The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek Short Guide

The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek by Evelyn Sibley Lampman

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

When published in 1955, The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek was chosen as a Junior Literary Guild selection. The novel was so popular that Lampman followed it seven years later with a sequel, The Shy Stegosaurus of Indian Springs. Enjoyable as a fanciful and lively adventure story, the novel also provides other pleasures. The story centers on two children who are trying to save their failing ranch; they are befriended and helped by the title character, a dinosaur called George, who has somehow survived for tens of millions of years. An armored dinosaur, the stegosaurus was about eighteen feet long, its huge bulk protected by a double row of large triangular bony plates projecting along its back and ending in four three-foot tall upright spikes on its great tail. Countering this fearsome description in the text, the illustrations by Hubert Buel show George to be quite genial and friendly.

Lampman's fast-moving story is full of humor. Young readers will be amused when George mistakes a small airplane for one of his despised enemies, the Pteranodons, a type of flying dinosaur, and rushes forth to do battle with the parked plane. Lampman has unobtrusively woven into her novel a surprising amount of information on dinosaurs, providing an introduction to the interesting fields of dinosaurs and paleontology (the study of fossils). Finally, the novel teaches, through its example of youngsters striving to save their home, the need to endure and to retain hope.

But fundamentally The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek is a whimsical, delightful story that makes for pleasurable reading.

About the Author

Evelyn Sibley Lampman was born April 18, 1907, in Dallas, Oregon, and grew up in this small town in the Willamette Valley. In the nineteenth century, this area had drawn many pioneers, among them Lampman's great-grandparents. Stories of the pioneer days passed on in the family would form the basis for many of her books.

She once explained that the townspeople featured in The Bounces of Cynthiann' were based on stories told by her father. Lampman graduated from Oregon State University in Corvallis in 1929 with a degree in education. In 1934 she married Sheldon Lampman, a newspaperman; the couple had two daughters.

After graduation, Lampman went to work for a Portland radio station as a continuity writer, a position she held for five years. She quit to devote herself to her marriage and children, but after her husband died, she returned to the station. Under the pen name Jane Woodfin she fictionalized her early experiences as a radio writer in her only adult novel, Of Mikes and Men. In 1945 she was appointed educational director at Portland's NBC affiliate radio station. She wrote and produced special programs that were broadcast into the classrooms of the Portland public schools. It was while writing radio scripts that she discovered how much she like producing works for children.

At a daughter's request, Lampman began writing a novel for young readers.

That first book, Crazy Creek, was published in 1948. She continued writing children's fiction, publishing more than a book annually, and in 1952 she gave up her radio work to devote full attention to writing. Lampman published some of her books under the pen name "Lynn Bronson" (Bronson being her mother's maiden name). In addition to her many novels, Lampman wrote stories for popular magazines and radio scripts, two of which won Jean Hersholt Awards. The City Under the Back Steps received the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Memorial Children's Book Award in 1962. She received the Western Writers of America Spur Award for Half-Breed in 1968 and for Cayuse Courage in 1971. Lampman produced books for children for more than thirty years, setting many of them in her home state, Oregon. She died on June 13, 1980, at the age of seventythree.

Lampman's early books were stories of humor and adventure. Representative of Lampman's less serious early novels are and Captain Apple's Ghost, which is about a ghost who revisits his old home and helps to turn it into a museum for children. Both stories are amusing and lively, with engaging fantasy characters.

Similarly whimsical is another early book, The Bounces of Cynthiann', in which the motherless Bounce children are looked after by the good townspeople of Cynthianna. In this novel, Lampman extols the virtues of small-town life.

In her later works Lampman turned to the sympathetic depiction of the inner conflicts of ethnic minorities, particularly the Native American. Elder Brother examines the conflict of cultures within a Chinese-American family that adopts a Chinese boy. Mexican-

American migrant workers are the subjects of Go Up the Road, a novel which reveals the demeaning nature of the migrant life and portrays efforts to improve it.

Lampman's sympathetic understanding of the plight of Native Americans is evident in a number of her books.

Among the historical fiction, Cayuse Courage details the Whitman Massacre of 1846 from the point of a young American Indian boy. Lampman's objectivity in offering both the white and the Native American viewpoint is apparent once more in White Captives, a narrative about members of a Mormon wagon train taken prisoner by an Apache raiding party. This book is noteworthy for its compelling characterizations of the Apaches and Mohaves. Of the purely fictional novels, several—such as Navaho Sister, Half-Breed, and The Year of Small Shadow—center on a Native American child caught between conflicting ways of life. In such stories, Lampman often strives to emphasize that a flexible and courageous young person can deal with change and accept new patterns of life while continuing to value the old.

