

Where Are the Children? Short Guide

Where Are the Children? by Mary Higgins Clark

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| Where Are the Children? Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Characters..... | 3 |
| Social Concerns..... | 6 |
| Techniques..... | 8 |
| Themes..... | 9 |
| Adaptations..... | 10 |
| Key Questions..... | 11 |
| Literary Precedents..... | 13 |
| Related Titles..... | 15 |
| Copyright Information..... | 16 |



Characters

The central character of Mary Higgins Clark's first thriller is the heroine Nancy Eldredge, who lives on Cape Cod with her husband, Raynor (Ray), and their children, Mike and Missy. Nancy was born to David and Priscilla Kiernan. Her father was an airline pilot who died of pneumonia when she was a little girl, and her mother, a receptionist in a psychiatrist's office, was killed in an automobile accident while on her way for a visit with Nancy. While a student at a college in San Francisco, Nancy meets and later marries one of her professors, Carl Harmon. The marriage, however, turns out to be a disastrous one since Nancy enters into it for all the wrong reasons. Her mother was on her way to try to prevent it when she was killed, and because of that Nancy blames herself for her mother's death.

At first Carl seems the perfect husband to protect and nurture Nancy, and they have a relatively calm life and two children, Peter and Lisa. Carl's protective nature, however, eventually turns to obsessive control, and Nancy begins to feel suffocated by his treating her as if she were a young child. When her children are suddenly drowned, she is accused of murdering them and at the trial Carl seems to confirm the suspicion. Nancy is acquitted for lack of sufficient evidence — although the police remain convinced of her guilt — and Carl commits suicide apparently unable to bear the grief of his loss.

Nancy feels guilty and confused by these tragic events and leaves the Bay area for the East, where years later she finally meets and marries a local realtor on Cape Cod. Her life takes on a semblance of normalcy as she rebuilds it with Ray and her new family until a series of strange events brings back the unresolved crime from her past. When her new children also disappear and are feared drowned, it seems that history is repeating itself, and she finds herself once again under suspicion of murder.

Ray Eldredge is a third-generation resident of the Cape and a successful realtor who employs a widow, Dorothy Prentiss, as his assistant. The other residents of the Cape Cod community who figure in the narrative are: a retired New York lawyer, Jonathan Knowles, who is writing a book on celebrated court cases of unresolved true crimes; Jed Collins, the local Chief of the Adams Port Police Department; John Kragopoulos, a Greek restaurateur looking for a property in Adams Port for a restaurant he wishes to open with his wife; Bernie Mills, the deputy policeman who works for Collins; Thurston Givens, a retired realtor on the Cape; and Courtney Parrish, a reclusive newcomer to the community, now living in the seventeenth-century sea captain's house that the restaurateur is considering for his new venue.

The two other major figures are Dr.

Landon Miles, a Boston psychiatrist and professor at the Harvard Medical School, and Rob Legler, a former student of Carl's, who had a crush on Nancy and testified against her at her trial. He has been missing for some years as a deserter from the Army and has been living in Canada in order to avoid capture and prosecution for being AWOL.



As the story of *Where Are the Children?* unfolds we learn that all of these characters are interconnected in various ways. Jonathan Knowles, for example, runs across Nancy's case in his research for his book and begins to investigate it. He is also falling for the widow realtor, Dorothy Prentiss. As John Kragopoulos is being shown property by Dorothy, they develop suspicions about the mysterious Courtney Parrish who lives in the old house. Dr.

Landon Miles once employed Nancy's mother and harbors guilt because he failed to help Nancy when she was experiencing mental problems as a student. He also claims some responsibility for Priscilla's death. Finally his memories and guilt will force him to Cape Cod to help Nancy deal with her current crisis. Also, a surprising number of the characters have lost either children or spouses, or both, and form a community of grief and understand *Where Are the Children?*

ing that surrounds Nancy.

The conclusion of the narrative resolves the mystery of the deaths of Peter and Lisa when it is discovered that Carl faked his own suicide, after having killed his children to cover up his molestation of his daughter, and is now living disguised as Courtney Parrish. He also has kidnapped Mike and Missy and is keeping them prisoner in the sea-captain's house, hoping that Nancy will be convicted this time for both crimes, removing any chance that he ever will be caught in the future.

Carl falls to his death from the top of the house as he and Nancy struggle over Missy, whom he has taken hostage while trying to escape from the police. Rob Legler also shows up on Cape Cod, planning to blackmail Nancy with her past. He is caught and presumably turned over to the military.

With the death of Carl, the evidence presented by Jonathan, and the recovered memories drawn out of Nancy by Dr. Miles, the truth of the past comes to light and frees Nancy from the demons which have haunted her for so many years.

