The Weathermonger Short Guide

The Weathermonger by Peter Dickinson

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The Weathermonger is an unusual adventure tale that depicts young people, who through no fault of their own find themselves confronting a society that has been poisoned by ignorance, intolerance, superstition, and sanctioned violence. These worsening social conditions stem from the Changes, a sudden, unexplained shift in the psychological and social attitudes of the majority of the country's population. The young people in this novel have not been fully susceptible to the Changes, and as they become aware of its dangers, they feel compassion for its victims and struggle to transform society. Their actions lead them into great personal danger, to which they respond with courage and ingenuity. They are able, finally, to counteract the Changes in a way that benefits specific victims and society as a whole.

Read alone or as part of the Changes trilogy, The Weathermonger poses questions about societal attitudes and the kinds of behavior a society chooses to sanction. It demonstrates what can happen when a society becomes permeated with intolerance and bigotry.

About the Author

British novelist Peter Dickinson was born December 16, 1927, in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, which was then an African territory of Britain and is now the independent nation of Zambia. At the age of seven Dickinson moved with his family to the West Country of England, where he began his formal education at an English boarding school. Dickinson specialized in Latin and Greek at Eton College from 1941 to 1946, served a brief term in the British army from 1946 to 1948, and then attended King's College, Cambridge University, where he took a degree in English literature in 1951. Dickinson worked as an editor and reviewer for the British magazine Punch until 1969, when he devoted himself full-time to his literary career.

In 1968 Dickinson published two novels—Skin Deep, an adult mystery, and his first novel for younger readers, an adventure tale entitled The Weathermonger, which was expanded in following years to become the Changes trilogy.

These first two novels are remarkably representative of Dickinson's writings of the next two decades, during which he published some fifteen novels for adults (mostly mysteries) and nearly an equal number of fictional works for young adults. Dickinson also wrote nonfiction, a few plays, and the scripts for a BBC television series (Mandog, 1972). His work has received several literary awards, including the Crime Writers Association Golden Dagger Award (1968, 1969), the Guardian Award (1977), the Boston Globe-Hom Book Award for nonfiction (1977), the Whitbread Award (1979), and the Library Association Carnegie Medal (1980, 1981)—the latter two for his young-adult novel Tulku.

As a whole, Dickinson's writings reveal his wide-ranging interests and a desire to address a variety of subjects. Both his adult novels and those for younger readers have diverse geographic and historical settings. Noteworthy among his adult fiction is the novel A Summer in the Twenties (1981), an historical novel that portrays its main character against the background of Britain's General Strike of 1926. Many of Dickinson's writings also reflect his interest in psychological and psychic phenomena, in particular his mystery novel Sleep and His Brother (1971) and his adventure stories, The Gift and Annerton Pit.

Dickinson's first three books for younger readers—The Weathermonger, Heartsease, and The Devil's Children— form a loosely-connected group called the Changes trilogy. Although these books present different sets of characters, each treats the social upheaval caused by a phenomenon known as the Changes, an event that spreads like a mental plague and plunges present-day England back into a preindustrial age.

Setting

The Weathermonger is set during the period of a few years in which presentday England is held in the grip of the Changes. The most pronounced effect of the Changes stems from the feelings of revulsion they generate in people toward power-driven machinery, feelings which result in society's return to a preindustrialized mode of living. But an even more significant aspect of the Changes is reflected in society's lapse into superstition, ignorance, and hatred of outsiders. Curiously, the Changes have not had the same effect on all of England's inhabitants, and those not succumbing to its effects flee into the countryside or escape across the English Channel to France.

Although The Weathermonger opens dramatically with Geoffrey and Sally near death in Weymouth harbor and narrates their subsequent escape across the English Channel to Brittany, most of the novel chronicles their trek across the southwest of England. Traveling in a 1909 Rolls Royce, by horseback, and by foot, they journey from Bournemouth on the Dorset coast to the Black Mountains of Wales, where they discover the underlying cause of the Changes.

