

Theo Short Guide

Theo by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison

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Overview

When the Nazis announce that all orphans in Athens, Greece, are to be rounded up and sent to Germany, Theo and his older brother Socrates decide to escape from the capital city and travel to a small village where they can hide and join the resistance movement. But, when they reach their destination, Socrates is brutally executed by the Nazis, leaving the younger boy on his own. Theo's only true companion and confidante becomes his shadow puppet, Karagiozis, a beloved and heroic character in Greek puppet-shadow theater. By using his puppet as a means to express his feelings, young Theo struggles to understand the meaning of heroism and bravery, to make sense of what is happening in the world around him, and to survive.

About the Author

Barbara Harrison was born in 1936. Today, in addition to being a distinguished and masterful author, she teaches English at the Charles E. Brown Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts. She is codirector of Children's Literature New England and has edited a collection of speeches originally presented at programs and lectures sponsored by the organization. She has also compiled and edited a further collection of essays and conversations regarding children's literature taken from programs presented at Simmons College Center for the Study of Children's Literature. Along with Daniel Terris, Barbara Harrison is coauthor of two biographies of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, both based on the authors' well-researched and award-winning HBO documentaries. The biographies focus precisely on those elements of the Kennedy brothers' lives that interest children.

Barbara Harrison lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Theo is her first novel.

Setting

Theo is set in Greece during the Second World War; the story begins in the capital city of Greece, Athens, and ends in a village situated north of Athens, Vasilaki. Although, the setting is faithfully described and presented, the use of the setting in Theo is distinctive and different from that of other novels set in and about Greece. The setting is used as a theatrical stage, as a backdrop to the action taking place. This is specifically described in the second chapter: "Mountains surround Athens, forming a natural amphitheater. The stage itself, the theater proper gives rise to six hills.... Each day the sun floods the promontories with light."

The setting enhances and illuminates the characters. It gives color and flavor to the story line and aids in the creation of atmosphere and mood. It complements the plot and transmits a flavor of the country in which the action takes place, without it taking center stage and thus allowing the reader to understand that the main themes of the novel (bravery, heroism and humanity) are universal and do not need a definite and static setting. The theatrical setting allows readers to displace themselves from the specific setting of Greece and apply the themes to their own chosen settings and times.

The use of the setting as a theatrical backdrop, however, does not mean that there are no authentic and realistic elements of the Greek setting within the text.

There exist a number of very accurate and distinct elements of the Greek environment and society within Theo, and naturally one of the most prominent is the presence of the puppet Karagiozis (the main puppet character of the "theater of the Greek people").

Pointers of historical authenticity also include the characteristic names that the Greeks called the Germans and the Italians during the war ("Krauts" and "Macaroni eaters" respectively), accurate accounts of specific occurrences such as the lowering of the Nazi flag at the Acropolis by university students, political and historical commentary, songs of the revolution, traditional practices ranging from healing methods with herbs to the burial preparation and ritual for the dead.

The Greek countryside is portrayed faithfully along with its maquis and tangled scrub oak-covered hills and mountains, the scorching sun in the summer sky described as "a white-faced hornet," the village of Vasilaki described as "a whitecap of sea at the crest of a wave" with its whitewashed houses and their orange-tiled roofs.

The setting also includes the concept of the diachronic countryside and society.

Things have not changed over the years, and people, customs and countryside are still the same as they were then. Things never change, and life carries on even after death. The bees do not stop buzzing, and the spider does not stop making its web.

Life goes on, and things never change. There will always be wars and cruel people, and there shall always be heroes. "The past was alive in the present, the gods of Homer and



Hesiod, the god of Moses and the New Testament apostles. Old gods and new flourished side by side with the living."

