

A Thief in the Village Short Guide

A Thief in the Village by James Berry

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Overview

"A Thief in the Village" is a story of moral instruction. It reminds readers that prejudice is not evidence and that unusual people are not automatically worthy of abuse. This "teaching tale" takes place in rural Jamaica where Nenna and Man-Man help their parents raise produce for sale in a marketplace two or three days away. The children guard the family coconuts from being stolen while their parents are away at market, and they succeed in chasing a thief away. Suspicion quickly falls on Big-Walk, who has long been suspected of stealing from his neighbors. As the plot unfolds and the thief is revealed, the story provides a picture of the people and their lives in a small Jamaican village.

About the Author

James Berry was born in 1925 in Jamaica, grew up there, and has used it as the setting for most of his fiction.

When twenty-three years old, he moved to England where he became an educator and literary scholar, publishing *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of West Indian Poets in Britain* in 1976 (revised 1981).

In addition to his scholarship and writing fiction, Berry has published two collections of poetry, *Fractured Circles* (1979) and *When I Dance: Poems* (1988). Featuring a deft prose style and fine depictions of life in Jamaica, *A Thief in the Village* was declared a Coretta Scott King Award honor book.

Although he did not begin writing fiction for young readers until late in his life, Berry has in less than a decade established himself as a distinguished voice in the field of young adult literature.



Setting

"A Thief in the Village" is set in the Jamaican countryside Berry knew when he was young, and the places and characters he depicts are based on those experiences. The story takes place on the farm on where Nenna and Man-Man live, the village near the farm, and the home of Big-Walk. The farm provides one setting for Nenna to grow as an individual when she learns from her brother some of the techniques required for guarding the property from thieves at night. She begins to mature through successfully conducting unfamiliar tasks. Her life becomes more complex when in the village. She recalls how the villagers seem to have caught Big-Walk out, suggesting that he is the man who has been stealing from all the local farmers. Her view in this reminiscence is simple: everyone says Big-Walk must be guilty, therefore he is guilty. Nenna's attitude mirrors the opinions of the village as a whole. The focal point of the village is a small shop where rum is sold and the local men hang out, telling each other stories and conducting business. Events in the village teach Nenna a worthy lesson, and the whole village gets a comeuppance when attention shifts to the truck of Duke and its contents. By the time Nenna arrives at Big-Walk's home, she is ready to learn about the complexity of human nature. Big-Walk is neither crazy nor frightening; he lives simply in a simple hut, with none of the menacing paraphernalia a professional thief should have.

Social Sensitivity

Although the theme of "A Thief in the Village" is that people's appearances can be misleading, its larger purpose is to show part of life in rural Jamaica. A world apart from the vacation resorts, glamorous beaches, and beautiful ocean vistas highlighted in glossy travel advertisements is an everyday Jamaica composed of people whose lives follow routines, habits, and patterns little affected by mechanisms of mass tourism. "A Thief in the Village" is a successful short story only to the degree that it faithfully portrays its characters and their lives.

The story shows part of how the community is organized, with the District Constable taking a leading role. It shows some of the principal concerns of the people in the community—their need for connections to the outside world, their worry about feeding and clothing themselves, and their need for security. These needs are universal ones of the human condition, and they help to enrich the portrayal of the characters, making even readers who know nothing of Jamaica want to more deeply understand the bonds of kinship between them and these fellow members of humanity.



Literary Qualities

"A Thief in the Village" begins with a story told by a girl whose storytelling has been praised by an English teacher. It was a story told to her by her father, and she writes it down at her teacher's request. Having her story come first, by way of introducing the main story, serves three important purposes. First, it tells us that the story is from the past; it is her father's story from when he was a boy, and the Jamaica depicted in it must be understood as the Jamaica of a generation ago. Matters such as public transport may today be more modern than in the story, and the village may not be so isolated as it was then. Second, it tells us that although the story may be a work of fiction, the author Berry wants us to think of its settings and people as having a basis in real places and real people. It is, after all, a "true" story from the narrator's father's past.

