

The Vandemark Mummy Short Guide

The Vandemark Mummy by Cynthia Voigt

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Overview

Althea and Phineas Hall have just moved to a small town in Maine to live with their father, who will be teaching at the local college. But their mother is living in Oregon, pursuing her own career. Although not officially separated, both parents and children are uncertain about their future relationships. While struggling with the dilemma of a two-career family and trying to adjust to new surroundings, Althea and Phineas become involved in a series of mysterious events when their father is named as curator of an Egyptian collection, donated to the college by a wealthy benefactor, Felix K. C. Vandemark II. The collection of relics, which includes the mummy of a young girl, appears to be of little real value.

However, Althea is intelligent and studious, and, when she observes marks on the wrappings of the mummy's feet, she recognizes them as letters from the Greek alphabet. But Dr. Ken Simard, a professor of history, assures her that she is mistaken.

The fact that Mr. Hall, the newest instructor, has been named curator of this collection seems to please no one.

The librarian, Mrs. Batchelor, is particularly angry because the collection is housed in the basement of the library rather than the museum where her husband is curator. Mrs. Prynne, a member of the college's board of governors, is certain that Mr. Hall is not qualified for the job. The Vandemark family is annoyed that the collection was left to the college instead of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. However, a local reporter named O'Meara is quite interested in the collection since she is a recent graduate of Vandemark College.

When someone tries to steal the mummy, Althea and Phineas suspect everyone who has shown an interest in the Vandemark legacy; and when the mummy is actually removed from the collection, Althea begins to unravel the mystery. But when she is abducted, it is her younger brother Phineas who comes to her rescue and brings her safely back to their father. Throughout the novel, Voigt pokes quiet fun at academic politics and raises serious questions about a woman's role in relation to career and family.

About the Author

Cynthia Voigt grew up in New England where she attended Dana Hall School and Smith College in Massachusetts. Although she always wanted to be a writer, out of necessity she became a teacher and discovered that she loved teaching English and classics. However, Voigt continued writing despite the fact that her manuscripts were regularly rejected. Then, when she was thirty-seven years old, her first book was published. *Homecoming* was the first in a series of seven books about the Tillerman family. It was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association and was nominated for the American Book Award.

Later writings have been enjoyed by young people and praised by critics.

Voigt has received the Newbery Medal and the Edgar Allan Poe Award, and her books have been named as Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Books. In 1989 she received the ALAN Award from the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English for her significant contribution to adolescent literature. Dorothy Kaufman summarizes the praise which both critics and readers have bestowed upon Voigt: "Cynthia's characters are clearly drawn; her writing is sophisticated and volatile; her word choice is precise: her ability to establish intense emotional levels is keenly developed".

Voigt has lived in Pennsylvania and Maryland, the settings for many of her novels. However, she now resides in Maine with her husband, Walter, son, Peter, and daughter, Jessica.

Setting

Vandemark College is located on the outskirts of the town of Portland, Maine. During the summer before classes begin, the small campus seems especially quiet and deserted. Phineas and Althea spend their time reading, cycling, and walking into town for ice cream. The only diversion Mr. Hall can offer is the chance to watch people fly kites over the weekend. However, when they enter the basement room which houses the Egyptian mummy, they seem to enter another world; there is a sense of awe, a sense of being bound to ancient times, which they all feel in the presence of the mummy. But this is a contemporary novel, and reality soon intrudes in the form of a break-in, a robbery, and an attempted murder.

Social Sensitivity

As a contemporary novel, *The Vandetnark Mummy* incorporates problems and concerns which are a part of the lives of many of her readers. The Halls have separated, and there is the possibility of a divorce. The children discuss it, and the father wonders about the effect upon them. Both Mrs. Hall and Ken Simard's wife are more successful than their husbands. Althea is not sure how this problem could be fairly resolved. When Althea is missing, the possibility of rape is raised by the police but quickly dismissed by Althea when she is rescued. And finally, there is not just an abduction but an attempted murder; Althea would surely have died if Phineas had not found her so quickly. However, these issues are not sensationalized; they are incorporated naturally as the plot develops.



Literary Qualities

The classic detective story follows a traditional pattern. First, a crime is committed by an unknown person or persons. The detective solves the crime by logic, by analyzing and interpreting the evidence. Readers learn of the evidence or clues at the same time as the detective so that they may test their own logic and powers of deduction.

Voigt takes this traditional structure and gives it some unusual twists. There are actually two crimes which are intertwined. The first is the case of the missing and mutilated mummy which Althea solves. The second is the case of Althea's abduction which Phineas solves. The first case, the missing mummy, follows the traditional detective story pattern more closely than the second although it too has some variations.