Superstitions and customs distinct to the Greek environment are also prominent in the novel. These include the evil eye, Saint Zacharias's healing bones, the ritual of death in which the body is laid in the grave with his feet towards Olympus "appropriate for a hero," and the belief that a proper burial is necessary if a victim is to find peace in the other world. If this is not done, then the living are haunted by the dead and neither shall ever find peace. What one witnesses here, however, is also the integration of the pagan ancient Greek practices with the Christian Orthodox religion. An example of this is the religious funeral with ancient pagan customs, i.e. coin to be given for the ferry across the River Styx. Furthermore, there are undeniable links between ancient and modern Greece; for example the connections between the ancient gods, religion, the revolution, and even the radio, all make up what we know to be Greece. Finally, an integration of the problems of the historical period, without there being long descriptions of the events also aid in bringing about a realistic atmosphere and image of the time.

Harrison's use of setting is thus an exquisite technique in reaching the true essence of the novel.

Social Sensitivity

There are three main themes which may be of interest in terms of social sensitivity and which are very well portrayed and discussed in Theo. These include the theme of child orphans, the survival and understanding of death both in general and in terms of the loss of family members or close friends, and the understanding and support between differing cultures and religious groups.

Theo can be used very effectively within the context of the depiction of an orphan.

Young Theo is a realistic orphan who not only has lost his parents—his mother at childbirth and his father in the war—but also his brother. The way in which his attempt and ultimate success in survival is portrayed is useful in giving positive messages in regard to orphans. A young boy who has gone through the worst possible situations is shown to survive and combat his loneliness. His search for strength in his loneliness is ultimately realistically and practically achieved.

In conjunction to the first theme, the second regarding the understanding of death in general is further realistically portrayed.

It is often difficult to find a young adult novel which can realistically portray the horror of death without delving into details of gore solely for the pleasure of describing it. Death can often be found in many different young adult novels; however Theo manages to portray death as a brutal reality that is part of life whether in war or in a normal life context. The dead body of young Theo's brother Socrates is taken to another level as Kyria Maria washes it and looks nonchalantly out of the window at the spider spinning its web. Life goes on whether we like it or not, and although it takes time to heal our sorrow and grief, we must be strong and continue in order to survive. Death, whether fair or not, can occur at any age and in any context and we cannot escape it when it calls.

Finally, Theo is a literary asset which can be used in order to bridge racial and religious differences. It promotes understanding of and support between differing cultures and religious groups. This is portrayed not only through the method of aid entitled "Operation Elijah" which existed during the Nazi Occupation in Greece as a partisan effort to assist Jewish families fleeing Athens, but also through the cooperation that developed between Christian, Gypsy and Jewish people. The novel includes a plethora of multicultural elements, and there is a generous mixture of all classes and ethnic/religious groups (Gypsies, Jews, Orthodox, poor and rich). The collaboration that exists in times of strife in order to survive is successfully depicted and discussion of the continuation of such support and collaboration stems from a reading of the novel.



Literary Qualities

In this first novel, Harrison shows strength in storytelling. She dramatizes brutality with restraint and convincingly depicts Theo as an innocent child scarred but not corrupted by the evil around him. The lesson Theo learns, according to critic Roger Leslie—heroism is "about good, about regret, even sadness at what one may be forced to do"—is conveyed with poignancy and conviction. Harrison plays with literary techniques and styles and entwines them within her novel in such an ingenious manner, that even if the plot does not have the qualities that a reader would like, the narrative and literary techniques themselves shall keep the reader enraptured.

Theo begins with a poem. The poem, which tells of the creation of Greece by God, is the first hint of Harrison's foreshadowing technique. Through this poem, the reader is prepared for the hardiness, stubbornness and strength not so much of the terrain and environment of Greece, but of the Greek people and subsequently the heroes of the novel.

Foreshadowing and the creation of a sense of foreboding are two of the texts strongest points. In the case of foreshadowing, there are so many little hints throughout the text preparing the reader for what is to come, that when the action does occur, the reader is aware of what was about to happen the second before it did. The night before Socrates's death, the reader is made aware of the fact that "in the dark, dark circles of the underworld, helmeted faints clambered upward within reach of Theo and Soc Alexandros," and then, just as Socrates is executed, "the votive light extinguished." The descriptions are eerie warnings of the ill fate to come.

