

Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night

Short Guide

Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night by Charles de Lint

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 Desert Spirits Crowd the Night Short Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Overview.....3](#)

[About the Author.....4](#)

[Setting.....5](#)

[Social Sensitivity.....6](#)

[Literary Qualities.....7](#)

[Themes and Characters.....8](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....10](#)

[Ideas for Reports and Papers.....11](#)

[For Further Reference.....12](#)

[Related Titles/Adaptations.....13](#)

[Related Web Sites.....14](#)

[Copyright Information.....15](#)

Overview

This story offers a lighthearted tale of a woman's entanglement with the mischievous Coyote and her following of the flute music of the mysterious Kokopelli. "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night," reprinted in *The Ivory and the Horn*, is an adventure in Navaho mysticism, in which the archetypal figures such as Coyote come to life. Not well versed in Navaho culture, Sophie is understandably confused. Sophie is an ideal companion for an adventure in a realm of dreams and Native American mysticism; she does not panic, and she retains a humorous sense of proportion while untangling herself from the music of Kokopelli and the pranks of Coyote.

About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, The Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmid, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmid-de Lint, was a schoolteacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1961. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15, 1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he managed one until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends.

A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His *Jack, the Giant Killer* won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "HOMer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for *The Little Country*.

The Little Country also was included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age, in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected *Trader* as one of its Best Books for Young Adults, in 1998.

De Lint has become the quintessential crossover author. His writings intended for grownups have found a large audience among young adults much as the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Peter S. Beagle have; he doubles his crossover appeal because his writings for young adults have found an appreciative audience among grownups.

Setting

Sophie Etoile lives in de Lint's fictional city of Newford, where many of his adventures are set. The city is a large, complicated place, with a mix of rich and poor, of residential areas and industrial ones. She is an artist who does not like attending her own art shows but ends up at one anyway. Her dream world is an escape from Newford and its problems, not that she does not like her friends such as Max, but she has a dream place called Mabon where she can have fun and enjoy the company of Jeck Crow. In "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night," the music of a flute draws her out of Mabon into the dream world of Kokopelli and Coyote. The desert seems like one from the American Southwest, but there is no way out of it. Coyote says that there is one, but he is so full of mischief that it is hard to tell whether he is ever truly serious, which means that Sophie could be trapped in the desert every time she sleeps.



Social Sensitivity

"Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" is based on Native American traditions and involves sexuality. Coyote insists, "It's this whole flute-player business . . . It's riddled with sexual innuendo, don't you see?"

[Kokopelli is] a fertility symbol now, very mythopoetic and all, but it wasn't always that way," later adding that "they didn't call him Koke the Poke for nothing." Sophie asks, "What are you [Coyote] saying? That all I have to do is have sex here, and I get to leave?" She does not like the idea at all. Yet, Coyote often nudges her about having sex.

There is nothing in all this that most young adults have not heard about already, and Sophie's determination to be the one who chooses the occasions when (and with whom) she will have sex, in spite of the seductiveness of the flute music and Coyote, is something to be admired.

The character Max is a homosexual, but this is not of particular significance in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night."

Max is just what he is, just as Sophie is what she is and Coyote is what he is. He is part of the interesting world of Sophie, and he is primarily important for his wisdom and his advice, as well as his deep spirituality. Perhaps Sophie's attitudes may prove somewhat bothersome if given thought; she is almost achingly politically correct, although this is softened by her open-heartedness that allows room for many different sorts of people and attitudes in her personal life.



Literary Qualities

"Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" is told in the first person by Sophie, the main character. This point of view serves an important purpose because the story is about Sophie, her spiritual life, and her emotional life, as well as about her art. What matters throughout the tale are Sophie's perceptions, and the first-person narration leaves the audience with only Sophie's perceptions. It is crucial to understand why this must be so to remember that the experience in the desert is entirely in dreams, interspersed among waking periods that for Sophie can be as dreamlike as dreams. In fact, she notes that dreams can be as real for her as waking life is. Thus, the audience is treated to a tale that is as much experience as it is plot and characterization.

The experience is that of dreams, with characters that shift and change forms, with mysteries that require faith to believe. Max's remark early in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" provides an important clue about what is actually happening: "This is so strange. Things like this don't happen in the real world." It is deceptive phrasing; it sounds like he is amazed at his good fortune, since Sophie, a noted artist, is giving him one of her works, but it turns out to be the key that unlocks later events. Sophie realizes that what remains permanent during her trips to dream worlds and subsequent returns to the waking world is what is in her head. It means that the waking world is as much a dreaming experience for her as the dream world is, and it implies that spiritual growth may be the essence of waking life as it is in the desert of Coyote, Kokopelli, and Nokomis.