Setting

The story takes place in the early 1950s on a remote ranch on Cricket Creek which has recently become home to the Brown family. Although the geographical area is never specifically named, the hot springs, rimrock cliffs and canyons, and sun-drenched dusty plains dotted with sagebrush indicate that Lampman has set her story in the arid desert plateau of central Oregon.

Hoping their newly inherited ranch will solve their financial problems, the widowed Mrs. Brown and her twelve-yearold twins, Joey and Joan, have moved to Cricket Creek, only to find the property in a sorry state. The nearest small town is miles away, and the Browns—especially the two children—must accustom themselves to the isolation and resulting loneliness. The disillusioned family also must contend with the harshness of the climate and a lack of water to irrigate their crops. Realizing the ranch cannot support them, they are grateful for the arrival of Professor Harris, a paleontologist who becomes their boarder while he scavenges the surrounding country for fossils. So long as there is hope of the professor's discovering a valuable fossil that would enrich the Browns, Joey and Joan will not have to move back to the city and leave the austere beauty of Cricket Creek.

Social Sensitivity

As her story progresses, Lampman skillfully interweaves much scientific lore on dinosaurs and paleontology, such as discussions of land and marine dinosaurs, dinosaur diet and behavior, fossil excavation, and climatic changes.

However, much of her information is now out of date. Although accepted as true at the time, the scientific beliefs in the novel have since been supplanted.

For example, its hypotheses on the reasons for dinosaurs' extinction, among them that mammals ate the dinosaurs' eggs, have been replaced by more complex explanations. The novel also holds that because of their comparatively small brains the large species of dinosaurs lacked adequate intelligence. New evidence of relatively complex social behavior in dinosaurs has rendered the belief in dinosaurs' outright witlessness unjustifiable. Readers may want to seek out more up-to-date information on dinosaurs.

Also of concern to some readers and parents will be the novel's sexism.

Reflecting the attitudes of its day, the novel engages in gender stereotypes, both overt and subtle, in its treatment of the twins Joan and Joey. The stereotyping is most obvious when the novels speaks of Joan eventually "taking prizes for baking and canning," while Joey is seen as someday "running harvesters and combines" and attending college.

This discrepancy between gender roles can also be seen in the characters' actions. Joey and the professor take the lead, laying plans even when their schemes are not practicable. In contrast, Joan and her mother sometimes are passive and self-effacing. They do not correct men, thus preserving males from embarrassment. Often in the presence of males, these female characters remain silent rather than voice their own reservations. When Joey informs Joan in a superior tone that she does not understand practical matters because she is a girl, Joan compresses "her lips tightly to keep back the angry retort."

When Joey proposes his money-making schemes of selling the stegosaurus to a zoo and tapping his water supply, Joan represses her objections, agreeing "doubtfully." So long as teachers and parents help young people understand that these attitudes, although prevalent in the past, are not acceptable today, this stereotyping should present no problems.

Literary Qualities

An amusing adventure story, The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek employs a variety of literary devices. The title character represents a literary type dating back many centuries: the wandering helper who arrives on a scene, renders aid, and then immediately departs. In addition, George's befriending of the twins allows Lampman to explore for young readers the emotional joy of acquiring a devoted friend, the gratification of receiving help from this friend, and the pain of separation. Occasionally she uses irony to heighten dramatic tension or lend a touch of wryness. For example, George's limitations of mind sometimes result in clearer thinking.

And Joey's assumptions that the bespectacled Mr. Smith is just an amiable businessman and that the sharp-eyed Mr. Jones, who intently watches Mrs. Brown hide her money, is "a crook" only set up the reversal to come.

As a gesture towards plausibility, Lampman offers a "natural" explanation for George's survival, describing how he adapted to marked geologic changes over the epochs. She does not, however, provide an explanation for George's power of speech, except to note that George supposes he "must have been born knowing how to talk." Lampman has a love for the landscapes of her native state, which is evident in her descriptions that capture the dramatic beauty of the painted desert plateau.

With similar deftness, she sketches her story in an unaffected, serviceable style that does not detract from its excitement and suspense.

Themes and Characters

Only a handful of characters people the world of The Shy Stegosaurus of Cricket Creek. Of the lesser characters, Professor Harris, a comic figure, is described as small and almost gaunt, with a face peeling from sunburn behind thick-lensed glasses. Although stereotypically absent-minded and eccentric, the professor is very learned in psychology, as well as paleontology. Towards the twins he is kind and patient, answering their many queries. The old horse, Daisy Belle, inherited along with the ranch because she was deemed too worthless to auction, has become the only friend for Joey and Joan, who kindly make allowances for her infirmity.

