tamarisk St. Aubyn, it gives him or her dangerous power. The effects of secrecy are particularly noticeable in the relationship between Frederica and Crispin. Secrecy destroys because it erects walls between people, like the bitterness of Lucy, Crispin's real mother, and like the wall that Frederica feels between herself and Crispin even after their marriage.

"There are times when I can forget it," she says. Yet, "I can't get close to you while it is there."

The attempted molestation of Frederica by Dorian is the secret that brings the fourteen-year-old girl and the young man together. The secret that Crispin carries inside him about his own birth nearly drives them apart.

Disclosure, while it may be painful and difficult, as is Crispin's revelation of his parentage to Tamarisk, who has grown up believing they are siblings and that he is the heir to the estate, always brings relief and is rewarded with greater happiness. Frederica forces her husband to reveal his secret to Tamarisk who re-affirms her love for him, his control of the estate, and her desire that this revelation never make a difference between them.

Effectively intertwined with the concern for the negative power of secrecy are the ideas of lost innocence and the instability of material things.

Frederica's move from a home filled with unhappy memories to her aunt's Wiltshire cottage in the village of Harper's Green is seemingly a move away from tragedy and into a world of innocence. Soon she becomes aware of the confusing and frightening reality hidden by its placid facade. The unwelcome attention and violence of Dorian steals her youth and his suicide reveals to the village its own dark side. Frederica says of her experience, "I grew up in that moment." Increasingly, as Frederica becomes aware of the village's secret history, it is apparent that innocence was only a delusion. It is a delusion also if the characters believe that material things, houses like Cedar Hall and St. Aubyn's, and fortunes like those associated with Crispin's tenuously-held estate, are a firm foundation for identity and future hopes. The experience of both Frederica and her friend Tamarisk proves that only love built on a foundation of "trust, faith and understanding," can give strength and stability, while mansions and fortunes may slip away in a moment.

Key Questions

Seven for a Secret offers a good opportunity to approach the topic of the clash of cultures from several perspectives. Casker's Island is a microcosm of colonial activity, with the focus on religious beliefs. Explicit value judgments are rarely expressed, but events and attitudes on the island can be compared to events in England with an eye toward determining the novel's implied values. Readers who have read Holt's early novels might be interested in comparing the male characters of this novel to earlier male protagonists like Connan TreMellyn of Mistress of Mellyn (1960) or Napier Stacy of The Shivering Sands (1969). In the later novels, these characters seem to have become more sensitive and less inclined to violence, even less sexually active. The novels are themselves a record of cultural changes in the last thirty-five years.

1. Frederica describes herself as a "romancer." She agrees that she "mak[es] up stories about people . . .

and half of them without a trace of truth to them." How important is this facet of her personality? How does it blend with her practical and truthloving nature? What role does it play in the plot?

2. What are the points of comparison and contrast between Mrs. Hammond's experience with the vicar and the church in England and the missionaries' encounters with the chief, Olam, and the religious rituals of Casker's Island?

3. The attack on Frederica in Barrow's Wood plays a central role in the novel. What are some of the ways that it influences relationships in the story and the development of the plot?

4. Is the handling of the issue of child abuse — its perpetrators and its intended victims — psychologically persuasive?

5. Does the youthful character of Tamarisk contain the seeds of the mature woman? Is the change in her outlook presented in a way that makes it believable?

6. The marriage of Rachel Grey and Daniel Grindle is a marriage of necessity. What stages does their relationship go through? How do they resolve their problems?

7. In Seven for a Secret parents are often absent, through death, desertion or neglect. What kind of parent is Ronald Hammond? Can he be compared with Mrs. Hammond or Mrs. St.

Aubyn? With surrogate parents like the Dorians and Aunt Sophie?

8. Frederica is unhappy with the knowledge that Crispin did not intend to tell her of his first wife's return. In a discussion with her father, she says, "It is dishonest." He

responds, "It is love, and did we not agree that there is nothing in life so wonderful as true love?" Does the book make completely convincing the argument that "true love" requires total honesty?

9. What kind of a man is Crispin St.

Aubyn? Are he and Frederica a good match, considering their experiences, personalities, values, and expectations about love?

10. Through Frederica's observations, the novel offers a critique of Christian conversion efforts on the island. What are the problems she sees? What does she think of them?

Can the problems be overcome?

11. Are the characters' attitudes toward pedophilia and sex outside of marriage consistent with modern expectations about Victorian attitudes and beliefs?

Literary Precedents

Seven for a Secret shares with Holt's earlier novels a background in the gothic and romance fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contemporary appeal of her stories is enhanced with the introduction of modern concerns, such as child abuse and the proper role of women, and a reduced reliance on the possibility of the supernatural for the chill of fear.

The title of the novel is taken from a children's rhyme in which Holt was quick to note the dark implications, which she draws out in the story. Frederica, as she herself notes, has the character of a "romancer." When she first sees the picture of the magpies that illustrates the rhyme, she is struck by the tinge of evil given to the message by the birds. Frederica is attuned to these feelings of uncanniness as others are not. As Tamarisk St. Aubyn writes in her letter to Frederica from Casker's Island, "One wouldn't have thought it would happen to real people . . . especially those in Harper's Green.

Life goes on in a dreary sort of pattern for years, and suddenly drama strikes."

The novel illustrates that Tamarisk is only half right, though. It is a characteristic of the romance that it deals with the eruption of drama, the unusual, into life. But the exposure of the dark subplot only appears to be sudden. Behind that "dreary sort of pattern" is a long-standing web of deceptions and in this we see the novel's gothic literary background. In the truth about Lucy's indiscretion and Crispin's birth, the past returns to haunt the present and the lives of "real people."

In the same letter, Tamarisk notes that the surprising truth about "Flora and the babies" is "like something out of the Bible or Shakespeare." She is correct in pointing out the connection of the story to plots, such as that of The Winter's Tale (c.1610-1611), that revolve around mistaken identity, misplaced children, separated twins, or orphans who are discovered to be royalty. Such tales exercise a fascination that seems to be akin to the attraction of the Oedipus myth or the feeling popularly supposed to be common among children that they must be orphans or the lost children of famous parents. The story has in common with the Bible its air of providentiality, exemplified by Frederica's statement that she has a part she "must play," that she "was chosen to play," as if total revelation were inevitable. Harper's Green seems a paradise, until its fallen character is exposed and its innocents see clearly what the face of evil looks like.

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