Themes and Characters

The main characters of "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" are Sophie Etoile and Coyote, supported by Max and the flute-playing Kokopelli. The early interaction between Sophie and Max says much about both of them and helps lay down expectations for Sophie's behavior in the rest of "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night." Max has lost his lover and Sophie offers him a painting, explaining, after he demurs, "Look . . . What would be the point of being an artist if you only did it for the money? I always feel weird about selling my work anyway. It's as though I'm selling off my children. I don't even know what kind of a home they're going to—there's no evaluation process beforehand." Some of Sophie's compassion can be seen in this passage, but ever prevalent is the passion she expresses about her art and her sense of humor. "Max shook his head. 'This is so strange. Things like this don't happen in the real world.' 'Well, pick a world where it could happen,' Sophie said, 'and we'll pretend that we're there.'" Sophie is funny, and she knows her way around words.

Both of these qualities are important during her adventure with Coyote. Max shows a hint of his wisdom when he asks whether Sophie picks "another world to be in when you don't happen to like the way things are going in this one." This insight cuts close to a truth about Sophie, one that bears remembering as she tries to find a way out of the desert in her dreams.

Sophie believes her ability to live in a dream world comes from her having "Faerie blood," which her friend Jilly says comes from a mother who was real in the dream world and a dream in the physical world.

"Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" is like a dream and as in dreams, logic is sometimes fluid. In other de Lint stories such as "Seven for a Secret" (1995), music draws people out of themselves, even putting them in touch with the spirit world. In the case of Sophie in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night," music is a theme, not of liberation but of entrapment. "The music is keeping me here [in the desert]," Sophie says. The desert is in her dreams, so what de Lint does with the theme of music is turn the idea of dreaming to escape reality, as Max suggests Sophie may do, upside down, making Sophie's waking life an escape from her dreaming. Not that her waking life is particularly helpful; she has to sleep sometime, and when she does she is right back with Coyote.

Coyote is a trickster, a character popular in many of the world's folkloric traditions.

De Lint describes him: The pale light from the coals makes his eyes glitter and seem to be of two different colors: one brown, one blue. Except for his ears, his silhouette against the deep starry backdrop behind him belongs to a young man, long black hair braided and falling down either side of his head, body wrapped in a blanket. But the ears are those of the desert wolf whose name he bears: tall and pointed, lips quivering as they sort through the sounds drifting in from the night around them.



Coyote's shape changes a little from one meeting with Sophie to the next. He is the stuff of dreams; even though Sophie insists that her dreams are real, the rules of the waking universe do not necessarily apply to anyone in the worlds of dreams. Coyote is funny, full of sass, and somewhat crude in his sexual innuendo, but his is consistent in one way: the dream is about Sophie.

Given his capriciousness, it is not surprising that Sophie does not believe him, but the more serious Kokopelli has the same point of view.

When at last Coyote takes Sophie to see Kokopelli, he is not the hunched seducer that Coyote described to Sophie. Instead, "there he is, sitting cross-legged on the red stone, a slim, handsome man, dark hair cut in a shaggy pageboy, wearing white trousers and a white tunic, a plain wooden medicine flute lying across his knees. A worn cloth backpack lies on the stone beside him." Sophie looks over the desert from atop the butte where Kokopelli sits, and he says, "It's about you. It's about what you want out of life." In fact, even the theme of music has been about her: "You were following a need that you dressed up as my music." This means that Sophie's time in the desert dream world was a process of self-discovery, something very much in the tradition of Southwestern Native American spirituality, in which a spirit journey can be a process of self-revelation.

"Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" does not offer easy resolutions to Sophie's experiences. For instance, Coyote still remains a mystery. Kokopelli says, "Without mysteries, life would be very dull indeed."

