

# The Shepherd Moon Short Guide

## The Shepherd Moon by H(elen) M(ary) Hoover

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## Overview

Today's late-twentieth-century world is radically different from what it was like just one hundred years ago; how much more different will it be in the forty-eighth century, over twenty-seven hundred years in the future? What empires will have arisen and fallen?

What great scientific discoveries will have been made and lost? In H. M. Hoover's novel *The Shepherd Moon*, we discover a world at once strange and familiar. The polar icecaps have melted and have long since drowned the great coastal cities of our era. Cataclysmic wars have been fought. Outer space has been conquered. Great orbital cities have been built and then virtually forgotten. Humanity has had to make the long hard climb out of barbarism on several occasions.

Some things, however, have not changed. The wealthy still lord it over the poor. Adults still mistreat their children. *The Shepherd Moon* centers on three such children: Merry Ambrose, a member of Earth's ruling class who seems to have it all, but who suffers from having been emotionally abandoned by her pleasure-seeking parents; Sami, a working-class girl who has lived and starved on the streets since running away from government conscription; and Mikel Goodman, the strange and deadly secret agent from the *Shepherd Moon*, who, out of his element on the planet Earth, seems at once superhuman and as helpless as a babe in arms.

All communication between the ninety-odd space colonies and Earth has been cut off for centuries. The two civilizations have both lost the ability to travel any distance in space and know of each other through little more than fragmented records and myth. Indeed, Earth's leaders are of the opinion that life on the *Shepherd Moon* and the other space colonies died out long ago.

Now, however, the colonies are looking for room to expand. When a meteor, plummeting toward the Earth, destroys one of the colonies, *The Shepherd Moon*'s extraordinarily callous leaders take advantage of the situation by sending a hundred young people in research capsules to hitchhike in the meteor's wake, even though it means almost certain death. Only five survive the trip to Earth, and Mikel, half-mad from his experience, angry at those who sent him, kills the other four children immediately upon landing as an act of rebellion.

Mikel's capsule falls to Earth near the Ambrose family's ancestral estate, where Merry is spending the summer alone, with only servants for company.

Using guile and his superhuman powers to subvert Merry's bodyguard, Mikel sets in motion an ill-conceived plan to conquer the planet. Aided by her grandfather, General Ambrose, Merry must put a stop to Mikel's plotting and get to the bottom of the mystery of the *Shepherd Moon*.

## About the Author

Born on April 5, 1935 in Stark County in northeastern Ohio, H. M. Hoover grew up with her two brothers and sister in a beautiful and peaceful rural setting. Her parents, both teachers and amateur naturalists, owned an old country house surrounded by fields, orchards, and woodland. She reports that "There were few strangers . . . I took for granted that most people could walk a mile and still be on family property or a neighbor's land across the fence." This sense of stability, mixed, perhaps, with a certain provincialism, is common to a number of the characters in her novels. On the eastern horizon, however, Hoover "could . . .

see the glow of Pittsburgh's lights reflected by the smoke that hung above it then, ninety miles to the east," a small urban intrusion into an otherwise bucolic childhood.

Due in part to her parents' influence, Hoover grew up with a love of books, history, and nature that she retains to this day. She received her secondary education at nearby Louisville High School and took classes at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, Los Angeles City College, and the Los Angeles County School of Nursing, but never received a degree. Before turning to writing full time she worked in personnel, insurance bonding, food manufacturing, and advertising. Hoover currently lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Over the years, Hoover has received a number of awards and honors. Her early historical novel, *The Lion's Cub*, was named a Children's Book of the Year by the Child Study Association of America in 1974. *Another Heaven, Another Earth* won the Ohioana Award in 1982 and was picked by the American Library Association as one of that year's Best Books for Young Adults. In 1984 *The Shepherd Moon* was a Junior Literary Guild selection, and Hoover received an award from Central Missouri State College for her contributions to the field of children's literature.



## Setting

The primary setting of *The Shepherd Moon* is the Ambrose family's oceanside estate near the former site of the city of Boston. An enormous, mostly unused labyrinth of winding corridors, palatial rooms, and overgrown gardens, it calls to mind any number of other celebrated mansions in both mainstream and fantasy literature, from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* to Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*. It may also contain just a touch of the old country house that Hoover grew up in.

Indeed, the scenes in which Merry wanders the mansion's dusty, decaying halls, have an eerie, but very believable feel to them, almost as if they come, at least in part, from the author's memory. Also highly effective are the scenes set on the grounds of the estate in the late evening and early morning hours, times of transition when shadows and mist obscure the details of everyday life and even the most familiar landscape can seem mysterious.

