

Swept Away Short Guide

Swept Away by Dafydd ab Hugh

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Overview

Swept Away is a complex psychological drama played out in the format of high adventure. Some readers may feel that too much introspection intrudes, impeding the drive of the narrative, but many others will relish the author's attempt to convey all of the thoughts going through the mind of the narrator, Jeanette Taylor. Jeanette and four companions become trapped and separated in the middle of a flood, resulting in a perilous struggle to survive. Jeanette's quick thinking is bound to appeal to many readers as she figures out ways to escape not only the rampaging forces of nature but a sociopath whose delusions threaten her with rape and death. How she copes is the heart of the adventure.

About the Author

Dafydd Ab Hugh was born in 1960. He received a master's degree in mathematics from the University of California at Los Angeles, and his career as a novelist began in 1987, with the publication of *Hewing*.

Setting

Most of the action of *Swept Away* takes place in the floodplain of a northern California river. Floodplains, the terrain alongside rivers that formerly became inundated during California's rainy season, are fairly prevalent in this region because of topography and climate. Rivers that overflowed to cover their floodplains have been dammed, creating reservoirs for California's long, hot, dry summers. These floodplains, now protected against water intrusion, provide both fertile land for farming and space for building new communities to *Swept Away* 361 house California's huge population. In *Swept Away*, the characters find themselves on a floodplain that is unpopulated and apparently part of a park system. A dam upriver has created a reservoir, and when the dam collapses, the floodplain reverts to its predam seasonal state—wet, marshy, muddy, and treacherous.

Social Sensitivity

Jeanette is blunt about sexuality. Her talk of French kissing and using tongues, her views about male genitalia, and her confusion about what she wants in a sexual relationship make up a substantial and credible part of her personality. The one time there is any possibility that sexual intercourse will occur is utterly horrifying, with Jeanette swearing that she will die before she is raped. The naked Bill is not an object of sexual interest; rather, Ab Hugh manages to make him an object of revulsion.

More disturbing to readers, both young and old, will be the topic of sexual mutilation. Bill has mutilated himself, or has been mutilated, with cuts on his penis and other parts of his body. The description could prove nightmarish for sensitive readers, and it is likely to give even worldlier readers pause.

Her frankness about sexuality is part of Jeanette's seeming frankness about everything. Her views tend to be angry, harsh, antisocial, and very judgmental. Her negative attitude probably stems in part from the circumstances of the novel—she is in a fight for her life. Part of her attitude may also come from her superior intelligence and her sense of the inadequacies of the life she has experienced so far, as well as her ignorance of human nature.

Her thoughts on a safe hiking route are discarded by her companions, and her thoughts on how they could escape the floodplain are ignored. Disaster follows in each case. Her misjudgments about people haunt her. She should never have invited Bill on the hike, since he is plainly the loosest of loose cannons. These matters add *Swept Away 365* up to a young woman, under great stress, expressing harsh views that reflect harsh events. This negativity, even if partly justified, makes her unpleasant; she is not a cheerful adventurer with whom readers will enjoy spending their time. She may be an objectionable figure for some, a bad companion who may lead young readers astray, but she is also exceptionally realistic for a figure in a book written for young adults, and the complexity of her interpretation of her experiences will challenge the thoughtful mind.

Literary Qualities

Ab Hugh takes his young adult readers very seriously, and in *Swept Away* he presents them with grave issues to read, ponder, and discuss in a psychological drama set within the framework of an adventure story. This storytelling mode is a narrative of a series of events, often arranged chronologically, with each event usually leading to an even more dangerous situation—the intense, “one darn thing after another” structure that invariably holds a reader’s attention. In *Swept Away*, Jeanette quickly moves from one problem to the next, but the pace becomes especially fast when the flood hits.

Part of her appeal—and the appeal of the novel—is that she must use her wits, knowledge, and good sense to find solutions to the problems that confront her, such as building shelter and keeping Dwayne and Bill in line.

It is unusual for an adventure story to also be a psychological drama; the latter usually requires long expository passages on the thoughts of the principal characters.

Ab Hugh combines the two forms by having Jeanette discuss her doubts and fears as she tells the story. The resulting blend of adventure with psychological drama is somewhat awkward: the psychological exposition often slows down the adventure narration. Other brakes on the narrative are the interruptions to tell other stories, as when Dwayne and Jeanette exchange stories in the shelter. These stories allow the novel’s secondary characters to express some of their own thoughts and feelings; Dwayne’s story, for instance, expresses some of his feelings toward Jeanette. Jeanette’s stories to others tell more about her psychology than she expresses in her narration of the novel. The story she tells Dwayne shows her ability to manipulate words in order to manipulate people, and her story of the night monster suggests that she may be subject to delusions.