This means that readers are to view the story as partly a lesson about the people of Jamaica. Third, the introductory passage tells us that the story is to be told by an educated person with a good background in grammar; the story may be her father's, but the language in which it is told is hers. This means we should not be surprised that the dialect of the story's characters, shown when they speak, differs from that of the narrator. This also means that the narration of the story itself, written in standard English, can help those readers who are unfamiliar with the Jamaican dialect follow the action and the development of the story's ideas.

Berry rarely tells a shallow and uncomplicated story in any of his writing. He uses symbols or dialect or structure to invite readers to make a deeper interpretation of his stories than their surface plots might seem to offer. He uses the technique of layered narration in "A Thief in a Village." The story told by the schoolgirl has stories within that story, the most important of which is Nenna's confrontation with Big-Walk in the village. Note how, while waiting together in the dark, she tells her story to her brother before the main plot actually gets going. Berry thus offers two barriers to the main narrative that readers must traverse—the schoolgirl's introduction and then Nenna's tale. This runs the risk of losing a reader's attention; readers are liable to set a book down permanently if nothing happens for too long. The reward is that the layered narratives enable Berry to present different perspectives on events that will clarify most of the action. The "do not judge a book by its cover" theme seems to naturally come from the schoolgirl; the caring about a person's humanity theme comes naturally from Nenna, who personally knows the people involved. This means that Berry can distance himself from the narrative but still not sacrifice the human intimacy that brings abstract ideas to life. Concepts and themes that are meaningful to him—the importance of looking beneath the surface, a community needs trust to flourish—are vigorously expressed by a vibrant character observing events from the vantage point of a later time.

Berry gains apparent objectivity while still expressing passionately held opinions. By having Nenna tell her story before the main action begins, he can encourage his readers to begin making judgments about the conduct of the people involved as events unfold, as if they knew what Nenna knew and could make her prejudgments along with her, as she does so.



Berry has his characters speak in the Jamaican dialect he remembers. He emphasizes this by having his narrator ask whether it would be acceptable for her to use the everyday pet names, Man-Man and Nenna, for her father and aunt to call them. The dialect of their speech adds pith, vitality, and interest to the story. The language, lyrical and to the point, is sometimes missing prepositions and verbs, as if designed to communicate as quickly as possible with little wasted breath.



Themes and Characters

It is unclear at first whether Nenna or Man-Man will be the story's protagonist; each plays an important role in the action on their farm. Man-Man is the more experienced of the two, and knows what to watch for, how to hide from thieves, and how to use a gun.

Nenna proves to have a sharp mind as she quickly adapts to watching for thieves in the dark. Once the action on the farm is over, the story focuses on Nenna and her experiences with BigWalk. She is a clearly drawn figure who is given depth by her fallibility, her intelligence, and eye for detail.

When she sees Big-Walk, she makes the same interpretive mistakes the village adults have made in their encounters with him: The tall, ragged man with knotted beard and matted-looking hair was there. His black mongrel dog sat alertly at his feet. The bottom of the man's trousers had frayed away to his shins, way above his broad bare feet with their spreading toes. His piece of old shirt, more skimpy than a waistcoat, was held together with a knot at his naked navel. . . . And, as always, he held his sharp machete in his hand. He was really a tall and marvelously muscular man.

Big-Walk looks wild and strange, and his carrying his machete about makes him a menacing figure. It is easy to see why Nenna would readily believe the rumors about him, yet there is little in Nenna's description of Big-Walk that points to criminality. Instead, the picture is one of an extremely poor man without enough money to properly clothe himself. Nenna's important moment of growth comes when she sees beyond the man's wild looks.

Most of the other characters in "A Thief in the Village" are stereotypes who are quickly sketched to provide a feel for the community of the settlement. Berry even goes out of his way to associate each character with a particular function: Mr. Anderson is the District Constable—he is the law; Duke is the "town man," the village's primary link to the region's towns and cities; Uncle Slim is "a man who laughed most of the time"—a listener; and Cousin Dago is a farmer "who always bragged how the biggest yams came out of his field." These are men who are largely respectable and leaders in their community. Berry shows through their interactions how each is invisibly tied to the others in a network of shared obligations and how critical trust is to the economic success of the village. An example of this is when the District Constable persuades Duke to sell a donkey for him in town, even though Duke protests that "you know I deal in field produce, not donkeys"—but they dicker and reach a friendly bargain, without contracts, on the basis of their mutual trust.