Because civilization has had so many ups and downs over the millennia, the technology of Merry's world is a patchwork of the advanced and the primitive. Although large parts of the Ambrose estate may be falling down due to age and disuse, its inhabited corridors are cleaned by robots. Although the rich fly in aircars, motorized ground traffic is relatively rare and crude. When Merry's adventure with her grandfather takes her to places outside the normal, rigidly-defined haunts of the super rich, she discovers a world of poverty, repression, and military rule. The outer space world of the *Shepherd Moon*, although we see less of it, seems equally repressive and rigid. They maintain the technology to create superhuman children like Mikel but have used it to create a callous dictatorship. When one of their space habitats is about to be destroyed by a meteor they make no attempt to save its inhabitants, instead concentrating all their efforts on developing a cover story to hide the loss of life.



# Social Sensitivity

Hoover examines such socially significant topics as the many varieties of child abuse, the essential emptiness of the upper-class lifestyle, the dangers of genetic manipulation, the evils of totalitarianism, and the tendency of governments to be run for reasons other than the greatest good of the greatest number. Her most telling theme, however, may well be class prejudice.

Perhaps because they have accepted without question the values of their parents, perhaps because they need something to shore up their own fragile egos, children are often quick to define the world in terms of us versus them, worthwhile people versus worthless people, and Merry is no exception.

Without being consciously aware that she is doing it, Merry makes unwarranted assumptions about the lives of the servants who take care of her, and they reciprocate in kind. They are there to serve her, just like the robots. She is there to be served by them, a temporary nuisance that keeps them from getting on with their own lives. When Merry's grandfather lands at the estate he shows himself to be possessed of similar attitudes towards those who are not members of his class. He knows his servants' names and treats them politely, but he is quite clear on the difference between him and them. Before he has even entered the mansion, General Ambrose notifies the butler that the other two men who have come with him are "aides, not guests" who must be quartered and dine with the staff.

Her bodyguard Worth despises Merry because she is rich and neither of them has any real interest in the other as a person. Worth is a bitter, dissatisfied woman who sees herself as a victim of the upper classes, something they use for their convenience.

We are told from the first page of *The Shepherd Moon* that she is ". . . waiting for the world to change." It should, therefore, be no surprise to anyone that she is a secret revolutionary or, for that matter, that she falls under Mikel's spell. He is, after all, the first member of the upper class who has ever appeared to take a personal interest in her, and she does not realize that he actually looks down on her.

Merry's concern for Sami is more honest than Mikel's interest in Worth, but she never loses track of class distinctions either. Although she genuinely likes Sami, she also sees herself as a sort of Lady Bountiful, looking after the younger girl's best interests.

Because she is rich and her grandfather is a general, Merry can arrange to have Sami exempted from conscription and given a second chance at school, but she has no interest in raising the girl to her own level. When Sami asks if they will ever see each other again, her response is "Probably not. Not for a long time." Sami, accepting the reality of class distinctions in her world, agrees: "To be honest, you wouldn't fit into my neighborhood—especially if they knew your grandfather was an officer."

# Literary Qualities

The decaying, mazelike Ambrose family mansion has many antecedents in literary history. Dickens is one possible source, particularly in light of the fact that Hoover lists him as one of her favorite childhood authors. It is not taking anything away from H. M. Hoover to also note that her novel is well grounded within the science fiction tradition and that she is essentially working a variation on several conventions common to that genre. Among these are the far-future civilization that has decayed from what it once was, the repressive government dominated by an elite who enjoy the advantages of technology while the masses live in virtual slavery, the solitary superman who stands outside the rules of society, and the alien from another world bent on conquest.

# Themes and Characters

Hoover has stated that she does not particularly like books that push social significance and, in truth, none of her published work falls within the realm of contemporary realistic fiction. Preferring historical or science fiction, she nonetheless insists on the importance of realism. Historical and scientific detail must be handled accurately, Hoover argues, or the book will fail to hold the reader's attention. The author finds historical fiction a greater challenge in this regard, although she admits that her science fiction has met with greater success.

Despite her stated dislike for didacticism, Hoover's novels do tackle important themes. In *The Shepherd Moon*, all three child characters have had their lives warped by uncaring adults. Although born with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth, Merry Ambrose is, in effect, an abused child. Her parents have no time for her and are interested in nothing but their own pleasure.

They have even joked in her presence about getting rid of her. They think nothing of abandoning Merry on the ancestral estate for an entire summer with no one to take care of her but servants who are distant and, in some cases, even hostile. Insulated by her family wealth, however, Merry is at first unaware of the extent to which child abuse of an even worse sort is common to her society. Sami has been ripped from her family as a labor conscript, something which is evidently an everyday occurrence for Earth's poor.

Even worse, Mikel Goodman, a product of the *Shepherd Moon*'s birth labs, has been so manipulated from conception that he scarcely qualifies as human.

Unable to feel affection or gratitude, he is essentially a monster, incapable of personal growth or any kind of salvation.