The enigmatic ending of *Swept Away* may bother many readers. Jeanette, who has made much of being responsible and living by her own moral code, walks out on Dwayne and Bill. She believes that Bill is hopelessly out of touch with reality, a danger to himself as well as others, and, in all likelihood, a deranged murderer. Dwayne has certainly done nothing to deserve being left in the company of someone who may kill him, especially since he has proven himself so devoted to Jeanette in a gentlemanly way. Bill, even if less dangerous than Jeanette supposes, may also be incapable of surviving without her help.

This open ending, in which Jeanette just walks off, was set up earlier in the novel by her expectations for the hike. Because she was hoping to get away from pressures at home and at school, she was angry with Bill for telling Dwayne about the trip. However, the hiking trip turns into a nightmare of responsibilities and psychological pressures.

Instead of escaping the psychic stress of teenage social life and the emotional turmoil of romance, Jeanette finds herself in the company of two boys each of whom thinks of her as his girlfriend. Their experiences on the ill-advised hiking route that she recommended

against bring more stress because she has to tolerate a bad choice that others have made for her. Then the flood comes, and all stresses, tensions, and pressures are magnified. She again submits to someone else's bad choices and finds herself isolated with two boys she would prefer to avoid. As a result of all this turbulence, the novel ends with the same emotional quest with which it began: Jeanette's search to free herself from the pressures that have agonized her spirit, even if only a temporary and qualified victory can be won.

Jeanette has spent most of the novel focused on herself, as if oblivious to the feelings of others, and the ending is an expression of her overriding concern for her own wants and needs. Even so, the novel seems half finished, and the immediate sequel indicates as much. In *Swept Away: The Mountain* (1996), the narrative is a continuation of events on the hike. It is possible that Ab Hugh wrote a much longer novel that his publisher divided into two parts. Certainly the resolution of the issues raised by *Swept Away* comes only at the end of *Swept Away: The Mountain*.



Themes and Characters

Swept Away is recounted by an "unreliable narrator," certainly one of the most complex and subtle narrative voices an author can use. An unreliable narrator is a character whose version of events is not to be trusted. The major challenge that such a narrator presents to the reader is to sift through the narrative truths and untruths to arrive at a reasonably objective view of events. Often this species of narrator is so untrustworthy that readers simply cannot know all of the truth. Such is the case with Jeanette Taylor, the narrator and central character in Swept Away.

Jeanette gives early evidence of being an unreliable narrator when she fails to notice any of the signs that Bill might be a very disturbed individual and not a good companion for a trip into a remote area. Bill's untrustworthiness is foreshadowed sufficiently enough that the reader will realize that Jeanette should stay away from him; that she misses these clues suggests that she may overlook other crucial details as she tells her story. Her "true" story of a monster in her brother's bedroom that seeps through a wall into her bedroom sounds like a delusion, perhaps a hint from the author that her obsession with guns, selfprotection, and being a "man of the family" may lead to other delusions. By the time Bill is playing his role as treacherous psychopath it is hard to distinguish what he is actually doing from what Jeanette imagines he is doing.

She also is very troubled by her absent father, though what she says about him may have little to do with what he was really like. For most of the novel, Jeanette implies that he abandoned her family; she clearly feels that he abandoned her, leaving her alone to fulfill his role in the family. Her remark that, he "literally" hit the road one night is a strong clue as to what really happened, but she does not reveal that he died until late in the novel, shortly after realizing she has been confusing events and people. She remembers swearing undying commitment to Neil when it is really Bill who has consistently told the truth by saying it was a mutual commitment between Jeanette and himself. We also learn eventually that Dwayne, the boy she characterizes as stupid throughout the novel, is a National Merit finalist; either the National Merit examinations have become very easy or there is more to Dwayne than she has been telling the reader. Her thoughts about Dwayne, coupled with her response to what social gossip imputes to him, provide an insight into how she may be confusing her imaginings with reality. Because everybody says that he has slept with a multitude of girls, Jeanette, by her own description not particularly pretty, would be just another conquest to add to his tally. She focuses on this rumored aspect of Dwayne even though she admits that he has been nothing but gallant to her, that the date on the motorcycle may actually have been fun, and that his efforts during the hike have been heroic.

Jeanette's tendency to substitute what she imagines for what is real makes Swept Away challenging reading. How are we to know what she believes is actually true?