The main elements of Harrison's literary style which distinguish Theo from many novels of young adult literature and attract the reader's attention are the cinematic images, the use of the theatrical setting and the dramatic twists and turns of the plot. Together, and along with the aromas and unique depictions of countryside, they work to create the distinct dramatic literary makeup of Theo. The plot progresses just as it would in a play with its climaxes and anticlimaxes, twists and turns, and this is further supported by the introduction, the mention of curtains being pulled back to portray the theatre proper setting of the plot whose promontories are flooded daily by the sunlight. Theo too has been described as an actor and having the uncanny ability to place himself in other people's shoes. This dramatic literary portrayal is further supported by poetic writing, metaphors and similes, all being used to create the theatrical mood of the novel. The story line is fast paced and filled, almost crammed, with detail perhaps confusing to the reader due to the speed; however one gets caught up in scenes and can almost imagine them backed up by music. Violent, yet realistic scenes within the book are also necessary in the creation of realism and in portraying the horrors of war in addition to bringing specific themes clearer into the mind of the reader. An example of the latter could be the "scarecrow corpse" which is necessarily described in order to bring the smell of death and horror of war closer to the reader.

These scenes are also illustrated in a cinematic literary manner.



A further literary style which is greatly implemented in Theo is that of the language which tickles all five senses; smells, sounds, flavors, colors and images of the time all help in magically conjuring the unique atmosphere of the novel. An exquisite example of this language is in the description of the aroma emanating from "nicks in the orange by the Juggler's nails."

In terms of the language being used, Greek words are scattered throughout the text in order to aid in the creation of the atmosphere of the authentic setting. A glossary of Greek terms used has been included at the end of the novel in order to assure complete understanding of the words and the context in which they are used.

The method of narrative used through the portrayal of Socrates's unsent letters to "Barba" in America is very interesting.

Through this method, one is able to understand and look more deeply into Socrates's character even beyond the grave. Other narrative methods which are distinctive to Theo are those which portray the young protagonist's storytelling both with and without the puppet. Theo's discussions with Karagiozis are also exceptionally insightful in terms of the young boy's character.

Finally, when concluding Theo, there are three appendixes, one describing the Karagiozis and explaining what he is exactly and what his role was in Greek culture and society, another containing a glossary of Greek words used in the novel and the third containing songs that are sung by the two brothers, which were characteristically sung during all historical periods when resistance movements were necessary in order for the Greek people to be liberated from an oppressor or enemy, i.e. Turkish army, Nazi army, perhaps even the Colonels of the Dictatorship. These appendixes confirm once again, the authentic elements, which are embedded within the novel.



Themes and Characters

Theo is a novel about bravery, about heroism, and about survival. From the outset of the novel, Theo is plagued and obsessed by the concept of the hero and what it means to be one. He wants to find a definition for the hero so that he can apply it to himself. His dream is to become a hero like his older brother and the heroes of history and antiquity whose heroic deeds he acts out in the form of puppet theatre.

Theo is determined to become brave in his brother's eyes. The young boy keeps asking questions about heroism and wants to find out everything possible about this word and its connotations. When his brother is killed, he asks himself if this is what death means, if this is a hero's fate, if all heroes must die in order for them to be proclaimed as such. He asks himself if there is a cost to courage and whether it is worth all the pain that is caused because of one's brave actions. Once Theo begins to come to terms with the concept of heroism and to understand what heroes do, he becomes apprehensive due to the fear that he feels. How can one be brave and courageous when one fears death and its consequences? The young boy uses his shadow puppet, Karagiozis, the fearless character of Greek shadow theatre, and reflects his thoughts and his apprehensions through discussions with it. He finally finds that bravery and fear are linked to each other and that some of the most heroic and brave people fear as well. Patir Alex tells him that: "It is possible to know fear and bravery at the same time."