This theme of business and personal dealings consummated through shared trust adds depth to a story of prejudice. A village thief not only takes away valuable sources of income from very poor people, he or she steals from the collective trust that is the village's most fundamental bond for communion. Without trust, there must be suspicion, and suspicion brings an end to the easy and fruitful interdependence that makes a community thrive. That Duke is the thief makes the point even more telling; as the



village's most important connection to the outside world, he needs most of all to be trustworthy—his news must be reliable, his bargaining must be honest. That he is a friendly and easy-to-get-along-with man contrasts him markedly with Big-Walk, emphatically making the point that one should not "judge a book by its cover." This opposition of appearance versus reality further enriches the underlying idea that communities thrive on trust, and it underlines the fact that Duke's subterfuge makes him a much more dangerous and harmful figure than the openly different Big-Walk.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do people think Big-Walk is the village's thief?
2. When he is caught, why do people treat Duke differently from Big-Walk than when they thought Big-Walk was guilty?
3. Why do the villagers believe BigWalk is a thief?
4. What are the rumors about BigWalk? Are any of them based on fact?

What are the facts?

5. Why would Nenna and Man-Man take it upon themselves to protect their family's coconut trees?
6. How does Berry show that coconuts are valuable to people? Why would coconuts be worth shooting someone to protect them?
7. What does "A Thief in the Village" show us about life on Jamaica? Did you learn anything that surprised you?
8. What is the central idea of the story? Is the idea too simple?
9. How well drawn are the characters in "A Thief in the Village"? Which ones are the most interesting?
10. How does Berry explain the kinds of names the characters have in the story?
11. What do the different layers of narrative tell you about the story?

What purposes do the different layers serve?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How is the law enforced in rural Jamaica?

2. What are district constables?

What are their jobs?

3. What are the crops identified in the story? Where on Jamaica are they grown? Which are the most valuable to Jamaicans?

4. What would day-to-day life be like today for a Jamaican girl like Nenna who lives on a farm?

5. The narrator tells us that the story is from her father's youth. What would life in Jamaica have been like over a generation ago, and how has it changed since then? Do farming communities still function the way they are depicted by Berry?

6. The story of Big-Walk introduces a large issue: What does society do with people who do not fit into normal social roles such as police officer or shop owner? What should be done about Big-Walk? Should anything be "done" about him?

7. Where are coconuts grown on Jamaica? When are they harvested?

How are they harvested? What happens to them once they are harvested?

Who buys them? What are they made into? How valuable are coconuts to the Jamaican economy?

8. Farms in "A Thief in the Village" seem to grow a wide variety of produce and raise a large variety of livestock. Is this typical of a Jamaican farm? Why would farmers want to diversify rather than focus on one valuable crop or one kind of livestock?

9. In "A Thief in the Village," the general store where rum is sold seems to be the center of commerce and socializing for the community. Where do rural Jamaicans tend to gather for commerce? Where do they gather to socialize? Are there any social conventions governing their behavior?

10. How does the Jamaican dialect differ from standard English? How did the Jamaican dialect evolve? What are its sources?

For Further Reference

"Berry, James." In *Contemporary Authors*. Edited by Susan M. Trosky.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992, pp. 36-38. This provides little biographical information and consists mostly of highlights from Berry's books.

Bissoondath, Neil. *New York Times Book Review* (May 8, 1988): 30. Bissoondath finds the details of the stories in *A Thief in the Village* to be accurate.

Gillies, Eva. *Times Literary Supplement* (July 8, 1988): 765. Gillies admires the depiction of Jamaican life in *A Thief in the Village*.

Related Titles

The stories in *A Thief in the Village* depict the everyday life of Jamaicans as Berry experienced it in his youth.

The stories feature the Jamaican dialect, keen observations of the details of ordinary Jamaican life, and vividly drawn characters based on village types he knew long ago. *Spiderman Anancy* (1988) is a retelling of Jamaican folk tales in which universals of human experience are pointed out in stories intended to teach young people about life. *Ajeemah and His Son* (1992; see separate entry, Vol.9) is about slavery in Jamaica in the 1800s. It also features sharply observed details of rural life expressed in powerful and dignified language.



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