Seven for a Secret Short Guide

Seven for a Secret by Charles de Lint

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Overview

In "Seven for a Secret," collected in Moonlight and Vines, de Lint spins a fairy tale that takes place in an unnamed city, perhaps in his fictional Newford, his partly Canadian, partly American city that is the setting for many of his tales, although the story's mention of "Devil's Night" may be an allusion to Detroit. It opens, "What follows is imagined, but it happened just so"; de Lint often blurs the distinction between reality and the supernatural, so this line captures the spirit of "Seven for a Secret," in which the supernatural seems natural, and the harsh lives of broken people can be mended, at least a little.

About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, The Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmit, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmit-de Lint, was a school teacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1961. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15, 1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he managed one until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends.

A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His Jack, the Giant Killer won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "HOMer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for The Little Country.

The Little Country was also included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected Trader as one of its Best Books for Young Adults in 1998.

De Lint has become the quintessential crossover author: his writings intended for grownups have found a large audience among young adults, much as the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Peter S. Beagle have. He doubles his crossover appeal because his writings for young adults have found an appreciative audience among grownups.

Setting

De Lint devotes much of his story to describing the setting, suggesting its importance to the story's wholeness. He begins one descriptive passage with the curious line, "The trees are new growth, old before their time." It takes some alertness to pick up the importance of this turn of phrase, and its meaning may only come to one after reading William's description of himself as forty-five but looking sixty. The trees themselves exemplify the people who find shelter among them—young, yet old before their time. This idea of the environment representing the people who live in it is expanded in the descriptive passage: "Scrub, leaves more brown than green, half the limbs dead, the other half dying. They struggle for existence in what was once a parking lot, a straggling clot of vegetation fed for years by some runoff, now baking in the sun." Jack, William, and the other homeless people in "Seven for a Secret" survive like that vegetation, living off of runoff from the rest of the city. "Something diverted the water—another building fell down, supports torched by Devil's Night fires, or perhaps the city bulldozed a field of rubble, two or three blocks over, inadvertently creating a levee. It doesn't matter. The trees are dying now, the weeds and grass surrounding them already baked dry." De Lint will later expand this image, using it to exemplify the steady decay of the city from the inside out. Where Jack and the others live, the city, like the trees, is almost dead. This core of the city is surrounded by communities that are themselves falling into ruin, to eventually become the next dead place.

"The city died here, in the Tombs," the narrator; William, notes. "Not all at once, through some natural disaster, but piece by piece, block by block, falling into disrepair, buildings abandoned by citizens and then claimed by the squatters who've got no reason to take care of them. Some of them fall down, some burn." In one of the curious twists of the story, it is in the dead core that Jack finds life in the form of Staley's music; it is in the dying area surrounding the dead area that the homeless survive by begging and scavenging. This seems at first to be an inevitable process of decay, forever spreading outward, but "Seven for a Secret" ends on a note of healing, as if through spiritual strength people can make their lives a little better and perhaps save themselves and their communities.

Social Sensitivity

William declares to Malicorne, "When you're standing at the bottom of the ladder like we are, nobody can tell you what to do anymore." She does not buy into his assertion, which sounds more like an excuse to avoid trying to improve his life than it sounds like a rationale for why he and others live their shallow, unhappy lives in the part of town no one with money would care to visit. But his remark captures some of the tone of "Seven for a Secret," which concerns how confessing one's life to another can yield spiritual healing, which in turn can become motivation to take action.

William himself finds a job as a custodian for a tenement, which pays him nothing but provides him with a room to live in, and tenants tip him for his work, so he has some money.

Given how bleak William's life has been in "Seven for a Secret," his job is a hopeful note and exemplifies the sensitivity with which de Lint handles the subject of homelessness in a modern city. The healing offered by Malicorne does not yield amazing, stunning transformations in the lives of the homeless who tell their stories to her.