The first clue is presented before the crime is committed: Althea notes the Greek letters on the feet of the mummy, but Ken Simard denies her interpretation. Later, the crime is committed. First there is an attempt to break into the room which houses the Egyptian collection, then the mummy is actually stolen, and finally it is found, but with a slashed throat and smashed feet. After the mummy is returned and while it is being examined, Phineas notes Althea staring intensely at the mummy's feet. She asks one question, "Why the feet?" and then abruptly leaves the room. Later when Phineas and her father are looking for her, they find that her bedroom is empty with only one light left shining on the papers on her desk. However, the papers are covered with seemingly meaningless doodles: "So If Mom Asks Request Divorce" and "Kill Every Noodle," and Althea is missing.

There is now a new mystery to be solved. It is in solving this mystery that Voigt moves away from the structure of the traditional detective story. During the night, Phineas awakens suddenly, knowing where Althea is. But the reader is given no clues as to where she is or how he knows.

However, Phineas goes directly to the basement of the library and tries all the locked doors until he finally finds Althea, bound and gagged. Before she can tell him Phineas announces, "It was Ken." The mystery is therefore solved by Phineas even though neither he nor the readers had any clues.

The solution to the first mystery, however, is based on logical deductions which Althea explains after she is rescued. First, she was puzzled by the fact that the mummy's feet had been smashed. Then she remembered the letters which had been printed there, the Greek letters which could be an undiscovered poem by Sappho since they spelled out the name of her daughter, Kleis. Before Althea left to confront Simard with her suspicions, she left a note in code, spelling out his name: "So If Mom Asks Request Divorce" and "Kill Every Noodle," but neither Mr. Hall nor Phineas can interpret her message. Simard, recognizing the importance of the few Greek letters and what the discovery will mean to his scholarly reputation, realizes he must get rid of Althea. After she is rescued by Phineas, Althea explains to her father and brother how she analyzed the evidence and decided that Ken Simard was guilty. Readers, of course, had the



same information, and even if they had not solved the mystery, they could look back at the story and see that all the evidence is there, leading to the logical conclusion.

The second mystery, however, which is solved by Phineas, is based, not on evidence, but on his extrasensory abilities which are introduced early in the story when he explains how he always knows the time even though he wears no watch.

Voigt's knowledge of classical literature allows her to develop a plausible motive—the chance that the Greek letters might be a missing poem by Sappho who is acknowledged as one of the great lyric poets of the ancient world.

However, much of her work was lost, and the discovery of a missing poem would certainly have brought the acclaim which Ken Simard desired.



Themes and Characters

Phineas Hall describes himself as "an ordinary twelve-year-old kid." Unlike his sister Althea, who spends all her free time studying the Greek language and history, Phineas prefers athletics, even though he admits he is "no jock."

Phineas believes he is not as smart as his sister, and he senses the bond between his father and Althea; they look alike, think alike, and have the same scholarly interests. When Phineas and Althea quarrel, it is usually over the anti-intellectual comments with which he enjoys baiting her. Phineas is more interested in the theory of the "mummy's curse" than in studying the markings on her feet. But Phineas has a sensitive side too. He observes his father carefully and feels bad if anyone ignores or slights him, and, in the end, it is Phineas who knows Althea best, who understands how her mind works, and who is finally able to rescue her.

Althea Hall is only fifteen years old, but, like her father, she has an interest in classical languages and already reads and translates ancient Greek.

However, her mother's influence is evident too; Althea is a feminist who believes a woman as well as a man has the right to pursue a career, but she worries about her parents and wonders if their marriage can survive while living and working on opposite sides of the continent. Althea is confident of her intellectual ability and refuses to be intimidated by Dr. Ken Simard when he dismisses her interpretation of the Greek letters on the wrappings of the mummy's feet. It is an interesting coincidence that the markings turn out to be a fragment of a poem by Sappho, the poet from ancient Greece whom Althea has been studying. However, by the end of the novel, Althea realizes that physical as well as intellectual strength is important for women. She learns this frightening lesson when she solves the mystery of the missing mummy but almost loses her life.

Sam Hall is a classical language scholar who has been teaching in a high school while his wife makes a much higher salary working for a congressman. When he has an opportunity to teach in his field at a small New England college, he accepts the job and concurs with his wife's decision that she remain in Oregon. Mr. Hall is not overly confident of his abilities, particularly as the curator of the Egyptian collection. It takes an outsider to tell Phineas and Althea that their father had a paper published in the *Classical Language Journal* and to assure him that he is qualified for the job. But, despite his concerns over his work, he is always a loving and understanding father who has taken on the role of single parent.

