Sweetgrass Short Guide

Sweetgrass by Jan Hudson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Although Sweetgrass is historical fiction, its storyline is one that is most familiar to contemporary readers, for it is simultaneously a love story and a coming-ofage story. At fifteen, Sweetgrass believes that she is more than old enough to marry Eagle Sun, someone with whom she has grown up. However, Sweetgrass's father, Shabby Bull, does not believe that she is ready to take on the demanding responsibilities of marriage, and Sweetgrass fears that her father will ignore her desire for a love marriage and will, instead, arrange a marriage for her with an old man, one who already has several wives. When Eagle Sun sends his older brother to meet with Shabby Bull regarding making a marriage match, Sweetgrass's father's response is that she is "not strong enough to be a sits-beside-him wife." To prove to her father that she actually is strong enough to marry, Sweetgrass must pass her father's test—to single-handedly prepare some thirty buffalo hides over the winter. However, a bigger test of a different type of strength confronts Sweetgrass during the winter when her siblings and almost-mother contract smallpox while Shabby Bull is away seeking food.

About the Author

Janis (Jan) Mary Hudson was born in Calgary, Alberta, on April 27,1954. While Hudson was still an infant, her father, Laurence (Laurie) Wiedrick, and her teacher mother, Mary, moved to Edmonton, Alberta, where Hudson's father became head of school library services for the Edmonton Public School Board and later a professor of School Librarianship in the faculty of Education, University of Alberta. After attending Edmonton's Mount Royale and Lendrum elementary schools and Harry Ainlay Composite High School, Hudson graduated cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree in English from the University of Calgary in 1978.

A law degree from the University of Alberta followed in 1984.

The year that that Hudson was in eleventh grade was spent in Eugene, Oregon, while her father was on sabbatical and was important in her early development as a writer.

There, she encountered Allan Woods, an English and drama teacher, who encouraged her to enter writing contests. Although she was one of two state runners-up in an NCTE competition, Hudson said, in an interview with Jenkinson, she found that the real value of entering the contests came from giving her the ability to seek objective, large-scale appraisal of work, something she likely would not have done without someone like Woods to encourage her.

During the Jenkinson interview, Hudson admitted to being a shy person, and she added that she wrote partly because she was so shy. She recalled finding her social niche in junior high by writing funny stories in language classes. She knew that they were good if there was a fight among her fellow students to see who got to read them out loud. As a very young girl, Hudson originally wanted to be a published poet, but she later changed that goal to wanting to write a novel, setting the age of thirty as her target date.

While engaged in her law studies, Hudson took an interdisciplinary course about Western Canadian First Nations treaties, especially those involving the lands around Calgary, and it was through this course that Hudson first encountered the period setting for Sweetgrass. In the Jenkinson interview, Hudson recalls the genesis of the Sweetgrass character, which occurred on a city of Calgary bus as Hudson was coming home from her university classes. Originally, she had planned to write the novel about a boy because the prevailing philosophy then was that a historical fiction manuscript stood a better chance of being published if the story was about a male. Hudson told Jenkinson that she could remember the exact moment at which she gave in and switched to a female protagonist. "I was sitting there, thinking about the plotting again, and there was this darn girl's voice buzzing away in my ear again. I thought 'I don't want to write about you. I don't like you. Go away!'" However, the character did not go away and, once Hudson accepted her, writing the book and developing the plot became much easier.

Before putting her fingers on the computer keyboard, Hudson spent more than a year researching the historical period. After she actually did start to write Sweetgrass, she says that her progress was sporadic, for she would often leave the novel for months before returning to it. In the Jenkinson interview, Hudson characterizes herself as basically being a "rewriter" rather than a writer. Although she recognizes that most aspiring writers write several novels before producing one that is publishable, for her, becoming a published author involved rewriting the same story, over and over, until it was publishable. She also told Jenkinson that, with the exception of Sweetgrass, the names of the other characters in the book were chosen out of indexes of stories from the period that included Blackfoot names.

