Song of the Magdalene Short Guide

Song of the Magdalene by Donna Jo Napoli

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Overview

Song of the Magdalene is Napoli's first young adult novel that uses the Bible as its source. Set in first-century Palestine, it recounts the adolescent years of Miriam, daughter of a prosperous and highly respected Magdala widower, and her struggle to remain true to her own ideals and passionate personality while trying to conform to the role of proper Jewess in a restrictive religious society whose stringent traditions hamper her every activity. The person with whom she had most in common is Abraham, the crippled son of the family's servant Hannah, who although bound by his paralysis, is free to think, read, and reason within the broken shell of his body.

It is Abraham who teaches Miriam to read and sing, who encourages her to grow intellectually and spiritually. The onset of her own seizures fills her with fear that she may be beset by unclean demons, but this dread is stilled when Abraham argues that to be handicapped is not a judgment by the Creator, rather it is a happenstance of cruel Nature. The tomboy and the cripple become two young rebels who unite to overcome all obstacles. Strong and lithe, Miriam uses a handcart to pull Abraham at first into the fields and then into the town so that he can experience the world around them. They do so with the grudging approval of Miriam's father and Abraham's mother who fear the possible consequences of their behavior.

Their household is joined by an unexpected ally when Judith—a barren widow who has wanted to marry Miriam's father ever since the death of his wife and her husband—seeks out Miriam after the girl has shamed her orthodox community by being inspired to sing aloud from the "Song of Solomon" in the House of Prayer, an act anathema for a woman, whose inferior sex is never supposed to speak aloud in the synagogue, or be taught to read, even from the Bible.

Miriam and Abraham eventually become lovers and consecrate their love in a marriage prayer to the Creator. Their union results in Miriam's pregnancy, despite Abraham's weakened condition after he has been exposed to the elements in one of their excursions into the fields. Now, it is Judith who gives Miriam support. After Abraham dies, Miriam and Judith prepare together for the child's birth, a child that Miriam longs for as a healthy extension of his father's spirit, a child whom Judith prepares to vicariously receive as her own. When the child is stillborn after Miriam's brutal rape by a Magdala carpenter, Miriam is sent to live with an uncle to quiet the vicious rumors spread by Jacob the carpenter that she has prostituted herself.

After a difficult sojourn with her relatives, Miriam sets off on a symbolic cleansing journey into deserted Qumran, the community of the Essene caves, where she prepares for her final journey toward the Messiah Joshua. It is here that she is first seen in the New Testament as the woman with seven unclean spirits, a link Napoli makes as she recounts the seven epileptic attacks that plague Miriam over the course of the book. That woman emerges as Mary Magdalene who carries with her always an alabaster jar of ointment and a song to sing for the many souls that yearn to be healed.

About the Author

Donna Jo Napoli was born the youngest of four children in Miami, Florida in 1948, to a building contractor and a housewife, both of whom were children of Italian immigrants. In many respects Napoli's success is the culmination of the American dream. She recalls, in a personal essay published in Something about the Author Autobiography Series, that there were never any books in her home, but by second grade she had discovered the school library where she soon persuaded the librarian to allow her to visit twice a week in order read more than the prescribed two books per week—beginning a lifelong affair with words. The nature of her father's business—building a house, selling it, then moving to another site nearby—led to Napoli's feeling of not belonging. Always the quiet tomboy, she retreated deeper into the world of imagination as she read.

Napoli had been born and baptized Catholic and made her First Holy Communion, but in an age when it was "cool" to stop going to church at the age of twelve, Napoli remained deeply religious. This love of religion would be manifested in her novel Song of the Magdalene, which also reflects Napoli's own questioning of religious authority as a young woman.

In addition, her vision deteriorated early on, until correction of a vision problem with hard contact lenses opened the world even more fully to her; she then began to excel in many subjects. She won many awards during junior high and high school, culminating in a scholarship to Radcliffe, then the women's college of Harvard University. At Harvard Napoli majored in mathematics, the precision of which would prefigure her love of linguistics, and took many courses in modern dance, a vehicle that allowed her mind and body to soar.