The belief that Bill murdered Lalla is based primarily on her interpretations of his remarks about feeling abandoned. Her reasoning resembles the "fives" trick played on Jeanette and her classmates by a schoolteacher who said that a closely guarded secret



to life is that everything comes in 362 Swept Away fives; he then challenged his students to put this precept to the test. After they had found sequences of fives almost everywhere throughout historical events, the teacher revealed that the quest to find fives was a ruse to teach an important lesson: in Jeanette's words, "if you look hard enough, you can find evidence of anything, no matter how silly." She spends much of the novel looking for duplicity and sexual exploitation in the people around her; that she finds them may be because she is looking too hard for them.

Even with all this misdirection and confusion about the real nature of people and events, readers can extract some truthful information from Jeanette's views- about the other characters. Because he tries to set the hikers against one another, she describes Bill as a kind of Iago, a character of magisterial deception in William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) who pretends to be Othello's friend while plotting his destruction. She is so sensitive to people conspiring against her that her identification of Bill with Iago could very easily be no more than the outcome of obsessed imagination. On the other hand, Bill's insistence on being in charge and his bizarre ideas seem genuine rather than fabricated or distorted, if for no other reason than that they reveal facts that Jeanette only grudgingly admits, such as the pledge she gave to Bill when they were much younger. It seems real enough when he strips naked to reveal horrible mutilations, and Bill does seem thoroughly out of his mind, even if Jeanette is finally wondering, "Who was crazy—Bill or me?"

Authors often place their characters under great stress in order to strip away the mask they typically wear and reveal the essence of their personality. In *Swept Away*, Ab Hugh places Jeanette, Bill, and Dwayne in a situation where their struggle to survive shows them for who they truly are and where every decision could cost them their lives. Jeanette, for all her harsh views of the other characters and her constant complaining, has admirable qualities. She keeps thinking even when she is under great stress and afraid that Bill will kill her. She figures out how to cross treacherous streams, build a shelter from saplings, and save Bill's life when he is in danger of drowning.

Jeanette also makes a tough moral choice under great duress, a decision so important that it defines her personality: "I have to live under my principles . . . not Bill's."

This display of decisiveness is in marked contrast to how submissive she has been through most of the novel—for example, when she allows Bill to take a hiking route she knows to be foolish rather than the sensible one she recommended. This acquiescence almost costs everyone their lives.

Her willingness always to let the boys take charge even though they are poor leaders seems to contradict her insistence that she is an intelligent, independent woman.

Jeanette never manages to reconcile completely her contradictory desires: to be submissive for the sake of general ease in the company of two men who seem to be strongly attracted to her, and to exhibit the independence of mind and action that she craves and believes to be the truer expression of her nature. This internal conflict leads Jeanette to end the novel with an act of selfassertion as morally suspect as her previous



acts of submission to the boys when she knew she was in the right. She makes a personal declaration of independence by walking out on Bill and Dwayne; in so doing, she shows that she will take charge of her destiny, but she also leaves Dwayne in the company of someone she believes might be a serial killer.

Bill has seemed to be on shaky mental ground from the start. He has trouble telling the truth, he may or may not have been on the road for two years, and he is manipulative. Placed in a life-and-death situation, he retreats into a childish desire to always be first. He soon shows himself to be panic-prone and inept, and he is on his hands and knees barking like a dog by the end of the novel. The essence of Bill is an insane desire to be in control, to have everyone do everything his way. Unlike Jeanette, he seems to lack any sense of introspection that might prompt him to self-examination and possible recognition of his problems; he is unaware of how his behavior appears to others.

Dwayne is another problematic figure.

From Jeanette's description of him, he would be the heartthrob of many teenage girls: tall, handsome, and powerfully built, a star athlete who may go to the Olympics as a swimmer. Jeanette is not interested in Dwayne herself and repeatedly admits that, despite the rumors of his indiscriminate amorousness, he is a gentleman with her.

Much of what she says about Dwayne must reflect her own irritation with him more than whatever real flaws he has. When their lives depend on him, Dwayne proves to be every inch the star athlete, using his great strength to help Jeanette and Bill.

Dwayne is far more than just a conveniently well-muscled young man; his heroic heart, undaunted by Jeanette's endless derogatory remarks about him, is as important as his physical prowess. Very sick from drinking tainted water, he forges on, doing what needs to be done and helping Jeanette.

She says, "He sounded like Beavis and Butthead's good, polite twin," but Dwayne comes off as someone good to have around in an emergency.