"Seven for a Secret" recognizes that healing is a process, and like the inner city that has slowly died, life returns to it only in small pieces. "Seven for a Secret" is not a story with answers for the homeless and homelessness; instead, it is about some homeless people in a city whose lives may reflect those of some of the homeless in other cities.

Literary Qualities

De Lint's stories are often like dreams. In some, such as "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep," the dreaming takes place in a concrete dream world, where people live their lives as if the dream world were as physical as the waking world. In others, such as "Seven for a Secret," the dreaming quality comes from the tone and the shadows that de Lint layers into his descriptions. For instance, Malicorne has a horn in her forehead, yet people do not always see it. In fact, William is surprised to see it partly because he has not noticed it before.

Thus, Malicorne seems like a dreamlike figure, whose form is hard to define and whose passive ways are languid, like sleep.

When she and Jack leave, William hears hoofbeats but does not see them go, whereas Staley says she saw two horses, one white and one black, trotting away. This moment is used to indicate the connectedness of William and Staley to the spiritual world.

Staley, with her spirit fiddle and her heartening music, is more connected to the spirit world than is William, who nonetheless has a connectedness of his own, perhaps a gift from telling his story to Malicorne.

Themes and Characters

This is Jack's story, even though he does not want to tell anyone his story. "[Jack] is a man who stands apart," William notes, "always one step aside from the crowd, an island distanced from the archipelago, spirit individual as much as the flesh." Several of the characters carry heavy burdens from their past, and Jack's burden turns out to be especially heavy, when he finally gets around to telling Malicorne his secret. That he thinks very little of himself comes from his one, great evil misdeed, combined with his belief that, as he says to William, "What you've done is who you are." This implies that Jack views himself as a murderer.

Jack is a particularly observant man. Of the other characters in "Seven for a Secret," only Staley matches him in understanding fully who and what Malicorne is. When he looks at Malicorne, Jack "notes the horn that rises from the center of her brow, the equine features that make her face seem so long, the chestnut dreadlocks, the dark, wide-set eyes and the something in those eyes he can't read." As the story develops, being able to see Malicorne's horn seems to be a sign of spiritual awareness. Jack and Staley see it just fine; William slowly recognizes it, signifying his own spiritual growth.

Malicorne has lingered in the Tombs, the dead and dying regions of the inner city, for weeks, collecting the stories of the homeless, but Jack clings tightly to his own story, suspicious that he will be somehow diminished by telling his story, the story of his life, to Malicorne, who he says takes away part of the lives of the people who tell her stories. This alone is a challenging idea, but "Seven for a Secret" is complex, and what is actually happening is that Jack is clinging to his guilt, punishing himself for a terrible crime that he thinks has defined him as a terrible person. The telling of his crime to others turns out to be the crucial step in his life to a true connection to the supernatural world, to an understanding that his story is an old one, heard by Malicorne hundreds of times.

The process of drawing out Jack's secret begins with the music of a fiddle, not painted blue but covered with a blue varnish that gives it a blue gleam. Amid the dying trees plays Staley Cross, who has come to the city to see the unicorn she has heard people mention. She and Jack and William have something in common: a love of books.

"You can put aside all the unhappiness you've accumulated by opening a book.

Listening to music," she says. For Jack, her music is soothing, comforting, something like spending hours reading in a library.

She even composes a waltz for him. William describes her as having "Hair the color of straw and cut like a boy's, a slip of a figure, eyes the green of spring growth, face shaped like a heart. She's barefoot, wears an old pair of overalls a couple of sizes too big, some kind of white jersey, sleeves pushed up on her forearms." She seems an odd pairing with Jack, who is dour and older, but her fiddling warms him some.

Staley explains the effect in part by asserting that "[Grandma] says it's a spirit fiddle." Jack takes this to mean that it is a doorway to the spirit world, but Staley thinks that such a doorway lies elsewhere.

Instead, she thinks the color of the fiddle is what is spiritual, because the color blue "fills the heart. Like the blue of twilight when anything's possible. Blue makes me feel safe, warm."