It was while at Harvard that she met and married Barry Furrow, another scholarship recipient, himself a poor boy from South Dakota and Iowa whom she describes as "radically left-wing, radically anti-clerical and wonderfully sweet." Together they excelled academically and in their roles as parents—Donna Jo received a Ph.D. in linguistics from Harvard and became a writer and poet, and Barry became a law professor who now teaches at Weidener University.

They have been married for thirty years and have five children.

The life experiences of her own children have been embodied in some of Napoli's books for children, while others develop from the children's curious questions and her propensity to take everything seriously, a characteristic developed over a lifetime of being a worrier. These characteristics have led Napoli to develop a strong interest in many areas of social justice, including those concerning the poor, the treatment of women in society, and the plight of minorities.

Napoli began writing for children many years ago, but it was not until 1984 that her first book was accepted and later published in 1988—The Hero of Barletta. The acceptance

of her retelling of an Italian folktale gave Napoli pause—causing her to wonder if her original work had any value in the marketplace. Although linguistics are her academic forte, Napoli is compelled to write, not only in her field where she is widely published, but also of her experience as a parent and out of her own quest for truth.

Many of her novels for elementary and middle-grade children reflect events and dilemmas in the life of her own children.

Napoli has received many awards for her work: Soccer Shock (1991) was named to the Hall of Fame Sports Books for Kids in 1996 by the Free Library of Philadelphia and nominated for the Nutmeg Children's Book Award by the Connecticut Library Association in 1994-1995; When the Water Closes Over My Head received boxed reviews and was named to the Bank Street's 1995 "Books of the Year" list; Shark Shock received commendations as did On Guard, a book that reflects one son's interest in fencing.

A fantasy takeoff on the tale of the Frog Prince, The Prince of the Pond was born because of Napoli's serious reasoning that a prince turned into a frog could never have survived without the help of a real frog, wise in the ways of pond life. The success of that story led young readers to demand a sequel detailing the life of Jimmy, the frog prince's son. Jimmy the Pickpocket of the Pahace (1996) is the result of their inquiries.

Trouble on the Tracks (1997) is set in Australia, a spot visited by Napoli in recent years.

It was only in 1993 that Napoli was inspired to write for young adults, choosing to retell the story of the most wicked woman in fairy tales—the witch in "Hansel and Gretel"—after her daughter questioned the plethora of evil women in the old stories. The Magic Circle (1993) portrays the witch as a healer cursed with an appetite for children, who hides in the forest to allay all temptation until the fateful day the children happen to come her upon her forest cottage.

This new outlook toward female protagonists proved both a fruitful source of inspiration for the author and a delightfully intriguing appetizer for teen readers, as Napoli followed The Magic Circle with Zel in 1996, a rendition of the Rapunzel tale casting the mother as the witch. Song of the Magdalene was also published in 1996, and it takes its plot from Napoli's pondering the adolescent years of Mary Magdalene and her own daughter's love of the character in the play Jesus Christ Superstar. During this time Napoli was awarded grants by the American Association of University Women and the Leeway Foundation to research her work. Napoli has used teens as the main characters in a 1998 title, For the Love of Venice, featuring an American teenaged tourist and a lovely Italian girl who is alarmed by the damage tourism is doing to her beloved city.

The young adult novel titled Sirena offers a mermaid tale set in Ancient Greece, and numerous other works for young readers.

Napoli's amazing versatility and her masterful use of language have propelled her to the forefront of young adult writers. Each new venture is eagerly awaited by librarians, teachers, and an increasing number of young readers.