The oral tradition is adapted effectively in Theo as not only does Karagiozis aid the young boy to understand his fears and anxieties regarding his obsession with heroism, but Theo also learns about the bond between fear and heroism through the folk story of "Yiannakis the Fearless" that he learns from Andonis the Gypsy. In discussing his anxieties with the shadow puppet, he learns that even the greatest heroes are afraid: "A hero avenges the death of his loved ones. A hero destroys trains and disrupts communications. A hero is fearless— only sometimes I've seen heroes piss in their pants with fear."

Young Theo goes through many psychological stages in his search for heroism, and these range from anger, terror, despair and the desire for revenge, to believing that the skillful use of a gun would be the summit of bravery, developing a feeling of pure disgust in the sport where he sees absolutely no beauty and only cruelty in being a hero, to finally realizing that humanity is one of the greatest virtues of a true hero.

Theo also reflects on the theme of death.

Graphic scenes of corpses, brutal images of murder and cruel visualizations of beloved characters being massacred are carried throughout the novel. The conclusion one draws, however, from these scenes is that death may come, but life continues for it is an ongoing process that never stands still.

Perhaps, after having witnessed multiple scenes of unmerited deaths and violence, one can draw a connection between this Theo 445 theme and heroism and thus state that



the ultimate act of heroism is that of humane survival through the worst of possible times.

Mythology and religion, past and present, are intertwined. "At these sanctuaries, some people make the sign of the cross because of devout religious conviction. Others make it to ward off evil spirits lurking at crossroads and in fields. Still others make the sign of the cross as a reminder that to bow down before the gods—to humble oneself before them—is wiser than to imagine oneself a god."

A further theme that is mentioned in passing and yet is very important not only to the setting but also to the authentic nature of the novel is that of the "American Dream." The dream of escape to the United States, to "Barba" (Uncle) Aristoteles Alexandros at 41-46 47th Avenue, Sunnyside Queens, Long Island, New York, is brought up not only in the beginning of the novel but also further along after the death of Socrates, when young Theo finds the unsent letters written by his late brother to their uncle. The dream of America is significant not only because the peak of immigration from Greece to the United States was between the 1920s and the end of the 1940s, but also because it showed that America was the unattainable dream that Theo's "heroic" brother had for escape. Socrates was as human as he was brave, he would most probably have preferred to have gone to the United States and learned the art of medicine, than have sabotaged olive oil containers in the savage mountains of Greece.

Harrison's characters in Theo are dramatic, and their actions are theatrically directed, as though they were actors in a perfectly supervised play. Theo himself reveals that he has "an uncanny ability in placing himself in someone else's shoes."

He is like an actor, able to displace his feelings, and this is clear in the manner in which he reflects his feelings through Karagiozis. Theo becomes brave when he becomes Karagiozis and is able to express his innermost thoughts, feelings and wishes through the puppet. An example of the puppet voicing the young boy's sentiments is when it is stated that: "Even though Theo said them, these were really Karagiozis's words. But of course, Theo could not deny that he was the one who said them." Young Theo's character develops in stages through the novel, and although at the outset of the novel the boy is very innocent and almost childish, the brutal events that he lives through influence him in the most positive way, making him strong, brave, humane and a real survivor. Theo is a perfectly rounded character, and this is obvious not only in the manner in which he finally proves himself, but also through his weaknesses. Perhaps, he may never have survived if he had not had Karagiozis as his voice, his family and his hero; however it is Karagiozis and his masterful theatrical skill that encouraged Theo's bravery and helped him towards the development of his character. Perhaps in any psychoanalytical theory, schizophrenia would be the first term to come to mind to describe this young boy's attitude towards Karagiozis. However the puppet would more certainly be a customary reflection of a young boy's consciousness, Theo's inner self trying to break out and make itself known: "Prove your fiber, your pluck, your fortitude. Become a hero, idiot.... Are you brave or a quivering excuse for bravery?" It is common for children to talk to their dolls and toys and thus discover their innermost feelings through conversations with them. A further link between Karagiozis and Theo is the



similarity between the boy's and the puppet's features. Theo is described as "out-of-proportion" just like his puppet. Theo and Karagiozis are one and the same, the first a young boy trying to come to terms with the harsh reality around him, the second a hero of the Greek folk oral and dramatic tradition, both having been shaped by circumstance and time.