Jack's thinking has focused on the spiritual ever since Malicorne suggested that ravens in the trees could be markers for the entry into another world. Jack remains suspicious of her, yet he steps to the trees the moment he hears music; his thinking about the possibility of there being a door to another place hidden among the trees shows that he is looking for escape, or at least relief, from himself and his past, which he says defines him.

Malicorne has that sort of effect on people. Talking with her seems to provide relief for the tormented spirits of the men and women of the dead part of the city, and she seems to draw others toward a greater understanding of their duality as "flesh" and "spirit." The narrator, William, says that "I'm a bum and I'm trying to make do," and that "I'm forty-five and I look sixty, and the last thing I am is innocent." Yet Malicorne sees innocence in him. "I study her" he says of Malicorne, "sitting there beside me on the bench, raggedy clothes and thick chestnut hair so matted it hangs like fat snakes from her head, like a Rasta's dreadlocks. Horsey features. Deep, dark eyes, like they're all pupil, wide-set. And then I see the horn." He has seen Malicorne often before, but for the first time he notices the horn. A horn in the middle of someone's forehead would seem to be something people would notice right away, but Malicorne is hard to see fully, always a bit mysterious.

In spite of all her talk about ravens and what they signify, especially the seventh raven from a nursery rhyme, the raven signifying a secret, the owl who perches above her may be the most important bird in "Seven for a Secret." Owls traditionally represent spirits, especially spirits that travel out of the physical body, and its presence with Malicorne suggests that there is much more to her than what William can say, that she has a powerful connection to a spiritual world.

William may have special qualities of his own because even though others find solace in telling their life stories to her, she seems to find comfort in confiding to William. "Live long enough, William, and you'll meet every kind of a person, hear every kind of a story, not once, but a hundred times," she says. In his turn, William tells her, "I'm where I am because I drank too much, drank all the time and damned if I can tell you why." There is much sadness in "Seven for a Secret"; it is not a tear-jerker, and its characters do not waste time feeling sorry for themselves, but in general they feel beaten, as though they have lost their lives.

It is in this context that Malicorne sums up the theme of "Seven for a Secret": "You've got to want to heal before you can get out of this prison you've made for yourself." She says this to Jack, but it includes William and the others who have told her their stories.

And she seems to give them something by her listening, because some of them begin participating in life again, in small ways. One finds work sweeping floors; another heads back home; William earns a room to sleep in by working in a tenement.

More hopeful than these small victories may be what William hears and Staley sees: "Far off, I [William] hear hoofbeats and I don't know what to make of that." This is an ironic sentence, because by now William has established that he understands Malicorne better than he chooses to admit. And he almost certainly knows what Staley means when she tells him, "And Jack was a man.

But when they left, I saw a white horse and a black one."

Topics for Discussion

1. What is meant by "What follows is imagined, but it happened just so"?

2. What is "Devil's Night"? How does it apply to the setting in "Seven for a Secret"?

3. Jack is described as a "spirit individual as much as the flesh." What is meant by this? How does "Seven for a Secret" reveal this aspect of Jack?

4. Why would a unicorn stay in a ruined inner city with the homeless?

5. Why does the fiddler Staley come to the ruined inner city? What does she get out of her experience there?

6. What makes the blue fiddle a "spirit fiddle"? What is Staley's view on the matter? Is she right?

7. Malicorne says, "Live long enough, William, and you'll meet every kind of a person, hear every kind of a story, not once, but a hundred times." What does she mean by this? Does this statement have more than one meaning?

8. "When you're standing at the bottom of the ladder like we are, nobody can tell you what to do anymore," William says to Malicorne. What does he mean?

Is he correct? Is he hiding something?

9. What are the limitations of Malicorne's powers?

10. In de Lint's "Bird Bones and Wood Ash," the character Jaime says the "war" of child abuse is "Fought not just in the physical, but in the soul as well." For the homeless in "Seven for a Secret," is the battle for them not just physical but in the soul?

