Smith Short Guide

Smith by Leon Garfield

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Overview

From the moment that Smith, a ragged eighteenth-century London urchin, witnesses the murder of an old man whose pocket he has just picked, he lives between hope and fear: hope that the document he stole from the old man will spell his fortune, and fear that the old man's assailants will murder him next. Smith cannot read and thus is unable to decipher the document. His journey toward enlightenment takes him through the alleys and shadowy corners of London, from thieves' dens to the homes of the wealthy. Smith brings to his quest shrewd common sense, the quickness of a scurrying rat, and a halfdeveloped sense of human kindness.

While pursuing the meaning of the document, he learns a great deal about justice of all kinds, and he acts with a desperate courage that makes the unexpected ending appropriate and satisfying.

The book's characters exhibit the limitations to be expected of those who have suffered from poverty, ignorance, or crushing misfortune. Mr. Mansfield, the blind justice; his daughter, torn between the need for a life of her own and the demands of her father; and the swashbuckling Lord Tom, highwayman and friend, all come to life in Garfield's tale, helping or hindering Smith in his efforts to uncover the document's secrets.

About the Author

Leon Garfield was born in Brighton, England, on July 14, 1921. He wanted to become an artist, but his training was interrupted by his service in the Medical Corps during World War II. After the war he worked as a biochemist in hospitals for twenty years before deciding to write full-time. He has produced novels, short stories, and works of nonfiction, many of which are set in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The God Beneath the Sea, a retelling of Greek myths, earned the 1970 British Library Association's Carnegie Medal for best children's book of the year published in the United Kingdom. Footsteps won the Whitbread Award of the British Booksellers Association for best children's book of 1980, and Smith was given the Phoenix Award of the Children's Literature Association in 1987.

Many of Garfield's novels cannot be strictly classified as adult or children's books. The majority are adventure tales in which children or adolescents play the central roles. His protagonists usually embark on quests staged against the backdrop of a historically accurate setting.

Garfield has said that Smith was a book that took a great deal of effort to write. For Smith, as with his other works, Garfield did all of his own research, and in the process turned up many interesting facts and incidents that helped make his work lively and appealing to both adults and children.

Setting

Garfield has received consistent critical praise for the effective settings of his books. In Smith he depicts eighteenthcentury London with an eye for accuracy and atmosphere, rendering in vivid detail the sights, smells, and sounds of The Red Lion Tavern, where Smith lives with his two sisters; the murky back streets, where he drifts and dodges like "a sooty spirit"; and the bitter, snowy reaches of Finchley Common, where he thwarts a coach robbery and saves the life of Mr. Mansfield.

Social Sensitivity

Eighteenth-century England, as recreated in Garfield's novel, is a lawless society. Traditional justice is shown to be mistaken, unkind, and inadequate.

The reader's sympathy goes to the petty thieves, highwaymen, and debtors whose actions are depicted as attempts to survive in a hostile world and whose accomplishments, like those of Lord Tom, are glamorous and exciting. The Mansfields, who live by a less opportunistic code, are helpless, deluded, and often unhappy. The complex character of Miss Mansfield, for example, shows the strain of subduing her naturally "peevish" nature in order to treat her father with the gentleness that makes her appear a "saint" in his blind eyes.

Garfield does not condemn the value system of traditional society, but he does emphasize that people should not be judged by class, appearance, or education. Both Mansfields are deluded about Smith's goodness and Mr. Billing's evil, suggesting that traditional morality is of limited worth unless it is infused with human sympathy.

Literary Qualities

The evocative atmosphere of the novel arises from Garfield's detailed descriptions of eighteenth-century London. The settings of the narrow, fog-shrouded alleys, the malodorous depths of Newgate Prison, the rough-and-tumble world of the Red Lion Tavern, and the rigid, unchanging Mansfield house all overflow with precise and picturesque detail.

Garfield's use of slang and thieves' lingo, combined with his descriptions of dress and manners, defines the separate worlds of the upper and lower classes and highlights the contrast as Smith moves between these two worlds.

Garfield's settings also function as metaphors for action and character. The dark, twisting streets suggest the evil plottings of the lame man; the cold and blinding snowstorm echoes Smith's detachment from the conventional patterns and beliefs of Mr. Mansfield's world; and the narrow twisting ventilators in Newgate Prison symbolize the convoluted path that Smith must negotiate to escape the world of crime, poverty, and ignorance.

Critics have compared the characters in the novel to the larger-than-life figures created by nineteenth-century English novelist Charles Dickens.

Living in an adult world that refuses to take him seriously, Smith is a complex combination of boyish enthusiasm, selfconfidence, and vulnerability. His careless thievery contrasts with his kind heart, and his ingenuity contrasts with his inability to defend himself in the face of unjust accusations. Mr. Mansfield is both physically big—"a real giant of a gent" who "fairly towered over the tiny, helpful Smith"—and physically weak because of his blindness. He is morally rigid in denying Smith his trust, yet willing to change his deepest convictions when he realizes the inhumanity of this kind of justice.

Themes and Characters

Smith and the blind judge, Mr. Mansfield, are the most effectively drawn and carefully balanced characters in the novel. Smith is motivated by the need to survive; he is a clever and quick pickpocket but has a sense of compassion that leads him to offer a helping hand to old Mr. Mansfield.