Patir Alexis and his wife, the two wise resistance fighters living in the village of Vasilaki, where the two brothers head upon their escape from Athens, are two very interesting characters in Theo. They are both traditional and untraditional characters.

They take on the role of parent figures for young Theo, teaching him about life and its secrets. Although a priest's wife, Kyria Maria combines pagan rituals with those of religion in addition to being the vibrant and forceful radio operator. She is ultimately saved by Theo, when the Nazis come to Vasilaki to kill the villagers as a form of revenge for the murder of their own soldiers. Patir Alex, on the other hand, teaches the young boy the art and craft of a true resistance fighter. He teaches him about humanity and religion and ultimately pronounces him a hero when Theo refuses to kill a German prisoner of war. Both characters are dynamic and independent and are complete in the manner in which they are portrayed. They are important in guiding and molding the young Theo into the humanitarian hero he becomes at the end of the novel.

Socrates, Zoe, Plato, Achilles, Rabbi Elias and his son David, Andonis the Gypsy leader, Papageno the town fool: these characters surround Theo. They influence him and create the environment and atmosphere in which he develops and finally becomes a hero. With the exception of Socrates, the characters surrounding Theo complement the plot by bringing in other strands of life as it was during the Nazi occupation. The stories that surround the characters like Andonis and Rabbi Elias are important in completing the image of racial persecution as well as informing Theo of other elements that aid in the development of his character, (such as the story of "Yiannakis the Fearless") and giving him a rounded knowlBook jacket illustration by David Wisniewski for Theo by Barbara Harrison.

edge of life around him. An example of the latter is the fact that Theo is aware of Judaism and some of the elements of this other religion. Furthermore, bricks are added to the wall of heroism inside of Theo as he accompanies the Jewish father and son on their way to find Andonis. Theo also is given the chance to help a loved one, even though it cannot be Socrates, to attain the American Dream. The three orphans, Zoe, Plato and Achilles are important in terms of comparison. The reader becomes aware that although Theo is an orphan as well, he has grown beyond the fear and innocence that still holds onto the three young children.

The orphans are almost used as a means for Theo to finally understand that he is no longer a poor defenseless orphan, but a Theo 447 young man who can protect and bring safety to others at last, just as his brother had done in the past for him. Finally,



Socrates is without a doubt the cornerstone of Theo's character. He is the reason for the young boy's obsession with bravery and heroism.

Socrates is not what one would call a completely rounded character, for one does not get the chance to get to know him well enough. However, he is neither a flat character. One could call him a "curved" character for one respects Socrates for his deeds and is aware of more than one could know about the aforementioned characters. One is given the chance to get to know his spirit and his feelings through the letters that he had written to "Barba" in the United States, and one is made aware of the fact that although he is made out to be a fearless freedom fighter, he was only a young man trying to survive as best he could.

Finally, other quaint yet unique characters include the "thickly pomaded" President of the Village, and without a doubt, Papageno, the town fool. Papageno's adoration for Mozart and the descriptions of him singing arias down the village pathways and carrying the "alleged" skull of Mozart with him are images which remain with the reader. What, however, could the importance of this character be? And what does he symbolize? It is peculiar for such intertextual elements as opera to be used in a book about Greece. Could the use of Papageno perhaps be for international intertextuality or is he simply a caricature literally necessary for comic relief?