Literary Qualities

Although Dickinson's novels concerning the Changes are often classified as works of science fiction or science fantasy, such labels are somewhat misleading. While there is an element of fantasy in them, they are realistic narratives, portraying events and achievements that are not wildly improbable. The root causes of the Changes—which stem from immense psychological powers of Merlin the magician, whose long slumbers have been accidentally disturbed— do seem farfetched, but they only provide the means, however implausible, for Dickinson to achieve his larger ends.

A fundamental literary feature of Dickinson's adventure novels is the motif of the journey. The journey, the quest, and the search—narrative features with an illustrious history—are central to the Changes novels as well as to some of Dickinson's later writings. In The Weathermonger Geof and Sally journey in search of the causes of the Changes.

Less prominent but still important is another narrative feature common to many of the world's most famous narratives, the heroic confrontation or epic battle.

In this novel, Dickinson's imaginative interests lie more with the plot and action than with characterization. Geoffrey and Sally are fairly interchangeable as characters and most of the adults are little more than stereotypes. But fine nuances in characterization are not essential to the plot of an exciting adventure story.

Sociai Sensitivity With their emphasis on tolerance and open-mindedness, Dickinson's Changes novels possess few elements of a controversial or sensitive nature. Although the subjects of race and religion are touched upon in a very general way, they are not treated in a fashion likely to offend many readers. And, while these novels do contain some violence, it is integral to the plot and is not portrayed in a graphic fashion. In fact by current standards it is somewhat tame. Dickinson places emphasis on the capabilities of young women, and in each of these books the young women are every bit the equal of the young men.

Themes and Characters

At the center of the novel is a pair of characters, Geoffrey and Sally, who are brother and sister. Each receives equal attention, and the narration is told strictly from a third-person omniscient point of view. Dickinson also introduces a number of intriguing secondary characters, such as Cyril Camperdown, the flamboyant con-man who uses Geof and Sally for his own selfish purposes. Lord Willoughby is a shadowy but extremely capable adversary in The Weathermonger, he masterminds the tracking of Geof and Sally and nearly succeeds in capturing them.

The most important theme in The Weathermonger concerns the nature of social groups and the kinds of pressures society may exert on the individuals within it. The novel explores what could happen if society were suddenly fragmented into small, relatively isolated pockets, completely closed off from the outside world and stripped of the civilizing influence of the larger culture. It shows, too, how society, by abandoning democratic processes, becomes an easy prey for a few strong-willed or strongarmed individuals. These underlying themes are first presented in The Weathermonger, but are more fully developed in the two subsequent novels.

A lesser theme running through the novel celebrates the contribution of machines to modern living standards.

Although country ways of life are portrayed as having attractions, there is very little idealization of rural life. For Dickinson life without machines is far less pleasant than life with them. While some writers deplore the industrialization of modern society and see it as a grave threat to our environment, Dickinson readily acknowledges the value of machines.

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the portrayal of adults in The Weathermonger. Are any adults portrayed favorably? Is it fair to say that the novel tends to provide a serious criticism or indictment of adults for mismanaging society?

2. Two of the most important characteristics of the young people in this novel are courage and ingenuity. Cite incidents where courage or ingenuity are displayed.

3. Using an atlas or other detailed maps of England and France, trace Geof and Sally's travels throughout The Weathermonger.

4. What do you know about the legendary Arthurian figure of Merlin? What particular aspect of the Merlin legend is especially relevant to The Weathermonger?

5. What has awakened Merlin from his long slumber? Why does he use his powers to destroy modern society rather than to improve it?

6. Imagine what life would be like if your society suddenly went through the Changes. Do you think you would succumb to the contagion or be somewhat immune like Geof and Sally? Would you try to escape to the wilderness or would you want to stay and help your friends and family?