Although she writes genre fiction which tends to rely on types rather than fully-drawn characters, Clark is remarkably successful at creating three dimensional heroines. Using an economical style she is able to sketch in the background of her central characters with sufficient insight to establish plausible as well as sympathetic figures. Readers seem to be able to easily get inside them and to experience their desires and longings — especially their fears — which provides depth to her plots and personalizes her themes.

However skillful at molding her heroines, Clark is not as adept at handling her male characters who tend to be more stereotypically either the evil predator or virtuous rescuer. And the latter is frequently a father figure who is either married to the heroine or is about to be. There are exceptions, of course. The opening of *Where Are the Children?* is a case in point. Since the novel begins inside the consciousness of the



killer, we know a bit more about him. But the novel quickly shifts away to concentrate on the heroine so that he moves with the rest of the secondary characters to the periphery of our concerns except as a motivator of the action. In this novel as in her others, the secondary characters, while often interesting, tend to be somewhat stock figures. But since her novels focus on these central female figures, the fact that the others are not as carefully drawn usually does not impair the emotional impact of her books.



Social Concerns

Where Are the Children? was Mary Higgins Clark's first novel and she says she drew the idea for the novel from a newspaper story. As the mother of five herself, the tragedy of missing children appealed to her as containing the germ of a true and yet dramatic human dilemma. Through writing her first novel, Mary Higgins Clark discovered many of the social concerns she has pursued in her succeeding thrillers. As the title of this book suggests, one of its major concerns is with what happens to children in a world fraught with dangers both from outside and especially from inside the family. Often, as in this novel, the focus of her narratives is on a young mother and her children, and, usually but not always, the woman has a mysterious past which pursues her in the form of an obsessed male figure. The male in Where Are the Children? happens to be Nancy's former husband, Carl, who suffocated her with his domineering attention and betrayed her to cover up his sexual activity with their daughter Lisa. This violation of trust places the female character at risk in a society that provides scant legal or communal protection for its "weaker" members.

There is a real contradiction in our modern world between the rhetoric that accords ample praise for motherhood and children but then seems to turn its back on the real needs of both in times of crisis. Clark writes passionately about this contemporary phenomenon.

The level of guilt experienced by Dr.

Miles provides a case in point. As a member of the medical establishment — and how more establishment can he be than to be a distinguished member of the Harvard Medical School faculty — he fails to help Nancy with her adolescent confusion. Had he acted in time perhaps he could have prevented her disastrous marriage to Carl Harmon, who she turns to in her desperation. Of course, Dr. Miles as well as the officials of the Adams Port police force rally around Nancy when she loses her children the second time, but even then their aid is tinged with suspicion.

A quick survey of the background history of the characters in this and her subsequent novels will show that a higher number than would be statistically probable have either lost a spouse or a child. The loss of a spouse becomes particularly important for the women characters because they frequently are without sufficient financial resources to remain independent and are forced to fend for themselves, often without a adequate employment opportunities. This lack of money also makes women, and their children, at risk and usually forces them back into a dependency on males for their support. As in Where Are the Children? such circumstances can work out well. Ray proves to be not only a good husband, caring, nurturing, and positively protective, but literally he also saves Nancy and Missy from the murderous clutches of the resurrected Carl in the novel's frantic denouement. As Carl plunges to his death while still desperately trying to cling to Missy, Nancy grabs her and Ray grabs Nancy preventing them both from falling as well.



Marriage, as an institution, in Clark's fiction is problematic. Married to the right man, a woman feels safe and experiences fulfillment in her life.

Married to the wrong man, however, she may find life to be harrowing, even fatal. Marriage as the traditional haven for women and children ultimately works out, but usually not before it has been tested. In this respect marriage has proved to be a central social concern in Mary Higgins Clark's books, and although it is a traditional topic dealt with by female writers, Clark's thrillers give it especially close scrutiny.

Also in her fiction Clark explores the broadly defined subject of evil, with its hypnotic attractions and devastating social consequences. By opening *Where Are the Children?* within the conscience of the deranged Carl, she sets a tone of dislocation that is only resolved by the ending. Moreover, Carl's thoughts are so twisted that from the beginning they give the reader a real feel for his later behavior that observing him only from the outside would not provide. It is a wonderful device and serves many purposes, not the least of which is to give evil a palpable feel instead of reducing it to a social abstraction, and this particularizing feature drives *Where Are the Children?*

home the disorienting nature of Nancy's past experience.

Although she might not agree, Mary Higgins Clark's stories do provide a substantial critique of social attitudes toward females and their traditional concerns. The conclusions of her novels right the wrongs vested on her heroines, but the fact that she raises so many negative issues casts some doubt on contemporary community values.