Sweetgrass is dedicated "To my almostdaughter Cindy Lynn"; Hudson was thinking of her husband's daughter by his first marriage when she wrote the book. Finishing the first draft in 1979, she shopped the manuscript around to many American publishers but did not find any takers. In 1981, Hudson decided to enter Sweetgrass in the first Alberta Writing for Young People contest, sponsored by Alberta Culture, where it placed second. Although placing in the contest was supposed to guarantee publication, the publisher involved in the contest reneged. Again, Hudson began sending the manuscript out and, while one Canadian publisher did show interest, the editor wanted the character, Pretty Girl, deleted from the first third of the book, something Hudson was not prepared to do. Finally, Allan Shute, the publisher of Edmonton's Tree Frog Press and one of the judges in the original contest, approached Hudson about publication. As Hudson explained to Jenkinson, what impressed her about Shute was not only that he liked her writing style but that he also knew what she was trying to do in the book with the character of Pretty Girl.

In the year it was published, Sweetgrass received Canada's two most significant awards for juvenile literature, receiving both the Canada Council's Children's Literature Prize and the Canadian Library Association's Book of the Year Award. Not published in the United States until 1989, the American edition of Sweetgrass received numerous accolades, including being named a School Library Journal Best Book, recognized with Notable Children's Book and Best Book for Young Adults citations from the American Library Association, and being awarded the Parents' Choice Award for Children's Books.

434 Sweetgrass On April 22, 1990, just days before her thirty-sixth birthday, Jan Hudson died in Edmonton from sudden respiratory failure brought on by viral pneumonia. That year also saw the publication of her second historical fiction novel, Dawn Rider.

Setting

While the book's physical setting is southern Alberta and perhaps parts of northern Montana, its time period, the 1830s, is much more important to the plot and the book's themes. Because of the introduction of the horse and the gun, coupled with the increasing incursion of Europeans who not only put stress on the land but also caused the indigenous peoples to change their hunting/food/clothing/shelter relationship with the animals around them, Blackfoot life was altered drastically. In her conversation with Jenkinson, Hudson explained some of these changes, the first being that there were fewer men. When a man was astride a horse and carrying a rifle, warfare suddenly became a much more mortal game.

Horse-raiding, a major sport for the young men, also became more dangerous and potentially fatal. As a consequence, most young men were not living long enough to become middle-aged, and it was the surviving middle-aged men who then took multiple wives. As well, the relatively few men of marriage age possessed much of the "currency" in terms of trade goods. Furthermore, there was pressure on the Blackfoot to engage in hunting for more animals than were actually needed for food because the animals' skins and hides were translatable into white trade goods which, in turn, meant wealth and prestige.

Hudson uses Sweetgrass's grandmother to explain the effects of these changes on Blackfoot women: "before men had guns they lived much longer. Most of our warriors didn't die young. Men had fewer things to trade for, so women didn't have to marry young to tan buffalo hides for trading."

Grandmother also explains how marriage has changed, "In the dog days. . . most men took only one wife . . . and no more, because they were happy together . . . the price of a wife was lower, too. It was just a gift then, like a girl's gift is to the man's family now."

Social Sensitivity

The biggest issue likely resides in the fact that Jan Hudson was a Caucasian woman who adopted the voice of an adolescent Blackfoot girl. Consequently, the charge that Hudson has engaged in cultural appropriation may arise. In an unpublished portion of the Jenkinson interview, Hudson argues that creating a story from historical records is an authentic way of writing, but she then goes on to acknowledge that such a story does not possess the same kind of authenticity as that which could be created by somebody with more direct experience of the language and culture. Nonetheless, it must be noted that Hudson was the adoptive mother of a Blackfoot daughter, and she did research her subject matter thoroughly. In the published version of the interview, Hudson acknowledges her own awareness of needing the approval of members of the minority culture, and so she shipped Sweetgrass down to friends on a Blackfoot reserve who went through it from beginning to end. Furthermore, Hudson states that the publisher also reviewed her research thoroughly.