Dr. Ken Simard is a history professor at Vandemark, and because he is much interested in the Egyptian collection, he becomes involved in unpacking and displaying the items. Phineas and Althea soon grow tired of his pomposity and his accounts of the many papers he has published. But in the end, Althea begins to understand how Ken must feel, for, like her own father, he too is the husband of a very successful businesswoman.



Although the mystery of the mummy, its strange markings, and its sudden disappearance drive the plot, Voigt interjects contemporary issues through the conflicts and the concerns of her characters. What is a woman's role when she must choose between her family and her career? And what is a man's role when married to a successful woman? Ken Simard is driven by a 4207 desire to compete, while Sam Hall quietly strives to establish his own career apart from competition with his wife.

Although Mrs. Hall never appears in the plot, we learn about her through her family's comments, and we realize she is feeling left out and perhaps guilty that she is not in Maine with her husband and children. Althea is caught up in these dilemmas as she searches for her own identity through her drive to excel intellectually.

Voigt interjects subtle humor into the otherwise serious and suspenseful plot in the character of Ken Simard and the world of academic politics. Impressed by his own scholarly abilities and his publications, Simard has dreams of teaching at Harvard. He is determined to study in England during the summer even though he has no grant because "when nobodies at Nowhere University are writing your academic recommendations—you don't stand much of a chance, do you?" But in the end, he is no longer a humorous figure but a pathetic failure still claiming that he could do "first-class work in the right circumstances."



Topics for Discussion

1. Identify the clues that led Althea to decide that Ken was guilty. Does it seem plausible that a fifteen-year-old girl could do this?
2. Identify the evidence which led Phineas to rescue Althea. Is this sequence of events plausible? Explain.
3. The question of how Ken planned to account for his discovery of a Sappho poem is never explained. Are there other unanswered questions in the plot? Identify and suggest possible answers.
4. Two crimes are committed: (1) the mummy is stolen and mutilated, and (2) Althea is abducted. Identify similarities between these two crimes.
5. Phineas believes Althea is more intelligent than he is. Do you agree?

Why or why not?

6. Mr. Hall plays a passive role in the solution of the two crimes which are solved by his children. Is this plausible or is it a weakness in the plot?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read *The Cullender Papers*, another mystery by Voigt. Compare and contrast the two protagonists, Althea Hall and Jean Wainwright.

2. Read a classic detective story by Edgar Allan Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle. Analyze the protagonist's use of logic and deduction. Are there any similarities to *The Vandemark Mummy*?

3. Investigate the life and works of the Greek poet Sappho. Write a report which explains why Althea was so interested in her work.

4. The Halls' separation has not been resolved by the end of the novel. Write another chapter which brings some kind of resolution to their problem.

Base the resolution upon what you know about the characters.

5. View and analyze several detective shows or mysteries on television. Note the crime and the clues which are shared with the viewer. What generalizations can you offer and support concerning types of crimes and use of logic and deduction in solving them?

For Further Reference

Cooper, Ilene. Review. *Booklist* (September 1, 1991): 46. The mystery itself is handled well, but the subplot dealing with women's issues is weak.

Kaufman, Dorothy. "Profile: Cynthia Voigt." *Language Arts* 62 (1985): 876-880. Based on an interview with Voigt, Kaufman discusses the source of Voigt's characters and plots and the importance of writing in her life.

Review. *Publishers Weekly* (August 9, 1991): 58. Concludes that both the mystery and the family situation are poorly developed.

Voigt, Cynthia. "Cynthia Voigt." In *Speaking for Ourselves*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990: 217-218. Voigt emphasizes the normality of her life, noting that writing is the most exciting part.

Watson, Elizabeth. Review. *Horn Book* 67 (1991): 739-740. Watson states Voigt has written a good mystery and handles the family situation realistically.

Related Titles

The Vandemark Mummy is a departure from Voigt's other fiction in that the mystery is more important than social themes or well developed characters.

The thread between this novel and Voigt's others is Phineas's strength, courage, wit and wisdom. On a less serious note than in the other novel's, this young woman exhibits the same high-minded traits that make all Voigt's heroine's admirable role models.

Another ghost story in which a pair of unlikely sleuths pursue a mummy is Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death.

Adding an element of suspense to this comedy of manners about small town, USA, the ghost story links socially outcast Blossom Culp with handsome and wealthy Alexander Armsworth.

Together these two freshmen, blessed with psychic powers, must find the missing mummy of a 3,500-year-old Egyptian princess and return it to her tomb, or face an ancient curse.

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