Topics for Discussion

1. How truthful is Jeanette? How can readers distinguish what is true from what is not in her narrative?
2. Jeanette does not like having Bill and Dwayne on the hike, and she knows that the route they are going to take is very dangerous. Why does she not turn around and go home?
3. What are Dwayne's good points? What are his bad ones? Why does Jeanette dislike him?
4. Why does Jeanette date Dwayne if she dislikes him as much as she says she does?
5. Why does Jeanette not tell Dwayne that Bill is a lunatic who almost raped her and may yet kill them both? Should she tell Dwayne?
6. What is the evidence that Bill is insane?
7. What is the evidence that Jeanette is insane?
8. Why does Jeanette say through most of the novel that her father left his family, only at the end revealing that he is dead?
9. Was the dark monster seeping through the bedroom wall a psychotic episode? Did Jeanette's mother hide in her bedroom from the monster or from her gun-wielding daughter who was threatening to shoot something?
10. When did you realize that Bill probably has some severe psychological problems? Why does Jeanette take longer to figure it out than you did?
11. Jeannette says that "if you look hard enough, you can find evidence of anything, no matter how silly," and she gives the example of being able to find the number five in everything. If what she says is true, how can one tell what is real from what is false? Is there any way to test evidence? How could Jeanette sort out truth from her imaginings?
12. When Dwayne and Jeanette tell each other stories—one about Orpheus and Eurydice and one about Tristan and Isolde—they slant the stories in order to make points with each other. This implies that *Swept Away* itself may be biased. In what ways could it be slanted?
13. Jeanette says, "I made up my mind that I was not going to be raped. No way. Bottom line, I'd go down fighting and make the son of a bitch kill me." Is this her only choice? How should she have responded to the situation?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What equipment should people take on a hiking and camping trip? Were the hikers in *Swept Away* properly equipped? Why do people embark on "adventures" without adequate preparation? Do they bear a measure of complicity in any difficult situation they 366 *Swept Away* may find themselves in? If so, how much?

2. Jeanette mentions the sort of childhood that some psychologists say is typical for serial killers. What do psychological researchers actually say about the childhoods of serial killers?

3. California has an elaborate search-and-rescue system that includes several state agencies. Who would have been sent to search for the missing hikers? How would the search have been conducted? Would the searchers have failed to look in the right place, as Jeanette fears?

4. Irony is a very important literary device: it enables readers to know more about what is going on than a book's characters do. In *Swept Away*, we often know more than Jeanette seems to even though she is telling the story.

Where in the narrative do we know or understand more than Jeanette does?

How does this affect our understanding of what is happening? Does it build suspense?

5. When people have an emergency in the wilderness like the one experienced by the hikers in *Swept Away*, what should they do? Who says so?

6. In *Swept Away: The Mountain*, how is Jeanette's character developed? What aspects of *Swept Away* are explained?

For Further Reference

"Dafydd Ab Hugh." In Contemporary Authors. Vol. 154. Edited by Terrie M. Rooney. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997, pp. 1-2.

Describes Ab Hugh's early works *Hewing* and *Warriorwards* (1990).

Publishers Weekly 243, 9 (February 26, 1996): 106. According to this review, *Swept Away* has significant flaws in its narrative, making it a so-so reading experience.



Related Titles

There are two sequels to *Swept Away*: *Swept Away: The Mountain* (1996) and *Swept Away: The Pit* (1996; see separate entry). In *Swept Away: The Mountain*, the events left hanging at the end of *Swept Away* are resolved (not all of the young people survive their ordeal). Jeanette's unreliability as a narrator is further developed, as her lies confuse even her. In *Swept Away: The Pit*, Jeanette and Neil try to resolve the mysteries surrounding Bill, including whether Lalla, Bill's supposed ex-girlfriend, is really dead. Jeanette's life and sanity are once again on the line.

The unreliable narrator occurs more often in books written for adults than those for young adults, but young readers are likely to read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925; see separate entry) and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847; see separate entry), each of which features an unreliable narrator, and each of which appeals to the thinking reader. In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway, is unreliable partly because, out of admiration for Gatsby, he tends to slant his narrative to make Gatsby look good and partly because he tends to apply his own standards of morality to his depiction of events, making him judgmental the way Jeanette is judgmental.

Nick Carraway, like Jeanette, recounts events as they happen, but the multiple narrators of *Wuthering Heights* recount the novel's events long after they happened. *Swept Away*, with its unreliable narrator and intense romantic confusions, would be good preparation for reading *Wuthering Heights*.

Readers would know to look between the lines of the older novel's narration to see that the narrators are passing judgment on the characters and picking their own heroes and villains by slanting their accounts. *Swept Away* readers would also know that the tragic, overheated romantic entanglements in *Wuthering Heights* reflect the personalities of the narrators as much as they reflect the personalities of Heathcliff, Catherine, Edgar, and the other chief characters. The complex narration in *Wuthering Heights* is more subtle than in *Swept Away*, but each novel has its melodramatic elements; swept up by powerful emotions and profoundly confused about her loyalties and sexual desires, Jeanette is her novel's Catherine.



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