Some members of First Nations communities could also feel that Hudson's book denigrates aspects of their culture. Hudson points out that this was a temporary period in Blackfoot history and to generalize that all of Blackfoot history is based on this short period would be like judging the civilization of the United States by what happened during the time of the Wild West. A notice to readers that they should not generalize the book's content to other historical periods or tribal groups is found prior to the title page: "The people in this story are not historical personages, but contemporary creations. The events, however, are based on written records of the winter of 1837-1838 in the territory which is now southern and south-central Alberta."

Polygamy and child-brides, even though presented in a historical context, could also raise concerns for some. Again, Hudson researched her subject carefully, explaining that the book's time setting was a period when many of the Blackfoot traditions and structures were breaking down, and that, until then, monogamy had almost been a rule in Blackfoot society. She adds that her research revealed that the average marriage age for women dropped from something like eighteen to thirteen.

Finally, some adults could perceive the smallpox chapters as being too vivid in their descriptions of how the disease physically manifests itself. Hudson acknowledges that some friends who had read the manuscript did concur that these chapters might be offensive to some readers; however, Hudson notes that her publisher did not feel that there was any need to tone down the smallpox chapters.

Literary Qualities

Sweetgrass has sometimes been criticized for being too slowly paced, a charge that Hudson addressed in the Jenkinson interview. She candidly acknowledged that some readers do find the book boring, and she attributes their response to the fact that, in writing the book, she was trying to recreate the annual domestic cycle of work for Blackfoot women. Hudson admitted to struggling with the challenge of how to make domestic chores, like berry picking and hide scraping, exciting. However, Hudson argues that, while Sweetgrass may lack the quick-paced action of some other books, what attracts and holds her many female readers is the whole question of marriage and especially that of "Who will become Sweetgrass's husband?" Since the criticism came principally from adult reviewers, Hudson also questioned their ability to identify with young girls who, not burdened by adult concerns like jobs, mortgages, and children, can still find suspense in romantic love.

Hudson is very strong in her use of conversation and in the development of character, particularly that of Sweetgrass and her paternal grandmother, She Fought Them Woman. The following exchange reveals the dismissive impatience of the young, romantically idealistic Sweetgrass who does not choose to hear the experienced-based wisdom imbedded in her grandmother's words.

"Have my parents talked to you about my marriage?"

Her old eyes kept smiling. "It will happen soon enough. Don't worry."

"But what's a woman without a husband?"

"You ask me, a widow?" She rocked back and forth and laughed out loud. "A young woman should enjoy her time for dreaming, Sweetgrass. The time for a husband comes all too soon."

"But, Grandmother, I'm fifteen."

"Most of a lifetime is time enough for men. You will find all they think about is buffalo and war. And they soon die as did each of my husbands. Aiii, those were great warriors!"

Grandmother paused to choose another berry. "A Blackfoot woman only lives for her work and children. Enjoy yourself while you're young."

"Old women are so boring!"

As well, Hudson unobtrusively includes in Sweetgrass many small details about and descriptions of daily Blackfoot life and customs, such as Cut Both Ways's gift-giving to poor families as a way of proving that he is a wealthy man or the women's berry-picking routines. Sometimes these references are obtuse, as in the case of Grandmother's reported conversation with Sweetgrass: "Grandmother says before men had guns they lived much longer. Most of our warriors didn't die young. Men had fewer things to trade

for, so women didn't have to marry young to tan buffalo hides for trading. In the dog days, she says, most men took only one wife." Many modern readers would likely read the term "dog days" and simply apply to it the contemporary meaning of those uncomfortably warm days of July and August, so named because the Dog Star rises and sets with the sun during those months. However, Grandmother is using the term to establish a historical period, that time before horses when the only pack animals available to the Blackfoot were dogs and so less could be carried with them as they moved across their hunting areas. So, while Hudson offers much to readers in the way of new learning, she also offers the more knowledgeable readers occasional opportunities to use their knowledge.