Smith has no scruples about his pickpocketing and even aspires to be a highwayman like Lord Tom for the excitement and treasure that such a life will bring—even if it also brings a death by hanging. His sisters call him "Smut," and at first he appears as little more than a grimy scrap of a boy. On the other hand, Mr. Mansfield—large in build, rich, and possessing the power and status of a judge—has only a rigid, abstract sense of justice to cling to in his blindness. This compels him to imprison Smith even though he is drawn to the boy and is in debt to him for his kindness.

Few people in the novel are who they seem to be at first. Because Smith lives by his wits, he is more perceptive than the others, reading character from people's faces. He instinctively distrusts Mr. Billing, the lawyer, and wonders about Miss Mansfield, whose face and flashing eyes contradict the gentle words and actions she shows her blind father.

Smith's determination to learn to read so that he can decipher the stolen document and his subsequent pursuit of the document when it vanishes provide the driving forces of the narrative. But it is his reluctant kindness and boyish courage that provide the theme. Smith proves that, contrary to Mr. Mansfield'sinitial belief, justice is not a matter of clinging to abstract principles. Instead, justice must be tempered by understanding and compassion. When Mr. Mansfield finally lies about Smith's identity in order to protect the boy, he has learned a more important lesson than has Smith when he learns to read.

Adventure novels usually depend on a series of exciting events that culminates in the success of the protagonist, usually because of his or her courage and determination in the face of overwhelming odds. Smith is a more complex novel because although the hero is brave and resourceful, his ultimate success results from his ability to face the intellectual challenge of deciphering the written word. The suspense engendered by Smith's attempts to elude his pursuers is balanced by the equal urgency with which he throws himself into the task of learning to read. The theme of ignorance versus knowledge is carried out at two levels: Smith learns to read, and he solves the mystery of the old man's murder; both of these events lead to the happy ending.

Topics for Discussion

1. Meg, the Mansfields' servant, says that she is kind to Smith because her mother has always told her to "follow her heart." How is her motivation different from Mr. Mansfield's? What rules of behavior does he follow?

2. In the novel's opening chapter, London is seen in part from the perspective of the birds who perch on the roof of St.

Paul's Cathedral. Why is this an effective way of setting the scene?

3. How is Mr. Mansfield's blindness an advantage to Smith? How is it a disadvantage?

4. A single incident often marks a change of fortune for a character. When Smith is brought to Mr. Mansfield's house, his layers of clothing are taken away and burned, and he is scrubbed to remove the layers of grime. How does this incident and the description of Smith after the bath suggest that his life is about to change?

5. Many characters indicate to Smith that learning to read will only get him into trouble, and that he will be better off if he remains ignorant. Why do they say this? What circumstances suggest, at first, that they may be right?

6. When Smith and Mr. Mansfield arrive frozen and exhausted at the constable's house, the man writes down their names and makes a list of everything he will give them. What does Mr. Mansfield think of the constable's need to measure carefully the help he gives toothers? How does the constable's behavior influence Mr. Mansfield's decision to lie about Smith's identity?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although the story is set in eighteenth-century England, it does not concern itself with actual historical events. Instead, the details of eighteenth-century life create an atmosphere for the adventure that takes place.

Show how the descriptions of the Red Lion Tavern and Newgate Prison help the reader understand Smith's personality.

2. Moral choice is an important element in Smith. Show how some of the events in the story teach Smith and the other characters that outward respectability, rank, and wealth are not always indications of honesty and goodness.

3. It is ironic that many of the characters in the story turn out to be the opposite of what they appear. Mr. Billing, a lawyer, turn s out to be a lawbreaker, and the man who judges Smith cannot see. Discuss some other examples of irony, such as the actions of Lord Tom, and show how the reader, as well as Smith, learns not to judge by appearances.

4. Symbols in a novel often stand for feelings and attitudes the author wants to convey about situations and events.

Discuss the way Garfield uses descriptions of fog and snow to show loss, confusion, or danger.

5. The names that an author gives to characters often reveal something about the characters. Why does Garfield give his protagonist only one name, and why does he choose "Smith," a common last name? What is the effect of calling the highwayman "Lord Tom"? Discuss how other names in the novel reflect on characters and the way they are perceived by others.

6. Show how the author uses humor to lighten tense situations. Consider Smith's bath at the Mansfields', the character of the hangman, and the way Smith finally escapes from prison under Miss Bridget's hoop skirt.

For Further Reference

Carpenter, Humphrey, and Mari Prichard. The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1984. Contains a brief overview of Garfield's works, which summarizes Smith's plot and literary qualities, and sets the novel in the context of the author's other novels.

Natov, Roni. " 'Not the Blackest of Villains... Not the Brightest of Saints': Humanism in Leon Garfield's Adventure Novels." Lion and the Unicorn (Fall 1978): 44-71. This article focuses on the way the author embraces humanity in all its weaknesses as well as all its strengths. Natov compares Garfield to some of the best nineteenth-century novelists and shows how Smith is both cynical and sentimental.

Stott, Jon C. Children's Literature from A to Z: A Guide for Parents and Teachers. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984. The entry on Garfield suggests that his novels are effective in introducing the violent aspects of eighteenth-century life to young readers.

Townsend, John Rowe. A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971. The discussion of Smith indicates the ways in which the author has developed the narrative line to produce greater unity than exhibited in his previous works.

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