In fact, both of the societies depicted in *The Shepherd Moon* are repressive.

We get relatively little detail about either, but we know that the leaders of both civilizations are perfectly willing to sacrifice human lives to maintain the status quo and do so without guilt.

Merry's grandfather, General Ambrose, adds an ambiguous note here. A powerful man within the established government, he provides a vehicle for Merry and Sami's own personal happy endings, removing his granddaughter from her parents' control and guaranteeing Sami's exemption from conscription. It seems clear, however, that, kind and loving though he may be, he entirely accepts the legitimacy of both the repressive government of which he is a member and the class structure that divides the world into haves and have nots. We also get hints of an underground, working in opposition to the establishment, but its primary representative, Merry's bodyguard Worth, is a cold, unloving fanatic. Her personality, coupled with her willingness to fall under Mikel's perverse spell, hardly imply a positive future. In short, although Merry has had her consciousness raised concerning class prejudice and the lot of those less fortunate, and



although she and Sami may indeed live happily ever after, the portrait of the future which H. M. Hoover paints is a bleak one.



# Topics for Discussion

1. How exactly does prejudice work?

To what extent does it involve making assumptions about what a person is like without looking at him or her individually to see what he or she is really like? What is actually wrong with doing this?

2. Are you aware of any class prejudice or other form of prejudice in your town or school? Do you or your friends have a tendency to classify or look down on people based on what their parents do for a living, how much money they have, what neighborhood they come from, which clique they hang out with, or, perhaps, some other group characteristic like race or religion? To what extent are your prejudices justified?

3. Have you ever discovered that someone else was classifying you in a way that showed class prejudice or some other form of prejudice? How did it feel? To what extent was it justified?

4. Mikel Goodman is obviously not a very nice person; he is, in fact, a multiple murderer. To what extent is his upbringing responsible for this? To what extent is he a villain and to what extent is he simply another victim?

Might his plan to conquer the world have succeeded or was it doomed from the start?

5. How believable was it that the people of Earth would have so little knowledge of the Shepherd Moon and its fellow space habitats?

6. Why does Merry's society conscript children? Our automatic tendency is to assume that doing so is wrong, but do they have a legitimate reason? Is Merry subject to possible conscriptions? If not, why not?

7. Why did Mikel kill the other four children who survived the trip to Earth with him?

8. Mikel does not seem to have much trouble subverting Merry's bodyguard.

Why is it so easy?

9. Why does Merry not fall for Mikel's tricks? Why can she see through him when Worth and the other servants cannot?

10. Do the good guys actually win?

Would the world have been better off if Mikel had succeeded in his plans?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Hoover has set up a conflict between the good person General Ambrose appears to be and the repressive government he apparently supports.

Discuss this conflict. Examine the general's personality in detail. Discover any hints you can concerning his opinions about the government. Use the discussion you have found here as a starting point, but go beyond it.

2. Examine everything you know about the two governments in the book, that of Earth and that of the Shepherd Moon. What similarities do you see? What differences? Is one worse than the other? Can one side be defined as the good guys?

3. Read Aldous Huxley's classic science fiction novel *Brave New World* and write a paper discussing the similarities between the society of that book and the society of the Shepherd Moon.

4. Prejudice often goes in both directions. Examine Merry's relationship with Worth and the other servants at the Ambrose estate. To what extent do all the characters involved look at each other as individuals? To what extent do they make assumptions about each other that are clearly based more on prejudice than reality?

5. What is Sami's role in *The Shepherd Moon*? What does Merry learn from her? What does the reader learn from her? In dealing with this question, do not simply describe Sami's actions.

6. What would have happened if Mikel's plans had succeeded? Write a short story in which Mikel is not caught and returned to the Ambrose estate.

7. This article has suggested that Merry, Sami, and Mikel are all victims of child abuse. Much the same can be said for Worth. Do some research on child abuse. Remember that abuse can be emotional as well as physical. Apply what you have learned to the characters in *The Shepherd Moon*.

## For Further Reference

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## Related Titles

The theme of abused and neglected children is found in a number of Hoover's books. Almost invariably that abuse, rather than being an isolated incident, is seen as an innate part of the society in which it occurs. In *Children of Morrow* and its sequel, *Treasures of Morrow*, for example, the two young protagonists grow up on a degenerate, post-nuclear holocaust military base where they are routinely beaten for supposed faults over which they have no control. Like Merry in *The Shepherd Moon*, they must learn to make decisions for themselves because their parents are either absent or uncaring. Like Sami and Mikel, their abuse is actually condoned by the powers that rule the society in which they live. In both cases rescue from abuse involves the discovery of acceptable surrogate parents. Abused or neglected children are also found in *The Rains of Eridan* and *This Time of Darkness*.



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