Themes and Characters

The theme of child-parent conflict, especially as it applies to the child's developing romantic interests, is a common one, but, in the context of Sweetgrass, it is exacerbated by the swiftly changing social mores of the Blackfoot. As Hudson explains to Jenkinson, "The social idea of what you do and how and why hasn't really caught up with the economic and political reality of what's going on."

The central character, Sweetgrass, represents those who are still attempting to follow the old ways and who either do not recognize, or do not want to recognize, that Blackfoot ways have changed and are continuing to change. All around her, Sweetgrass sees fathers giving their adolescent daughters to older men in marriage. Nevertheless, she still uses an example from the past as her model and recalls that "Father wanted to marry my mother, and she wanted to marry him. Mother was really old to get married, maybe eighteen, and he was only twenty-three. But they chose each other, and their parents thought it was okay."

Consequently, Sweetgrass believes that the romantic love she feels for her childhood friend, Eagle Sun, should be the principal criterion her father, Shabby Buffalo, uses in arranging her marriage, rather than the number and quality of horses he could receive.

Whereas fifteen-year-old Sweetgrass is very idealistic, her younger friend, Pretty Girl, just thirteen, is very much a realist.

Though Sweetgrass prattles on about how Pretty Girl's father might arrange her marriage to a young man, Shy Bear, Pretty Girl recognizes that, because her family is kimataps (poor), her fate will be different. "You know how poor my family is. My boyfriend doesn't have half the horses Father could get for me from some older men." As Pretty Girl predicts, she finds herself becoming just another of Five Killer's wives. Even though Pretty Girl is not in a love relationship, Sweetgrass persists in only seeing marriage's romantic side. When she asks Pretty Girl what it is like to be married, the response is, "Nobody gets married to be happy," and, when pressed further, Pretty Girl adds, "He'll just give me children."

She Fought Them Woman, Sweetgrass's paternal grandmother, carries the memories of the ways things used to be among the Blackfoot, and she fully recognizes how their society has changed. At one point, Sweetgrass quotes her: "Grandmother says it's bad times for women now, not so much for men. Back in the dog days when my grandmother's grandmother was a girl, that was a good time."

Another theme that emerges is that of the changing role of women in Blackfoot society. In speaking with Jenkinson, Hudson made the observation that in those situations where there are lots of women and relatively few men in a society, women tend to be undervalued and their options are distinctly narrowed for them. At one point, when Sweetgrass says, "I'm going to marry and be happy," Pretty Girl responds, "Perhaps, but you've got to marry because 436 Sweetgrass it's the only thing a Blackfoot woman

can do." Hudson pointed out to Jenkinson that such a limited future for Sweetgrass was not always the case, for, in the Blackfoot tradition, there were many ways by which someone could become a respected person, and there were as many ways for women as there were for men. For instance, someone could be brave, generous, good on the hunt, unusually virtuous, physically attractive, possess spiritual power, or be good on the warpath; a person who demonstrated any of these characteristics was, indeed, a powerful person. However, during the time of Sweetgrass, these routes to being respected had started to break down so that, increasingly, there was one main criterion, which was wealth.

Topics for Discussion

1. Jan Hudson, a member of a majority cultural group, wrote about members of a minority culture. What are the implications of such a situation? Can someone who is not a member of a cultural group write about that culture? By extension, do you think a person of one gender can write from the perspective of the other gender?

2. After the attack on the Blackfoot camp by the Assiniboin, She Fought Them Woman, Sweetgrass's grandmother, says to Shabby Bull, Sweetgrass's father, "Sweetgrass will be a warrior woman." Was Grandmother correct in her prediction? Explain.