Their mother, Mrs. Brown, is an archetypal maternal figure known almost entirely through her maternal duckings of concern or outrage. Repeatedly Mrs. Brown voices her concern about feeding, clothing, and housing her children; warm-hearted, she also makes the professor, who is always careless of his own welfare, one of her responsibilities. That Mrs. Brown is never physically described allows young readers to visualize the character with their own mothers' faces, bringing them more deeply into the story.

It is the trio of Joey, Joan, and George, the stegosaurus, who constitute the major characters. Joey and Joan, the twins, resemble each other greatly, with their freckled snub noses, red hair, and wide grins. They dress alike in cotton shirts, blue jeans, and large straw hats that guard against the sun. In addition their minds work alike, and they can communicate with just their eyes, as if they can read each other's thoughts.

Joey's lively and enthusiastic nature is manifest as he tries to convince Joan to support his various impractical schemes for making money. Joey can be hasty or impulsive, unless restrained by Joan's better judgement. Joan is more deliberate and reflective, even more practical and clever. She demonstrates concern for others' feelings, and is particularly sensitive to George's plight as the last surviving dinosaur. Joan also provides a voice of conscience when she comments on Joey's plans to sell George to a zoo or to divert George's water supply.

George first appears seemingly out of nowhere to flatten a rattlesnake that is menacing Joey and Joan; he greets them in a quiet and small voice which is suitable to his gentle nature. His most apparent quality is his painful shyness. He has lived all alone for the sixty million years since the last of his kind died, and now he understandably fears the coming of strangers. Until he meets the children, George has not realized how lonely he has been and how much he needs friendship.

George confesses immediately that he believes himself quite "stupid" because his brain is so small, and he ascribes all his actions solely to instinct. Paradoxically, George's simple-mindedness occasionally can be advantageous. He reduces matters to their barest essentials in a sort of "reverse" analytical thinking. His inability to reason abstractly makes him dependent, and Joey and Joan realize that they must guard him

from the dangers that contact with the twentieth century could present. His lengthy solitude has made him very sensitive, and he is easily upset or frightened.

George's appeal stems from the incongruity of his large body and his gentle, innocent nature. Young readers, of course, find a certain attraction in reading about a gargantuan character. Such manipulation of size is a theme popular in children's literature. Lampman relies on this in creating this sweet-natured monster who becomes a secret friend.

A major theme of the novel centers on establishing friendships and alleviating loneliness. Initially all three characters are lonely; Joey and Joan have no playmates, and George has been alone for millions of years. Indeed, it has been so long since anyone conversed with the stegosaurus that he has completely forgotten his own name, which forces the twins to rename him George. Later when recounting how he awoke from hibernation to find himself "the only one left," George breaks down and sobs. But given the opportunity, George instantly makes friends with the twins, and becomes much happier. The interdependency of these three, which increases as the story progresses, emphasizes the need for making and keeping friends.

Joey's reward for capturing the bank robber, the professor's continuing stay as a boarder, and the salvation of the ranch through the discovery of a fossil are all due to George's devotion and aid.

At the end, George, although the twins' closest friend, must leave and presumably will be lonely once more. But the Brown family has new fast friends in the professor and Mr. Jones. The novel also demonstrates that a friend should be protective and faithful, qualities exemplified in George. Moreover, through Joan's criticism of Joey's schemes to exploit the stegosaurus, Lampman teaches the need to be considerate and not to abuse friendships.

These resolutions suggest another theme, how the characteristics of youth—exuberant energy, good will, and optimism—are major forces in bringing about the rescue of the ranch. The other savior, George, can be said to be the true innocent. His uncovering the Eohippus fossil that will make Cricket Creek the mecca of paleontologists occurs wholly by accident; his disabling of Mr. Jones' plane, a rash action which ultimately results in the pilot staying on to help the family, is done out of ignorance. The twins' zeal to remain on the ranch arises from a youthful determination to hold on tenaciously to what is theirs. In addition, the twins' determination suggests vestiges of the old pioneer spirit and echoes the settlers' attitude toward their land. Another underlying theme is selfreliance. The spirit of the children is not only sustaining but rejuvenating. The actions of Joey, Joan, and George combine to restore life to the decrepit and dying ranch. Empowered by innocence, the good intentions of childhood ultimately triumph.

Topics for Discussion

1. George is quick to call Joey and Joan his friends. Why? What does this reveal about him?

2. Should Joan and Joey have known better than to believe George knew of a "hidden river" with plentiful, usable water? Why?

3. To what extent does George react or think like an animal and to what extent does he react or speak like a person?

What are some of his human attributes?

4. Joey's ideas for finding ways to have George earn money are not quite feasible. Can you come up with some more practical plans?

5. Was Joey right to ride into Silo to report the missing money so quickly?

Why or why not? How could he have acted differently?