11. How important to healing is interaction among people in "Seven for a Secret"?

12. What does Jack mean when he says to William, "What you've done is who you are?" To what degree is his statement true? To what degree is it not true?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What colors are mentioned in "Seven for a Secret"? What do the colors mean to the narrator? What do they mean to other characters?

2. Are inner cities dying in the pattern described in "Seven for a Secret"?

Choose a city and describe how its process of decay is represented, or not, in "Seven for a Secret."

3. Are there inner cities that are healing?

Choose one and describe how its process of healing is represented, or not, in "Seven for a Secret."

4. What social services are available to help the homeless in cities? How effective are they? What could be done to improve the them?

5. To what degree is "Seven for a Secret" about the loss of self-respect? How does de Lint handle this idea in other stories? How important is it for understanding his work?

6. Are there other stories about unicorns who are shape shifters? How do the unicorns in these stories interact with human beings? (You might begin with Peter S. Beagle's novel The Unicorn Sonata.)

7. How many of the homeless in cities are homeless because of alcohol abuse like William or drug abuse like Casey or from hiding from a dark past like Jack?

Where can you find the information to answer this question? How accurate is the information?

8. How do psychologists use music as therapy? Does the music in "Seven for a Secret" work the same way?

9. What do birds, including the owl, symbolize in "Seven for a Secret"? Support your interpretation with cues from the book.

For Further Reference

Schimel, Lawrence. "Interview with Charles de Lint." Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, no. 32 (Summer 1996).

Schimel conducted this interview via written correspondence. Although the interview is extensive, it remains well focused on de Lint's literary work. In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world." A copy is available at de Lint's Internet Web site.

Timonin, Mike. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint."

Wordsworth, vol. 8, no. 4 (January 1998).

A longer version of this interview appears on de Lint's Web site. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."

Related Titles/Adaptations

De Lint is a prolific writer of short fiction. Most of his tales take place in urban settings, especially fictional Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life, often as gently and subtly as it does in "Seven for a Secret." For instance, in "Small Deaths" (1993) disc jockey Zoe Brill meets Gordon Wolfe, "A serial killer of people's hopes," who says, "I'm the bringer of small deaths." He brings those moments when something goes wrong, perhaps a failed romance, that forever changes a person's life. His supernatural influence is even more subtle than that of Malicorne. Like "Small Deaths," "In the House of My Enemy" (1993) takes place in the imaginary city of Newford. Like "Seven for a Secret," this story deals with an important social issue, child abuse. Whereas Malicorne's magic is subtle, and Gordon Wolfe's is scarcely recognized, the magic of Jilly is aggressive and its effects are concrete. She creeps through the city listening with her mind for the signs of a child being abused, and then she uses her powers to enter the mind of the abuser and change it, rendering him (there do not seem to be any hers) harmless.

Jilly's power comes from her association with a fairy ring, a place where she communes with nature spirits. Malicorne is one version of the nature spirits found in abundance in de Lint's writings. Some nature spirits are assertive, even pushy, like Coyote in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night," but others are warm, even comfortable, like Jeck Crow in "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep." In "Wooden Bones" (1989), the healing spirit takes the form of a rabbit who helps a city girl acquire some self-esteem while living in exile in the country. Although it is often hard to tell whether de Lint is writing specifically for young adults or specifically for grownups, "Wooden Bones" is an example of how de Lint can direct his story at young adults. In it, a fiddler captures the girl's attention, somewhat the way Jack's is captured by Staley's playing in "Seven for a Secret." As in "Seven for a Secret," the environment itself in "Wooden Bones" takes on symbolic significance, with buildings, especially abandoned ones, representing protagonist Liz's inner life.

Related Web Sites

http://www.sfsite.com/charlesdelint/.

Accessed October 7, 2002. This is an exceptionally fine author's Web site with information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and an FAQ section in which he answers questions about himself and his views.

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