Setting

Song of the Magdalene is set in the smothering environment of first-century Magdala, a town in the north of Palestine known for the beauty of its tower and the lush meadows and valleys that surround it. Magdala is home to Miriam, whose budding pubescent nature begins to chafe at the strictures enjoined.on religious Jewish women. Magdala is a small town where everyone knows each other's business and where the pious women at the well zealously appraise each other's observance of the Law, ready to condemn and ostracize over the smallest breach of morals and behavior. Miriam lives in her widowed father's home, taken care of by Hannah, her father's housekeeper, who daily tries to stress upon Miriam the prohibitions by Jewish law.

It is in this setting that Miriam emerges from childhood. Her father is a loving parent whose memory of Miriam's mother is that of a woman who loved to travel with him and share his life, who took great pleasure in bright colors. Because of those memories, Miriam's father tempers his fears that her rebellious nature may bring her harm in the tradition-fettered enclave that is Magdala.

He himself has defied convention by taking into his home not only the widow Hannah as his housekeeper, but also her crippled son Abraham, called an "idiot" by the townspeople who strongly believe that to suffer a handicap is a sign of habitation by demons or the result of the "sins of the father." In addition to taking in Abraham and his mother, Miriam's father has also allowed Abraham to be tutored by his Uncle David, a scholar. Abraham is far from idiot. He is a naturally intelligent young man with a love for life and nature imprisoned in the shell of a body which grudgingly allows him only the use of his right arm.

Miriam runs from the limitations imposed on her behavior and dress into the valleys and meadows that lie outside the town. It is here that she suffers her first "fit." Certain that her attack is the manifestation of a demon within her, Miriam turns homeward to the only other person that is "possessed"—Hannah's Abraham. Napoli uses this small town inhabited by even smaller people as a symbol of repression, and in placing her main characters in the "cages" of epilepsy and paralysis, sets the stage for them to emerge triumphantly over bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and religious extremism.

Abraham is liberated by his love for Miriam, his death, and the possibility of his life continuing unblemished in his offspring.

Miriam continues her journey toward maturity and spiritual wholeness in her symbolic journey through Dor, a coastal town where Jews romanized their names and the drachma took precedence over the Torah, into Qumran, the white, silent caves of the Essenes, and finally back to Galilee and the just-emergent order of the Messiah Joshua, who welcomes into the New Law even those crippled or, like Miriam, charged with prostitution.

Social Sensitivity

The very essence of Napoli's Magdalene is the lack of morals and social sensitivity couched in the orthodox Jewish mores and superstitions of the first century. Her novel is a cry of concern for the rights and treatment of women throughout time. Her choice of Mary Magdalene as the protagonist of the story speaks volumes. Napoli says of her novel, in Something about the Author Autobiography Series: it is "a story of many kinds of love, with particular attention to the love between women." Despite their disapproval of the way Miriam's fervor for life affects the way she interprets the Bible, Hannah and Judith support Miriam with unconditional love. Ilene Cooper, in a Booklist review, writes that "Napoli's inclusion of issues of the ancient world—the treatment of women and the infirm, religious practices, societal pressures—means that the book demands a reader who can both comprehend philosophical ideas and appreciate nuance." The young adult audience should provide such a venue. Young adult readers will find many similarities to Miriam's world in their own century. The treatment of women, the pressures of a consumer society, and contradicting religious values affect the daily lives of young people today as much as they ever have even if the outward forms are different. Song of the Magdalene, then, is anything but an old-fashioned story.

Literary Qualities

Wonderful images abound in Napoli's work: the titillating taste of pomegranate seeds shared by the young lovers; the raw sensuality of an apple from Sodom bitten by a Roman soldier as "its sweet juice perfumed the air and made his bottom lip shine"; the shape of the mandrake root fondled by Abraham in his living right hand. The reader is aware of the young people's love even before they are. The story evolves over six years before their mutual love flowers in consummation, even as Abraham's spirit begins to fade. Miriam grows from a coltish child of ten to the hungry-for-life aspirant of sixteen without a true awareness of the impact her behavior and beauty have on the petty people and cruel community values of Magdala.