3. Grandmother's statement that "Their [men's] lives without our [women's] lives are worth less than our lives without theirs" seems to be contradicted by the reality around her. For example, despite doing the cooking, the women eat after the men, and, while the men kill the buffalo, it is the women who do the heavier work of butchering the carcasses and preparing the hides. Discuss whether or not Grandmother's words are true.

4. After the death of Sweetgrass's mother, her father took a second wife, Bentover-Woman. Sweetgrass refers to Bentover-Woman as her "almost-mother" and to Otter as her "almost-brother."

Today, we would use terms like "stepmother," "stepbrother," or "half brother."

Which terms do you prefer and why?

5. Hudson has said that the book that eventually became Sweetgrass originally had a male central character and that the male character was likely Otter, Sweetgrass's younger almost-brother.

How do you think the story would have been different if it had been told by Otter?

6. When Jan Hudson was trying to find a publisher for Sweetgrass, one publisher showed interest but wanted the character of Pretty Girl removed from the first third of the book. If Hudson had agreed to the request, how do you think the book's plot and characterization would have been changed?

7. When fifteen-year-old Sweetgrass hears that her friend, Pretty Girl, just thirteen, is going to be married, she becomes envious and says, "I would've sacrificed a finger to be in her place."

Pretty Girl, however, does not share Sweetgrass's enthusiasm about marriage, declaring, "Oh, I would rather be dead than married." How do you account for their differences of opinion?

Sweetgrass 439 8. Grandmother tells Sweetgrass: "Back in the dog days when my grandmother's grandmother was a girl, that was a good time. Then sometime later we

got horses from the south tribes and guns from the Cree in the north." What did she mean by the term "dog days?" Why would those days be better than when they had horses and guns?

9. What are the differences between a "slavewife" and a "sits-beside-him" wife?

10. Sweetgrass says, "I am a good Blackfootwoman and follow the proper ways of duty." Did she?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. "Sweetgrass" is more than the name of the book's central character. Research the role that the plant, sweetgrass, played, and still plays, in First Nations' cultural traditions.

2. To prevent members of her family from starving to death, Sweetgrass fed them fish, a major cultural food taboo, and, because of her actions, some of her family survived. One way of explaining what happened is to say that the "end" result, Sweetgrass saving lives, excused her "means" of achieving that result (i.e., violating a major food taboo saved lives). Conduct a debate with the following focus: Be it resolved that the end justifies the means.

3. "Grandmother undid the laces of the baby's carrying bag. The baby made a face at her own bad stink. She really needed her moss changed." The preceding passage is just one of many examples that Hudson includes in Sweetgrass that describe how the Blackfoot lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. Using the novel and other resources, research traditional Blackfoot life under such headings as food and cooking, clothing and materials, transportation, dwellings and furnishings, and social customs and structure.

4. Among the Blackfoot, individuals had at least two names, a childhood name and then an adult name. For example, when Sweetgrass's grandmother, She Fought Them Woman, speaks to her son, Shabby Bull, she sometimes refers to him by his childhood name, Sobbing in the Night. Explore how you and/or your siblings and parents received your given names and any nicknames.

5. Jan Hudson uses the literary device of the simile in her writing. The Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (online version) defines a simile as "a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as (as in cheeks like roses)." One of an author's intents in employing simile is to assist readers in their understanding of the text. Since Sweetgrass, the central character, lives in a natural, unspoiled area, Hudson utilizes comparisons that would be familiar to Sweetgrass and other members of the Blackfoot tribe. For example, while describing the repetitive nature of their lives, Sweetgrass says, "Our lives seemed fixed as in a beaded design or the roundness of an old tale told on winter nights." Rewrite the above simile so that their new content would reflect the environment in which you live. Find further examples of similes in Sweetgrass, and continue to adapt them to reflect where you live.