Popular fiction often both criticizes and redeems such values, or rather first criticizes and then redeems them. The general effect is to espouse traditions which are also found wanting. This contradiction provides such popular writing with its tensions and suspense while leaving it open to possible negative interpretations masked by the conventional happy endings. Although Nancy at the end of *Where Are the Children?* appears to have exorcised the demons that have plagued her for so many years, it seems unrealistic to believe that she will not continue to experience many of the same fears and doubts in the future. And no matter how loving Ray may be or how secure her present children, she surely will be unable to completely purge her psyche of the nightmares caused by Carl's betrayal or the death of Peter and Lisa at his hands.

Techniques

A large measure of the success of Clark's novels resides in her literary style, which is dominated by a straightforward prose and a compressed time frame. The style allows her novels to be easily accessible to a broad readership; it moves smoothly along and drives the narrative with it. Like much other popular fiction of the same type, her novels can be easily read at one sitting. This gives them the same compression of effect that Edgar Allan Poe demanded of his short stories. This concise form is an excellent vehicle for the thriller which relies on the essential ingredient of compounding of events for its tension. One of the reasons genre fiction has remained so popular is that it does not require close reading to deliver its effects. That such fiction is also capable of sustaining analysis or that it can be read at a more leisurely pace is another matter. The point is that in its basic format the element of easy stylistic accessibility is a virtue.

Another characteristic of Clark's novels is their compression of time.

The events of *Where Are the Children?*

take place within a single day, Nancy's thirty-second birthday. The novel becomes a day for remembering the past and for looking forward to beginning a truly new life. This collapsing of events into such a short period enhances the dramatic intensity of the narrative as well. Along with her uncomplicated style such time constraints strengthen the novel's impact. Within the tight temporal frame, however, Clark also interweaves backstory material, fleshing out the events which are taking place in the present. We learn about Nancy's previous life, her marriage to Carl, the trial which leaves her guilt unresolved, and the brief episode with Rob Legler which jeopardized Nancy's credibility. All of these previous events are skillfully interwoven with the growing tension that surrounds the missing children.

Finally, Clark uses a common fictional device of mixing scenes which are unfolding simultaneously. By cutting back and forth between these episodes she is able to increase the suspense which is driving the plot.

Like intercutting in a film, as two or more events converge, it accelerates the narrative to a dramatic conclusion by shortening the length of each succeeding event as the plot progresses. This technique also serves to bring together all of the various, perhaps seemingly desperate, stories and characters, and ties together the elements of the fiction at the conclusion.

Themes

One thing all of Clark's heroines have is pluck. When needed, they seem to possess huge reservoirs of tenacity and courage. For example, in spite of all of her psychological traumas, the taint of guilt that still surrounds her, and even though weakened by exhaustion, Nancy still is able to drag herself out of bed, struggle to Carl's hideout, and wrestle him for the lives of her children. Mother-love seems capable of overcoming enormous obstacles. Nancy also is able to cope, more or less successfully enough, with her unresolved guilt to make a new life for herself and to start over with Ray and their children. To have such resilience is remarkable.

But if overcoming such obstacles is routine for females in Clark's fiction, so is their final dependence on a male support system. Again, this contradiction works within the conventions of her thrillers. Mary Higgins Clark is no feminist in that regard, nor does her work, for all its strong women, espouse feminist themes. In the end her female leads never go it alone. Their independence and self-reliance never quite proves adequate enough to abandoned the conventions of marriage and motherhood. Nancy would be swallowed up by Carl and Rob Legler were it not for the other men who come to her rescue.

The guilt that hovers over her about the deaths of Peter and Lisa would remain except for the legal research of Jonathan Knowles or the medical expertise of Dr. Miles. And she would surely have died, with Missy, if Ray had not been there to save her. It is curious that much of Nancy's strength is absorbed back into the conventions of the patriarchal society which placed her at risk in the first place. These contrasts are not unique to the fiction of Mary Higgins Clark, but are a staple of the literary traditions out of which she writes.

Adaptations

Where Are the Children? was made into a feature motion picture by Columbia, directed by Bruce Malmuth, with Max Gail, Frederick Forrest, and Bernard Hughes and starring Jill Clayburgh as Nancy. The film was shot on location on Cape Cod and was released in 1986. Both Mary and her daughter, Carol, a professional actress, had bit parts as reporters in the film. In an interview Mary recounted a humorous incident during the filming when amid a pushing crowd of news hounds she fluffed her one line by calling out: "Come on, Jill. Tell the truth — admit it — you did kill your kids, Jill." The director stopped the scene and wanted to know who was calling out the name "Jill." She got the line right on the second take.



Key Questions

Because of the topical nature of many of her books, Clark's fiction should provide good material for group discussion. Many of her novels have been taken from current newspaper stories which involve women and children in danger. These stories often repeat ongoing situations which may have been experienced by members of the discussion group and therefore could resonate strongly with them.