6. George is right when he sneers at the fossil he uncovers for belonging to a small mammal. Why might the author have made the discovered fossil be that of Eohippus, the "dawn horse," rather than the dinosaur fossil Professor Harris wanted so desperately to find?

7. What makes Joey so sure that it is Mr. Jones who is the robber? What is the source of his perceptions about criminals and why does it mislead him?

8. What clues point to the fact that it is Mr. Smith, not Mr. Jones, who is the true "robber"?

9. None of the adults believes Joan and Joey's story about seeing a stegosaurus.

Is this ultimately good or bad?

10. Is Mr. Smith entirely bad? Which of his actions show that he is considerate? Was he to some extent justified in embezzling the money?

11. What is the nature of Joey and Joan's interaction? To what extent does she agree to go along with Joey's plans and to what extent does she influence them?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Lampman's information about the disappearance of dinosaurs is out of date. What explanations for their extinction have been suggested since this book was written? Is there a consensus currently on why dinosaurs died out? You may want to contrast the old and new theories.

2. Given the novel's vistas of desert plateaus dotted with sagebrush, some readers may suppose that the setting is the American Southwest, rather than Oregon. After all, isn't Oregon full of forests? Research the geography of this area of eastern Oregon and write a report on it.

3. We have seen that the terrain in which the novel is set can be very dry.

Can plants and animals live in such a desert habitat? If you walked along the canyons where Joey and Joan walked, what living things might you see? Research the plant and animal life that flourishes here and write a report about several of the flora and fauna which interest you.

4. The Shy Stegosaurus of Indian Springs introduces a new character, the Native American boy, Huck, who has very different concerns from the Brown children's. Read this novel and compare the two books. How do the concerns and themes of the two novels differ?

5. Is it right for Joey to consider making George work for him or to contemplate selling him to a zoo? Mr. Smith has been wrong in embezzling from the bank in which he was a clerk, but is it right for Joey to accept the reward for capturing the criminal when he believed the "crook" was actually Mr. Jones? Out of the several moral issues in the novel, pick one theme of morality in the novel, and trace and discuss it.

6. Besides being emotionally close, twins like Joan and Joey often share features and attributes of personality.

Joey and Joan think in such a similar manner that they almost appear able to read each other's minds. New research is ongoing on similarities in twins. Investigate the range of and degree to which twins share characteristics.

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Related Titles

The Shy Stegosaums of Indian Springs represents an intermediate step between the humor and adventure of the first Shy Stegosaurus book, and Lampman's later explorations of the social problems afflicting children of cultural minorities. Both elements are combined in this novel which involves the trio of Joan, Joey, and George with Native American characters. The focal character is Huck, an impoverished American Indian boy of about twelve, who lives with his great-grandfather, Opalo, in a rough, unpainted shack on the Warm Springs Reservation. Opalo, now well into his nineties, is the last remaining medicine man of the Klickitat tribe and is Huck's only living relative. Thought demented by some adults, Opalo obstinately holds fast to both the old ways and his native language. Huck, repeatedly taunted for being called "Weewino" (Klickitat for huckleberry) by his great-grandfather, is lonely until George, who has relocated in the area, introduces himself, believing he has found someone in need of help. Joey and Joan are spending the summer with their aunt, who operates a resort near the reservation. They befriend Huck and team up with George to help solve the plight of old Opalo.

This plot incorporates several significant themes. With several variations, Lampman presents the tension between the old and the new. The first variation consists of the conflict between the old, traditional Klickitat ways, now disappearing, and the new lifestyle, strongly influenced by the white culture. Some adults are even violating ancient tribal traditions, having forgotten the reasons these laws were established. Additionally, Lampman juxtaposes extreme, even enfeebled, old age, as represented by Opalo and his aged cayuse, Paint, and callow youth, in the person of Huck.

Opalo's increasing infirmity introduces another theme, the problems of coping with senescence. She depicts the decrepitude of extreme old age, the pain of witnessing a loved one's decline, and the question of what will happen when the elderly are unfit to live on their own. There is also a recurring clash between Joey's romanticized and stereotypical expectations of American Indian life and its reality— the poverty, the harshness of the living conditions, and the lack of prospects for improvement. Yet in the face of such adversity, the two Native American characters retain their pride. Huck, with the help of his friends, develops self-pride, and Opalo maintains boundless pride in his knowledge and position as a medicine man, as well as in his people and their traditions.

Dealing with such themes, the sequel is more profound than the original book.

Lampman still manages, however, to fill the book with scenes that young readers will find humorous, such as George's attempt to attend the annual tribal festival incognito by stuffing himself inside a too-small tepee. Lampman's moving story is an excellent presentation of Native American lifestyles and the problem of preserving them.

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