6. In Sweetgrass, the central character, Sweetgrass, quotes her paternal grandmother: "Grandmother says it's bad times for women now, not so much for men. Back in the dog days when my grandmother's grandmother was a girl, that was a good time. Then sometime 440 Sweetgrass later we got horses from the south tribes and guns from the Cree in the north."

Grandmother's statement suggests that the negative changes for women were the result of the acquisition of horses and guns. The idea that the adoption of these new

"technologies" was harmful to the Blackfoot people is explored further in Hudson's other novel, Dawn Rider.

7. As well in Dawn Rider, there is a conflict between the Blackfoot young and the old, with the former desiring to make use of the new "technologies" while the latter want to reject them, fearing their potential negative consequence.

What are some of today's new "technologies" that some people want to embrace, while others fear their potential negative impacts? Choose one, such as cloning or genetically modified foods, and argue both sides of the technology's potential impacts.

8. Research smallpox in its historical and current contexts.

For Further Reference

"Hudson, Jan." In Contemporary Authors, vol. 136. Detroit: Gale, 1992. This entry offers a very short listing of biographical facts.

"Hudson, Jan." In Something about the Author, vol. 77. Detroit: Gale, 1994. This lengthy entry, in addition to biographical information, provides the background to Hudson's writing of her two historical fiction novels.

"In Memoriam: Janis Hudson." Feliciter (September 1990): 13. This brief obituary summarizes Hudson's writing career.

"Jan Hudson." Children's Literature Review, vol. 40. Detroit: Gale, 1996. This thorough piece not only provides biographical details and the author's commentary on her own writing but also reproduces numerous reviews of both of Hudson's titles.

Jenkinson, Dave. "Portraits: Jan Hudson."

Emergency Librarian (September-October 1984): 46-47. This entry is a short discussion of the author's life and how Sweetgrass came to be written.

Shea, Mora. Review of Sweetgrass. Alberta Report (March 26,1984): 45. This entry is a brief, positive review.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In Sweetgrass, readers were able to see some of the effects that the acquisition of guns and horses had on the Blackfoot way of life. Hudson received many requests from readers to write a sequel to Sweetgrass, but had no plans to do so. "I don't think I would like to move forward in historical time," she said. Part of her reasoning was that "when it gets closer to the time where there are people living who remember, then these people are obviously infinitely more capable of writing about that period than I am." She did say that "I'd like to go back in time and do something on Sweetgrass's grandmother, for she was an interesting person who led an interesting life."

With Dawn Rider, Hudson did in fact return to the Blackfoot of an earlier period: the mid-eighteenth century. However, her protagonist was not the grandmother but another female, sixteen-year-old Kit Fox, who is present when her tribe obtains its first horse. Because the tribal elders fear the changes to tribal ways that the horse may bring, it is sent to be tamed in an outside camp, a place where no woman is welcome.

Kit Fox prevails on the horse's guard, her cousin Found Arrow, to let her visit the animal and to assist in its training. When the mounted Snake tribe attacks, it is Kit Fox who must ride the horse, Eagle Flies Over Hills, to seek help from a neighboring Cree village that has guns. Based on written records from 1730-1740, Dawn Rider is an excellent companion read to Sweetgrass, for its events presage the cultural changes to be experienced by the Blackfoot of Sweetgrass's time.

Even though it is set in modern times and on a different continent, Suzanne Fisher Staples's Shabanu would also make a fine complementary read, for it shares a number of themes with Sweetgrass, especially those of an adolescent girl's not wanting to marry someone significantly older who already has a number of wives, or someone who has been selected for her by her father.

Related Web Sites

Byrnes, Robin. Review of Sweetgrass. CM: Canadian Review of Materials. http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/cm/cmarchive/voll2no4/sweetgrass.html.

March 14,2002. A brief positive review is found in the CM Archive section of the Web site.

Review of Sweetgrass. Native American Books http://www.kstrom.net/isk/books/middle/mi220.html. March 14, 2002. This review begins positively but then proffers "a second look" from a First Nations' perspective, one which is very negative.

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