Both highly emotional and personal, Clark's themes and plots, in spite of the ways they are dealt with in the fiction, are frequently capable of multiple interpretations which can be extended well beyond the confines of her books.

For example, although she would not admit to being a feminist writer, the focus on women and their problems in the novels raise many issues now being debated in public as well as feminist circles. Those issues include the place of marriage and children and the importance of careers in the lives of contemporary women. How much women still need to rely on male "protection" in a world more sympathetic to women's desires. And the extent to which women are still defined and their lives controlled by patriarchal social attitudes. Such issues are routinely raised by her books but are often left unresolved by their endings. These topics should promote a lively discussion.

1. Can the group think of similar true cases involving a mother being accused of murdering her children to compare with the novel? Does *Where Are the Children?* seem to come close to reality?
2. Explore the contradiction between the heroine's strengths and her weaknesses which might explain the novel's problematic position as a "feminist" work of fiction.
3. What is the nature of "evil" in *Where Are the Children?*
4. What causes the "evil?" 5. Name the characteristics of the "good" and "bad" men in the fiction.

How do these characteristics effect Nancy?

6. What is it specifically that attracts the readers to a Mary Higgins Clark thriller?
7. What other novels have you read that compare with *Where Are the Children?* and how do they differ?
8. Why is the setting on Cape Cod an especially good one for this work of fiction?
9. Why can one best describe this book as a "thriller" rather than a "mystery" or some other crime novel genre?
10. How does *Where Are the Children?*

make use of "Gothic" elements?

Literary Precedents

The woman-in-peril novel dates back to the rise of the Gothic romance at the end of the eighteenth century. In the typical Gothic tale, a young woman is trapped in an isolated country house or abandoned monastery and menaced by a fiend bent on her sexual destruction.

The romances rely on exotic, often historical, locations dripping with period trappings and surrounded by a general atmosphere of decay. The suspense in the early romance novels was protracted, as was the prose, and they generally appealed to a middle- to upper-middle-class reading public, largely female, who had plenty of free time for reading long works of fiction.

While the genre had wide appeal, it was not without its critics, who found the Gothic atmosphere often comically excessive. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is perhaps one of the better known of the parodies of the form written during the time. In spite of its excesses, however, the Gothic novel has proven a durable literary genre down to modern times.

Where Are the Children?

Technology and literacy rates were to modify both the length and literary content of these early genre novels. As the nineteenth century progressed and readership widened to include the poor, the publishing industry found that popular fiction could be sold in shorter, serialized forms in periodicals.

Publication of novels in parts allowed readers to consume the product slowly and did not require large amounts of free time since the parts were published over many months. Many variations of the woman-in-peril novel appeared during the Victorian period, and they often altered the conventions to allow for the creation of more forceful contemporary heroines. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) provides a good example of a mid-Victorian novel that domesticated the excess of the Gothic formula. Wilkie Collins's late mystery *The Law and the Lady* (1875) uses a deformed recluse who lived in a crumbling country house as part of its plot. Moreover the main portions of the Gothic tradition remained strong during the nineteenth century and were carried forward by a number of writers, many of whom used them in their tales of horror. Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker both used the Gothic tale for their stories about vampires.

With the turn of the century, almost universal literacy, and an increase in leisure activities of all kinds, popular fiction, especially genre fiction like mysteries and thrillers, grew shorter and more compact. So did the novels that now had to compete with the periodical fiction for the reader's attention and money. Horror and adventure tales, especially those appearing in pulp magazines and later in comic books, shamelessly exploited the Gothic tradition, doing much damage to its literary reputation. The woman-in-peril story fared nicely, though, in the pages of mystery writers, often female, like



Mary Roberts Rinehart, who continued to update the form in their popular novels. Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* is really a Gothic tale revitalized.

The evolution of the modern mystery thriller was completed during the explosion of paperback fiction after World War II. Both in reprint and in originals, paperbacks made literature affordable to almost everyone, and while a good many paperbacks reprinted mainstream or classic fiction, they also opened up a vast market for genre fiction which remains vital to this day.

The popularity of Clark's woman-in-peril thrillers attest to the strength and vitality of Gothic fiction. Although her novels avoid the excesses of her predecessors, they nevertheless are a part of a very long and quite distinguished literary tradition.



Related Titles

Those readers looking for other novels in the field will be best served by turning to Clark's subsequent efforts in fiction, especially, *A Stranger is Watching* (1977), *A Cardie Will Fall* (1980), and *While My Pretty One Sleeps* (1989). There are however, other writers, especially women writers, who have promoted strong female characters in the mystery field. Certainly Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, Linda Barnes, and others have opened up the crime and detective genres to resourceful and dynamic women protagonists. These characters may have harder edges and survive without the help of a male protector, but they are also the end products of a two-centuries old pattern of literary female emancipation.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994