What would be left to strive for if everything were known?" This is not entirely satisfying if one is looking for a careful tying up of loose ends, although it is a fairly tidy way of expressing a rationale behind storytelling, which tends to assume that there is something to tell that its audience does not already know. Even though Sophie is an experienced traveler of dream worlds, and even though in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" she has shown that she can tangle with the best of word-players, Coyote, and survive, she cannot take in all of her experience. She realizes that what is permanent is what she carries in her head after leaving her dreams, but she states, "I have to take it all on faith and for some things, faith isn't enough." On the other hand, there is a third alternative to Kokopelli's mysteries and Sophie's faith, which is Max's summation: "The desert brings home how precious life is and how much we should appreciate it while we have it." By now, Max has been fleshed out enough that his opinion matters. Still, his view may be too neat and comfortable.

After all, there is the lingering mystery of why Sophie misses Coyote.



Topics for Discussion

1. Sophie says, "I have to take it all on faith and for some things, faith isn't enough." What are the limitations of faith?

2. At the end of "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night", Sophie declares, "I never thought I'd say this, but I miss him [Coyote]." Why would she miss Coyote?

3. What is the point of the story of Barking Dog?

4. How could music be keeping Sophie in the desert?

5. Why does Coyote take an interest in Sophie?

6. How is it that Coyote knows about Sophie's life and her feelings?

7. Why does Sophie not try to run away?

Will Sophie's experience with Coyote change her life in any way?

8. What is de Lint's purpose in telling the story of "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night"?

9. What is the significance of Coyote's having visited Mabon?

10. What is the importance of dreaming about the desert and Coyote every time Sophie sleeps? It is only dreaming, is it not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Why does Kokopelli play the flute?

What is the significance of the flute in Native American folklore? What are some examples of flutes from Native American desert tribes?

2. Draw or paint a picture of Coyote as Sophie sees him. Is this how he looks in pictures made by Native Americans?

3. How does "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" compare to de Lint's "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep?" Does "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep" help to explain anything in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night"?

4. Which folk tales does de Lint seem to draw on for "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night"? How faithful does he seem to be to his source materials?

5. Will Sophie meet Coyote again? Write a story about her again meeting Coyote.

6. Music plays an important role in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night." De Lint uses music in many of his tales.

How does he present music? What are its effects on characters? What does it represent? How typical of de Lint's work is the presentation of music in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night"?

7. What are the symbols in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night," what do they mean, and how do they advance the narrative?

8. How does "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" fit in among his other Newford stories?

9. Coyote refers to "kachina material."

What would that be? What is its role in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night"?

10. "The desert brings home how precious life is and how much we should appreciate it while we have it," Max says to Sophie. What in "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" supports this view?

11. Who is Ihu and what has he, she, or it to do with Coyote? From what cultural tradition does Ihu come?

12. Kokopelli says, "Without mysteries, life would be very dull indeed. What would be left to strive for if everything were known?" How well does this reflect the culture from which Kokopelli is derived?



For Further Reference

Green, Roland. Booklist, vol. 91, no. 11 (February 1, 1995): 993. Green is unimpressed with *The Ivory and the Horn*, in which "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" appears.

Publishers Weekly, vol. 242, no. 13 (March 27, 1995): 77. This entry is a brief, positive review of *The Ivory and the Horn*, in which "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" appears.

Schimmel, Lawrence. "An Interview with Charles de Lint." *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, vol. 32 (Summer 1996). Schimmel conducted this interview via written correspondence. Although the interview is extensive, it remains well focused on de Lint's literary work.

In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world."

A copy is available in de Lint's Internet Web site.

Timonin, Mike. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint."

Wordsworth, vol. 8, no. 4 (January 1998).

A longer version of this interview appears on de Lint's Web site. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."



Related Titles/Adaptations

De Lint is a prolific writer of short fiction. Most of his tales take place in urban settings, especially fictional Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life, but some take place elsewhere, often Sophie's dream world. For instance, her dream world figures prominently in "The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep" (1993), in which she saves the moon from drowning in a swamp where evil creatures have imprisoned it.

The story is allegorical, with the moon representing Sophie's mother, who had deserted her when she was a child. "Where Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" alludes to this earlier tale and shares with it figures that are symbols. Sometimes de Lint places his characters in actual wild surroundings, rather than having them venture into the wild in dreams. "Wooden Bones" is an example of such a story written for young adults. In it, a troublesome, unhappy city girl meets one of the old people, a fiddler with the head of a rabbit. In "Wooden Bones," the environment itself takes on symbolic significance, with buildings, especially abandoned ones, representing protagonist Liz's inner life.

Related Web Sites

<http://www.sfsite/charlesdelint/> Accessed November 26, 2002. This author's Web site gives information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section in which he answers questions about himself and his views.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, 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 Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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