The characters in Theo may be caricatures and actors; however they are rounded, and they are not included in the novel without a specific role or purpose. Each one may be found in the novel for a certain reason. Theo may be the protagonist of this book, yet each and every other character is the protagonist of a specific reason of being; he could be a protagonist in the theme of multiculturalism, or a protagonist in strength and independence. Each character has a role, and it is these roles coupled to a specific theme, which make up the strands of the woven cloth entitled Theo.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the role of the puppet, Karagiozis, in the novel and how does it help Theo overcome his fears and anxieties?

2. Discuss the use of tradition and rituals in Theo. Which Greek traditions impress themselves most upon the readers?

3. Characterize Patir Alex and Kyria Maria.

Consider their relationship as well as their actions of resistance against the Nazis.

4. "It is possible to know fear and bravery at the same time." Discuss.

5. Discuss heroism as it is portrayed within Theo. Is its definition accurate in the novel?

6. Discuss the importance of theatre in Theo. Consider the setting as well as Papageno and Karagiozis.

7. Hope, humanity and survival are the main themes of Theo. Discuss how these themes emerge from the novel even though they are constantly surrounded and submerged by the worst circumstances: death, war, and betrayal.

8. What is Papageno's role in Theo? Why include a "silly" character such as Papageno in the plot? What is his usefulness within the novel as a whole?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Theo has always been in search of heroism. Does Theo become a hero or was he always one?

2. In Theo, "Operation Elijah" reminds us of the method of the "Underground Railroad" which has been used throughout history in times of war as a means of escape and search for freedom.

Describe a time when the "Underground Railroad" was used and how it was similar and/or different to "Operation Elijah."

3. How is olive oil made? And once it has been made, where and how can olive oil be used?

4. In Theo as in Greek society, shadow puppet theatre and the favorite hero Karagiozis was shown extensively. Find out about another one or two such puppet theatres and describe them and their main characters. Finally, see if you can find any similarities between them plotwise, character-wise, etc. A hint is that Punch and Judy in the United Kingdom was very similar to Karagiozis in Greece not so much in terms of plot, as in terms of the context in which it was used and the hidden messages it transmitted.

5. In Mozart's opera, "The Magic Flute," what was the story about and who was Papageno?

6: Immigration to the United States from Greece during the early 1900s was at a peak. Many immigrants became successful and very important pillars of American society. Find and discuss a famous person in today's society who came to the United States as an immigrant or is a descendant of immigrants.

For Further Reference

Leslie, Roger. Review of Theo. Booklist (January 1, 2000): 902. Complimentary review approving Harrison's first novel though mistakenly characterizing the work as "a worthy addition to the many accounts of Jewish suffering during World War II."

Schliesman, Megan. Review of Theo. Horn Book Magazine (November-December 1999): 740. A carefully considered book review commending the author's first novel and her brilliant literary style.

Related Titles

Theo is a culturally well-researched novel, and this fits very well into Harrison's corpus of interest as the previous books that she has written all belong to the non-fiction genre. Her research into the Kennedy brothers' lives has prepared her considerably for the task that she has undertaken with Theo.

From what one reads in her acknowledgments at the beginning of the novel, Harrison has relied strongly on memories of real people who lived during the occupation, authentic accounts and facts found in Greek archives as well as factual books related to themes that have interested her, all for use in the fictional context of Theo. Many similarities can also be found between this novel and Alki Zei's *Petros' War*.

Both young boys are innocent at the start of the novels, and both have matured at the end. Both boys have painted slogans on walls as actions of resistance, both have realized that their part in the war for liberation has not been adequate and that they have to do more. In particular, both young boys dream of heroism and becoming heroes themselves. Both boys are so different within the larger context, yet so uncannily similar at the same time, that one can acknowledge the fact that Barbara Harrison has created a truly authentic novel, for she has managed to portray events and themes relevant to the setting just as if they were related by a native speaker who had first hand knowledge of the situation, the atmosphere and the feelings which grew within children and adults living during that time.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996