

White Jenna Short Guide

White Jenna by Jane Yolen

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Characters

Jenna, the protagonist of *White Jenna*, matures in thought as she struggles with the dual nature of her life. She plays a public part, but in private, to those close to her, she denies the attribution to her of the role of the Anna.

When prodded at one point to kill in cold blood the man called Bear, as prophecy suggests, she demurs. "I am no story," she insists. "I am no tale. I am real." Jenna no less is highly skilled in strategy and swordplay. She is no traditional fairy-tale or fantasy heroine, but a feminist creation, a reinforcement of the theme of women's potential for independence and heroic impact upon society as a whole.

Jenna possesses a woman's resources which need no man's aid, implied by the magical presence of her dark sister Skada, who appears in candlelight, firelight, or with the moon. This "sister light, sister dark" combination is common to the system of Hames. Jenna's traveling party initially includes warrior sisters light Catrona and dark Katri, as well as adolescent Petra, selfappointed bard and priestess-in-training whose dark sister should appear as she matures.

What sets Jenna apart from other Hame characters is her embodiment of a break with the past, even if it means the end of Hame women's separation from men. "You love both women and men," Jenna is told by a prehistoric metaphysical apparition, the Alta she encounters in a time-travel experience.

"That, too, makes you ready for what is to come." Jenna's matured relationship with her lover and eventual husband, Carum Longbow, reinforces this theme of equitable gender relations.

Carum is a king's third son, whom Jenna met in the earlier novel. He is no more a traditional fairy-tale prince than Jenna is a traditional heroine. He remains a sensitive scholar in flight from men attached to usurper Lord Kalas. Carum admires Jenna's qualities of courage and independence but has no wish to emulate them, and spends much of his time in retreat or in a castle dungeon. It is Jenna who must rescue him and save his kingdom.

Carum is one type of man in the novel. On his side, the side of legitimate succession, are men willing to come to terms with Jenna and her women for the mutual good. These include Piet of the king's army, also lover of Jenna's aide Catrona, and King Gorum himself, older brother of Carum. King Gorum represents an antiquated stage in women's history, the arranged marriage, which Jenna manages to escape due to the sudden murder of her aide Catrona, and Petra's cleverly invented twists of prophecy.

Again are underscored themes of value in folkloric creations, and the outworn nature of patriarchal codes and hierarchical inequity. King Gorum's eventual death leaves Carum to assume the throne.



Against Carum and King Gorum's forces are arrayed the far more numerous forces of usurper Kalas, the men who have destroyed many Hames.

These include the brutish Bear and Cat, brothers to the Bull and the Hound Jenna dispatched in an earlier novel, *Sister Light, Sister Dark*. "The ox in the field," the prophecy says, "the hound at the hearth, the bear in the cave, the cat in the tree, all, all shall bow before her." These characters represent the type of men who cannot participate in a new, equitable social order.

Indispensable aides to Carum's forces are the women of M'dorah Hame, happy to see the boys Jareth, Marek, and Sandor from among the townsfolk recruited along the way. The women regard the boys as the Young Heralds of M'doran alternate Altite prophecy. These women, and the Grenna elves and Alta of Jenna's time-travel experience, are characters linked in themes of Jenna's maturation in social wisdom and gender cooperation. The M'dorah women paraphrase for Jenna the Grenna's egalitarian rule. "Every end is a beginning," they say. "No one stands highest when all stand together."

The Grenna, under their leader Sorrel, live by relative time and social equality. The Alta of Jenna's time travel is their student. She enlightens Jenna on her role as the saving Anna. Jenna must unite light and dark, men and women, the Alta says. There are many "turnings" in history, just like the circle. There are many Annas, one for each turning. Jenna is the one for the current age.

Social Concerns

In *White Jenna*, Yolen addresses post-1960s questions of shifts in gender roles through a fantasy world she developed in an earlier novel, *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (1988). Central to the novel is the quest of the character Jenna, a highly gifted teenager living in a patriarchal Garunian age and presumed to be a prophesied goddess-savior. During attacks by men against women called the Gender Wars, Jenna must try to preserve the lives of clans of women called Altites. These women, who raised her, worship a female deity named Great Alta and dwell in mountain enclaves called Hames. As Jenna pursues her quest, she is embroiled in situations that address such current concerns as the social value of a women's culture, women's political empowerment, and balanced gender relations.



Techniques

White Jenna follows the format established in *Sister Light, Sister Dark*. A synopsis, displaying the remarkably economical language Yolen is capable of, is provided at the beginning so that this sequel is self-contained. *White Jenna* is a fantasy consisting of a main narrative, interspersed with sections of myth, legend, balladry, folktale. By this intriguing means thematic concepts are introduced and reinforced, and the mundane features of Jenna's life are contrasted with its folk-heroine dimensions.

Sections of historical research inspired by the Garunian age cleverly poke fun at the world of scholarship, and provide examples of Yolen's entertaining wit. Yolen's style is flowing, deceptively simple. The plot is intricate, the cast of characters varied, and the action complex. The inclusion of songs with musical notation at the story's end reflects Yolen's appreciation of music and her insistence on rhythmic word flow in her poetry and prose.

Poetic imagery heightens the reader's engagement with Yolen's fantasy.

Concepts are communicated through symbolism. Besides the magical play of light and dark, which relates to women's self-development, Yolen employs the color green. The Grenna are surrounded by the color and are also called Greenfolk, a name which emphasizes the growth and vigor of the egalitarian concept they present. Jenna's journey with the Grenna to the Green World blends fantasy with the sciencefiction device of time travel.