7. Consider the titles of the three novels in the Changes trilogy. What does each refer to? Who is the Weathermonger? What are the literal meanings of Heartsease? What thematic implications does this phrase also have? Is there irony in the title The Devil's Children?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read the second book of the Changes trilogy. Geoffrey and Sally in The Weathermonger and Jonathan and Margaret in Heartsease are similar pairs of characters. In what particular ways are they alike? What talents and interests do Geof and Jonathan share? What talents and interests do Sally and Margaret share? Despite their similarities, can you think of ways in which these pairs of characters differ?

2. After reading the final volume of the trilogy, consider the various villains or antagonists in the three novels—such as Lord Willoughby in The Weathermonger, Mr. Gordon in Heartsease, and Arthur Barnard in The Devil's Children. What are the chief characteristics of these characters? Are they all simply evil characters, or can you draw important distinctions between them?

3. Look up information on the Sikhs.

What special religious beliefs distinguish this Indian sect? Besides religious beliefs, what other cultural traits distinguish this subgroup within the Indian culture?

4. Look up information on the Severn River estuary. Consider the significance for Heartsease of this river's tidal nature. Consider also the proximity of the river to the canal described in the novel, a canal which actually exists.

5. Write a story describing what your neighborhood would be like if it suddenly went through the Changes.

For Further Reference

Andrews, Sheryl B. Review of The Devil's Children. Horn Book 46 (December 1970): 616-617. In her synopsis and brief commentary on the third and final Changes novel, Andrews observes that Dickinson gives greater attention to details than in the first two novels.

Haviland, Virginia. Review of Heartsease. Horn Book 46 (April 1970): 159.

Haviland provides a synopsis of the second Changes novel and offers a brief critical commentary. She suggests that a central flaw in both The Weathermonger and Heartsease stems from the fact that "the philosophy behind the Changes and details of the retrogression of man are insufficiently treated."

Review in Children's Book World.

Chicago Tribune. November 8, 1970. A review of Dickinson's overall achievement in the Changes trilogy.

Related Titles

Dickinson followed The Weathermonger with Heartsease, and The Devil's Children. Heartease is set entirely in Gloucestershire, where two young cousins, Margaret and Jonathan, attempt to rescue an injured American sent into England to investigate the Changes.

Believing the American, like all outsiders, to be a "witch," the local citizens intend to use him in a sacrificial killing.

With assistance from Lucy and her brother Tim, Jonathan and Margaret effect a dramatic escape by tugboat down an abandoned manmade canal to the Severn River.

The Devil's Children portrays the initial phase of the Changes. The novel begins in London and describes how Nicola Gore, who has become separated from her family, is reluctantly taken on by a group of Indian Sikhs, who have not been affected by the social disorder. She travels with them as they search for a place in the English countryside where they can safely re-establish their own community. When they find what they are looking for on the outskirts of a small village (perhaps located in Sussex), they face a series of challenges from the villagers and others, which culminate in a climatic battle. The Devil's Children concludes with a total dissolution of culture into a new and better one that is free from prejudice.

Dickinson's other novels for young adults may be roughly classified according to their settings. Those with contemporary settings include Emma Tupper's Diary, which concerns a search for monsters in a Scottish loch; The Diary, which deals with the psychic powers of a boy who can see what others are thinking, enabling him to uncover a murder plot; Annerton Pit, in which a blind boy saves himself and others who have become lost in the darkness of an abandoned mine; and The Seventh Raven, which concerns a children's opera group held hostage by terrorists.

Perhaps more highly-regarded than his novels with contemporary settings are those with exotic historical settings.

The Dancing Bear is set in the sixth century and depicts the journey of a slave boy, his bear, and a holy man from Byzantium to Hunnish lands. The Blue Hawk has what seems to be an ancient Egyptian setting (although it could also be a futuristic setting) and concerns a boy-priest caught up in a society characterized by extreme political and religious rigidity. Tulku is set in China during the Boxer Rebellion (1900) and depicts its hero's escape to Tibet and his growing awareness of life's complexity.

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