Napoli's prose has a fluid resonance that bespeaks her love of language. Nowhere is it more evident than early in the book when Miriam lets the syllables of her name roll around on her tongue as she ponders the origin of her name. "Mrr .. . bitter; maram: wished for; mry: loved; mr .. . fat?" The text is replete with descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Bible, especially of Solomon's "Song of Songs." Napoli has often said that she loves the study of linguistics.

Song of the Magdalene offers proof of this love.

Napoli has created here, as in her other young adult novels, strong female figures as central characters who evoke sympathetic responses from readers. As in her portrayal of the witch in The Magic Circle and Rapunzel in Zel, Mary Magdalene emerges not as a prostitute turned saint, but as a woman wronged by the society in which she lives, forced by circumstances to suffer until her Redemption.

The choice of the names Abraham and Isaac for the males in the story who will die is evocative of the Abraham and Isaac of the Old Testament, who must precede the New Law and the promised Messiah. Their names are suggestive of parallels to the Old Testament. For instance, throughout the text the "Song of Solomon" is employed again and again. As Miriam the child/woman sings its verses she wonders about growing up and her own beauty. She must obey her passionate heart as she sings aloud in the House of Prayer even though it makes her cursed in the eyes of the observant Jews around her; her reasoning so beautifully simple: "I sang into a space devoid of spirit.

I felt that if I stopped singing, I, too, would be empty of the quickness we call life."

When Miriam is at last walking north once again to find Joshua, the sick child of the Roman matron Lucia in her arms, it is the "Song of Solomon" she sings—a fitting processional to the Messiah. Napoli weaves the lyrics and the theme of the story with a sure hand.

Themes and Characters

Miriam and Abraham are the central characters in the Song of the Magdalene. Miriam's youthful exuberance is set forth early in the novel as she struggles to be the good Jewess her father would have her be. The valley calls her each day. "If I didn't go, I'd burst from within. The open beckoned me."

Miriam's heart yearns to run and rejoice— to glory in all that is. The prohibitions of the veil and all the rituals of order required of observant Jewish women threaten to throttle her very soul. The onset of her first seizure beneath the "blue, blue sky" she loves and the fear of possession by demons serves as further evidence that Napoli is using the realities of Miriam's religious and social strictures and the agony of her epileptic seizures as a dual imprisonment—a theme that is repeated in the life of Abraham.

Abraham has to suffer within his wasting body, enduring the taunts and fears of the townspeople and their total immersion in superstitious religious practice, while knowing all the while that he is a soul with the mind of a scholar and the sure knowledge that his handicap is not a curse. Always friends, their friendship takes on a deeper meaning as Abraham shares the secret of Miriam's affliction, in some sense more serious than his own. An "idiot" is ignored in their culture but a healthy child/ woman who suffers fits must surely be plagued by demons. The demons in the novel are not these young people's afflictions. The demons are the religious codes of their society and the reflexive ignorance of the people who embrace them.

The carpenter Jacob is an example. His hatred of Abraham stems not only from his loathing of Abraham as a senseless idiot, but also from the realization that Abraham had the intelligence to notice a mistake he had made in measuring a length of wood.

And the fact that Miriam speaks that truth on Abraham's behalf only inflames Jacob's hatred. He uses the Torah to incite the townspeople against Miriam after he has brutally raped her in angry lust. It is this rape that causes the death of Miriam and Abraham's unborn child and causes Miriam's father to send her away for her own safety. Jacob's false piety, as well as that of his wife Shiprah, is a foreshadowing of the sanctimoniousness of the Pharisees. Miriam's travail parallels the sufferings of the new Messiah.

Miriam's father and his housekeeper Hannah represent all that is good about the Old Testament. They adhere to the true spirit of the Torah, giving substance to the admonition to treat those who suffer with respect and love. Each of them warns the children to take heed. They sense that Miriam and Abraham's innocent behavior can only bring them ill will. For Miriam cannot and will not conform to the people's ideal and Abraham defies all they superstitiously believe about helpless cripples.