Themes

The character Jenna is engaged in a quest for self, a central theme which works on various levels. Jenna's identity relates to questions of life's dualities, women's independence, gender relations and social duty. Throughout the novel, Jenna leads the dual life of private person and folk heroine. She is regarded in spite of herself as a prophesied savior, a "holiest of sisters," because of her white hair, dark eyes, and unusual three-times-orphaned status. Jenna is also strong and exceptionally gifted in all things. "Your coming is the beginning and it is the end," she is told.

The theme of social responsibility is developed through Jenna's acquiescence in necessity. Jenna sets aside the alienation she feels from prophecy to play the part of the White Goddess or Anna, savior, because she is convinced that a strong leader must take control.

Initially at stake is the survival of the independent sisterhoods, the Hames.

The situation soon alters to involve help for the forces of the legitimate king against evil usurpers, the men who have also begun attacks on the Hames. The theme of bonding among women merges with themes of balance in gender relations and political empowerment for women. The Gender Wars evolve into a war for succession, and social restructuring for the common good.

Jenna's quest for self is inextricably linked to her impact upon society as a whole, thus illustrating the theme, too, of value in women's cultural life. Jenna is the product of women's exclusive nurturing. This teaching is precisely what prepares her to join with the true king's men and defeat the forces of evil. Her process of self-discovery through leadership introduces a provocative exploration of the themes of ideal social structure, equality and the nature of time. She encounters elves called Grenna, who take her to an alternate world and teach that the perfect model is the circle. "No one is higher.

No one is lower. No one is first. No one is last." Fourteen-year-old Jenna emerges from her encounter five years older.

Jenna's encounter with the Grenna, and her impact on society as the Anna, incorporate a theme commonly found in Yolen's fiction, that myth, legend, folklore and imaginative creations are vital to social order. The theme is reinforced by Jenna's acquiescence in the use of balladry, song, and poetry to win forces to her side. Imaginative creations contain truths that rational methods cannot find, a point made by the fictitious, future scholarly studies inspired by Jenna's life and presented in the novel. The scholarly conclusions are often humorously askew.



Key Questions

Because of the currency of its themes and Yolen's intriguing method of approaching them, *White Jenna* should provoke stimulating discussions. The question of gender relations should lead readers into provocative areas of thought. Yolen is not considered truly radical in her feminist position, and groups might enjoy discussing her work in light of the women's movement. Another fruitful line to pursue is the social restructuring treated in the novel. Discussion groups interested in fantasy should find Yolen's work highly stimulating.

1. Trace the development of Jenna's thought in the novel. How does she mature in areas of gender and social structure?
2. How does Jenna's relationship with Carum revise patriarchal tradition? What does their marriage represent?
3. The details of the ending are ambiguous. How do you interpret what happens?
4. Sort out the interrelationships among the players in the battle for women's empowerment in an equitable social order. How do the characters/ character types interrelate to achieve the ultimate good?
5. Consider Jenna's reference to the tale of Little Bit, the mouse, as a factor in her defeat of the Cat and the forces of Lord Kalas. Consider also her refusal to kill the Bear and her application to warfare of the training she mentions she has had. Does Jenna finally win in battle because she utilizes strategies and skills that are uniquely women's? Do these have value in society today?
6. Do you agree with Yolen that myth, poetry, ballad, the various facets of culture she depicts, are indispensable elements in society?
7. What do you make of the final "history" section, a letter to the Dalian Historical Society rejecting the theories of Dr. Magon? Does the scholarly discourse work as a way of enriching the story?
8. Discuss Jenna's time-travel encounter with the Grenna and the apparition of Alta. What philosophical concepts are presented? How does Jenna apply them?
9. Do the sayings gathered into a list at the novel's end have any purpose besides conveying folkloric flavor?
10. Discuss the symbolic imagery of objects, metals and colors in the novel.

What effects does it achieve?

11. Discuss Altite prophecy, Petra's role, and the cultural elements of poetry, sayings, legends, and songs. Do so in light of themes and the ways heroes/heroines arise in



contemporary society. Could one facet of the situation of Jenna's exaltation by others be a spoof on modern culture? Does Petra bear resemblance to the contemporary purveyor of propaganda?

Literary Precedents

White Jenna has roots in centuries-old oral and medieval folkloric and fairytale tradition. Elves are found in European mythology, English and Scottish folklore and ballads, and are widely used in more recent fantasy literature.

The device by which the elves and Jenna enter another realm can be traced back to Lewis Carroll's nineteenth-century fantasy, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865).

Yolen has adopted fantasy conventions for her novel, but she has written from a feminist perspective. Her strong heroine Jenna has replaced the traditional hero, a conception found in the speculative fiction works of such writers as Anne McCaffrey and Marion Zimmer Bradley. In particular Yolen falls among such postmodern writers as Angela Carter and Tanith Lee, who through fantasy and fairy-tale form have questioned patriarchal codes. In its ambiguous ending, *White Jenna* respects fantasy form, but poses a question about gender relations.

Related Titles

Sister Light, Sister Dark (1988) precedes White Jenna in this series of two novels. The first volume follows the maturation of Jenna from babyhood to her early teens, stressing her alienation from and adjustment to her society.

The novel ends with Jenna's acceptance of her role as the prophesied White Goddess or Anna, poised to set forth on her journey to warn the Hames about enemy armies of men. Yolen's literary fairy tale "The Thirteenth Fey," loosely based on "Sleeping Beauty," contains a fairy-narrator's speculations about inequitable gender relations, decadent monarchy, and the rise of democracy.



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