

The Wheel on the School Short Guide

The Wheel on the School by Meindert DeJong

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Overview

The chief goal of *The Wheel on the School* is to illustrate how members of a community can work together and grow closer in the process of achieving a common goal. DeJong develops this theme in his tightly structured dramatic novel set in the Dutch village of Shora during the early twentieth century.

The routine business of Shora is interrupted after Una, the only girl in the village school, asks why there are no storks in Shora. Since storks bring good luck, the village ought to have some of the birds nesting on its roofs, but for some reason the storks do not come.

Lina's teacher encourages the class to ponder Lina's question, and before long the entire village—old people, parents, children, and even pre-schoolers—are involved in bringing storks and their good luck to the town.

About the Author

Born on March 4, 1906, in the village of Wierum (located in the province of Friesland on the north coast of the Netherlands), Meindert DeJong came to the United States with his family in 1914. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the DeJongs settled, Meindert attended Dutch Calvinist secondary schools and Calvin College. He later attended the University of Chicago but left without a degree. During the Great Depression, DeJong held many different jobs and began writing for children and young adults only at the suggestion of a local librarian. He published his first book, *The Big Goose and the Little White Duck*, in 1938.

After completing several more books, DeJong joined the U.S. Army Air Corps during the Second World War and served in China. Readjusting to civilian life after the war, he continued his writing career, and during the 1950s wrote a book a year. He spent several years in Mexico during the next decade and wrote six books during this period.

Returning to the United States, DeJong stayed for a period in Michigan before settling in North Carolina.

Many of DeJong's novels deal with a young person overcoming the difficulties of living in a world controlled by adults. The books often take place in a foreign land and often feature animals as important characters. *The House of Sixty Fathers*, which grew out of DeJong's World War II military experiences, is about a boy and his pet pig.

Journey from Peppermint Street and *The Wheel on the School* are set in Holland.

Maurice Sendak illustrated six of DeJong's books, including *The Wheel on the School*.

DeJong has received several prestigious awards for his writing. *The Wheel on the School* was awarded the 1955 Newbery Medal; *Journey from Peppermint Street* won the 1969 National Book Award; and *The House of Sixty Fathers* received the Children's Book Award of the Child Study Association and was named a Newbery Honor Book.

In 1962 DeJong won the International Hans Christian Andersen Award for his contributions to literature for young people.



Setting

DeJong establishes the setting in the opening lines of the novel. A fishing village on the North Sea protected by a dike, Shora is located in the province of Friesland. The village of Ternaard is located south of Shora, and the next village along the dike to the northeast is Nes. A canal road connects Shora to Hantum.

The novel's depiction of Dutch village life may at first appear out of step with the rushing modern world of rapid travel and instant communications. The story probably takes place around 1912, when DeJong himself could have been one of the pupils in the village school. At this time, before the two world wars, people in Shora dress as they have for centuries, wearing native costumes and wooden shoes. Almost no events from the world at large seem important in this small village, which depends on fishing for its livelihood. The sea and the sky provide topics of conversation that vary only with the weather.



Social Sensitivity

The children's goal of getting the wheel on their school becomes a project that includes the participation of the whole community—the aged, the disabled, the toddlers, and the middle-aged parents.

The project provides everyone with a chance to do something important for the village and for themselves. If the children, with help from all the others, are able to achieve their goal, they can take pride in something they started.

Teamwork is all-important, and the villagers have a collective sense that they are doing something for the common good. Even if storks are supposed to bring good fortune, it is not luck that unites the village, but rather the effort with which everyone—from legless Janus and ninety-three-year-old Douwa to the tots in the tower—contributes to the cause. The villagers are rewarded when they learn to tolerate one another's differences and to value and respect the contributions that each individual is able to make. DeJong stresses the importance of tolerance and cooperation, and *The Wheel on the School* teaches its readers a positive lesson as a result.

Literary Qualities

DeJong creates suspense by giving the children a goal that may appear unattainable. What seems a trivial matter at first becomes an all-consuming passion for them and for the rest of the village.

Suspense is heightened further when DeJong shifts the action in times of crisis. For example, while Lina and Douwa wait to be rescued, the narrative suddenly jumps to the legless Janus, the teacher, and the boys who are trying to fish a wheel rim out of a canal.

Similarly, the raging storm described near the book's end continues unabated for five days, forcing the village to wait to find storks.

The focal object of the story is, of course, the wheel, which begins to symbolize the effort that goes into finding it.

All the children and some of the adults work as spokes that will support a hub—or central "dream"—around which they turn. This one dream seizes the imagination of the villagers and leads all of them to work together. The concept of the wheel also encircles the community, bringing the village inside its circumference. Perhaps it is this clearly developed symbol of a simple idea that makes *The Wheel on the School* so believable.

The novel's omniscient narrator concentrates on the children, telling what each one thinks. Because the narrator never provides similar insights into the adults' thoughts, the tale belongs to the children. The children's language includes American colloquialisms, making it easier for American readers to identify with the children of Shora.