Judith's entry into Miriam's life adds a surprising, yet stabilizing, presence. The widow who longed to be Miriam's father's second wife has also suffered. She has had to take a menial position in her brother-inlaw's household. Only remarriage can re store her

standing in the community. Once seen as a conniving woman out to trap her father, Miriam comes to value Judith as a friend while Judith is brought to see Abraham's real worth. She also teaches Miriam to play the flute and dance the songs singing in her heart. It is Judith and Hannah who support Miriam through her pregnancy, the aftermath of her rape, and the loss of her child Isaac. It is Judith that will be a comfort to Miriam's father when Miriam leaves.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Miriam feel that she is different from the other women at the well?

Is it only her age that separates her from them?

2. How does Miriam deal with her society's expectations of a proper Jewish girl? Would you say she is religious?

3. How would you describe Miriam's relationship with her father? With Hannah?

4. Describe how the onset of Miriam's "fits" affects her relationship with Abraham.

5. How does Abraham cope with his paralysis? Does Miriam provide his only escape from his crippled body?

6. Judith's appearance in the household affects all its members. Describe how she changes their lives.

7. The valley is a metaphor for freedom for Miriam and Abraham. Why?

8. Abraham stops Miriam from choking during her second "fit." How does she react?

9. Why does Hannah become a co-con-spirator to hide Miriam's fits?

10. Describe the relationship between Miriam's uncle and his wife Rachel towards Miriam.

11. How does the move to Dor influence Miriam? Her stay in the caves of Qumran?

12. Does the "Song of Solomon" describe only a sensual love?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Napoli's novel includes many references to Biblical places. Name them and describe their importance to the story.

2. Miriam and Abraham each seem to have their true natures imprisoned by factors they cannot control. Describe the differences and similarities between their "prisons."

3. The author of this novel is a renowned linguist. What does a linguist do? Detail samples of her linguistic abilities in the writing of this novel.

4. The "Song of Solomon" is quoted often in Song of the Magdalene. Of what relevance is this song to the Song of the Magdalene?

5. Compare and contrast the treatment of women in the twentieth century to those of Biblical Magdala.

6. Compare Miriam in Song of the Magdalene to Zel in the author's 1996 fantasy of the same name.

7. The lives of Miriam and the known Jesus seem to follow a parallel course before their meeting. Describe how this is so.

8. Describe Miriam's growth as a woman from the novel's beginning to its end.

What are the particular events that trigger this growth?

9. Miriam's "fits" seem to describe what is now termed epilepsy. Research this malady and its symptomatic behavior.

How accurate is the depiction of it in Song of the Magdalene?

10. Miriam suffers seven "fits" during the course of the novel. Detail them and the effect each has on the development of the plot.

For Further Reference

Review of Song of the Magdalene. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (January 1997): 182. While critical of Napoli's giving her heroine "a fairly modern mindset," the novel is seen as "still a provocative imagining about one of the most famous women in the New Testament."

Cooper, Ilene. Review of Song ofthe Magdalene.

Booklist (October 1,1996). Cooper offers criticism of the novel and Napoli's ability of "telling familiar stories from a fresh perspective."

Napoli, Donna Jo. Something about the Author Autobiography Series. Volume 23. Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 161-78. A revealing personal account of the writer's life and literary efforts.

Review of Song of the Magdalene. Publishers Weekly (November 4, 1996): 77. Calls the novel "one of [Napoli's] riskiest."

Entry on Napoli in Something about the Author, Volume 92. Edited by Alan Hedblad.

Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 161-66. Details the author's awards, honors, and bibliography, and features "Sidelights" commentary from Napoli.

Wilton, Shirley. Review of Song of the Magdalene. School Library Journal (November 1996): 124. Wilton writes that the "skillful weaving of plot and character create a gripping novel that is hard to put down."

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