Maurice Sendak's illustrations in *The Wheel on the School* give readers a clearer understanding of Dutch costume and dress. Ultimately, the book teaches a great deal about early twentieth-century Dutch culture through the subtle integration of text with illustration, but the plot itself is always more important than the details conveyed in either the pictures or the text.

One interesting point is that there are no full-page pictures; therefore, all of the drawings are in close proximity to the parts of the text they illustrate. The drawings underscore the text rather than extend or overwhelm what DeJong has written.



Themes and Characters

The story begins and ends in the village school, but there is an important difference in the setting at the conclusion of the story: a wheel rests on the school for storks to nest in, and two waterlogged storks have been rescued to tenant the straw atop the wheel. DeJong explains how the children, their parents, and the old people of the village manage this feat, emphasizing what happens to a community when its members take joy in working together to achieve a common goal. Focusing on the children's points of view as well as their initiative, DeJong is primarily interested in the role that children can play as a force for action in the world, even this small world of the village.

On the Friday afternoon in spring that Lina reads her composition about storks, the students get immediate assistance from their teacher, but not in the form of action. He challenges their existing knowledge, asking them what they know about storks, and then asks them to exercise their curiosity: "Will you wonder why storks don't come to Shora to build their nests on the roofs, the way they do in all the villages around? For sometimes when we wonder, we can make things begin to happen." Grandmother Sibble III further fires Lina's imagination by telling her that when she herself was a child, storks nested in the village.

The next day, Lina and five boys undertake searches for a wheel. Jella is the biggest of the boys and husky for his age; Eelka is mentally swift, but physically slow and clumsy; Auka is "a nice, everyday boy"; and Pier and Dirk are twins who enjoy each other's company.

A chapter is devoted to each individual search, ending with that of Lina, who finds a wheel in a most unlikely place with the help of the hearty village patriarch, Douwa.

Hunting for a wheel involves others, and the children's searches begin to connect people: Pier and Dirk encounter the legless Janus, who the children think is the meanest man in the village until he becomes a friend and helper.

Eelka pulls the drowning Jella out of a canal. Auka meets a seller of pots and pans, the Tin Man, on the way to Nes.

Through some clever maneuvering, Auka helps the Tin Man get a wheel for his wagon. In gratitude the Tin Man gives Auka a wagon ride back to Shora, where he and many other villagers work together to help Lina salvage a wheel for the school.

Putting the wheel on the school unites the community of Shora. Even people who seem to be outsiders, such as Janus and Douwa, are brought into the group. Friendships develop, especially between the young and their elders: characters give up prejudices about others, and together they overcome obstacles. Since no one seems to know exactly how to raise the wheel to the top of the school, the villagers learn through experience and achieve their goal through perseverance.



Two processes are central to the story—teaching and learning. After Lina reads her paper, the class starts on a quest for information, which turns into a quest for a wheel. Since none of the children has been involved in such a search before, the process of finding a wheel becomes an adventure. The book also shows that people can gather information from unexpected sources.

Adults whom the children previously ignored suddenly seem important. For instance, Lina realizes that Grandmother Sibble III knows a great deal and is willing to share her knowledge. The old woman suggests that Lina must think like a stork, explaining that it is necessary to put oneself in the situation of others. The children learn that questions are important, even if they do not yield instant answers, and that dreams and wishes have value, too, but must be supported by actions. The villagers must find a wheel before they can hope for storks, and the teacher encourages the students to "look for a wagon wheel where one is and where one isn't; where one could be and where one couldn't possibly be." Instead of training the children to learn by rote or by example, the teacher encourages independent thought, curiosity, and creativity.



Topics for Discussion

1. Janus is thought of as the meanest man in the village, at least until the children get to know him. What general and specific ideas emerge from DeJong's treatment of Janus's character?
2. The teacher is an important person who helps transform the children's thoughts into action. Why do you suppose that DeJong never gives the teacher a name?
3. How do the children encourage adults to become interested in their project?
4. How important is the setting to the events of the novel? Could the story be elsewhere?
5. What have you learned from *The Wheel on the School* about the Dutch countryside and village life in the early twentieth century?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. One scientific method for solving problems is as follows: 1) select an area for research, 2) define the problem, 3) gather data, 4) organize and test data, 5) formulate a hypothesis, 6) test the hypothesis, and 7) accept or reject the hypothesis. Although this specific method may not have been the model the teacher had in mind, this process seems applicable to the way the children discover the solution in the book. Show how the villagers use each step in this process to bring storks to Shora.
2. Consult some nonfiction books about storks. How would an ornithologist—a scientist who studies birds—view the events in *The Wheel on the School*? How accurate is the information about storks? Consider, too, the superstition that storks bring luck.
3. The story begins on a Friday and concludes the following Friday. Explain what happens on each day and discuss the novel's structure.
4. Water plays an important part in the action of the novel. Why does DeJong use this one element so frequently? Are the repeated rescues at sea the only pattern DeJong creates from the everpresent water?
5. Trace how Lina, Jella, Eelka, Auka, Pier, and Dirk each contribute to the process of getting the wheel on the school.

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