

The Wild Hunt Short Guide

The Wild Hunt by Jane Yolen

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Overview

Yolen has made the use of folktales and legends her specialty. She believes that folklore is not the exclusive property of its country of origin, but should be available to storytellers everywhere. Accordingly, she feels free to take whatever she needs from any source if it fits a given story. She calls herself an "empress of thieves," but argues that we instinctively use what is at hand for our view of reality. Yolen pulls "threads from magic tapestries to weave my own new cloth," because gifted writers can, in her words, "reinvigorate the literature with cross-cultural fertilization." *The Wild Hunt* is an example of this process. In this novel, Yolen has produced an amalgam of a medieval Scandinavian legend, the Hunt itself, a myth of changing seasons, and a rite-of-passage adventure for a young boy. To these are added the magical properties of rowan trees, a naming of names ceremony, talking animals, and an owl that gives the Hunt its signal to start. Jerold, the Queen of Light's chosen hero, lives in the ordinary world in a gothic mansion. A parallel world exists in the same house, and Jerold, in his new suit of armor, ventures into that world, passing through a subterranean region on his way to confront the Lord of Dark. Every child must learn to face his or her worst fears and triumph over them. Many children fear darkness and wild storms. The world we know is simultaneously very beautiful and very terrible, and Jerold emerges from his trial, having rescued his counterpart, Gerund. He leaves with his new friend and a new assurance. Yolen points out that beneath every piece of fantasy literature is the world and society of the storyteller who has written the fantasy. Fantasy literature is "one step removed" from realistic fiction, but it provides an angle of vision that may help its reader come to terms with the real world by seeing it imaginatively.

Despite the objections of some critics that *The Wild Hunt* may be too subtle for its target audience of eight- to twelve-year olds, it would be a mistake to underestimate the ability of that age group to respond to this book. *The Wild Hunt* is a carefully written fantasy that will stimulate the imaginations of its readers. It might also lead readers to do their own research on the legendary figures presented: the Wild Hunt, its leader, the White Goddess, and the Moss Man. The book presents a dark world, but it has elements of humor—the dog Mully and the cat, for example, who are on one level the animals they appear to be, on another level much more. If the book is more difficult than many of its type, it rewards the patient reader with insights into the kind of imagination that expresses itself in myths and legends. Francisco Mora's illustrations will also assist in this process.

About the Author

With over 125 books to her credit, Jane Yolen has been called "the American Hans Christian Andersen" by her editor, Arm K. Beneduce. Fascinated all her life by the folk legends of the world, she has adapted much of that material for her books. A precocious child who could read even before entering school, she also loved folk music; later while at Smith College, she helped support herself as a folk singer and poet. Medieval folklore, particularly Arthurian legends, is her favorite source material and forms the background for several of her books.

Yolen was born in New York City on February 11, 1939. Her father, Will Hyatt!

was an author who specialized in human relations. Her mother, Isabelle Berlin Hyatt, was a social worker. Yolen attended public school in New York, and later entered Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut.

While in her teens she became deeply interested in Quakerism. The rituals of Quakerism, Judaism, and Catholicism would later be incorporated into her fairy tales and novels.

At Staples High School, Yolen was captain of the girls' basketball team, served on the newspaper staff, participated in the jazz, Spanish and Latin clubs, and won the school's English prize. She also toured and performed in the school's choir. Yolen's interest in Quakerism and pacifism intensified with her participation in folk music festivals, called hootenannies, which also helped her develop her interest in poetry and folk songs. She further honed her writing skills at Smith College, where her stories were published in magazines and newspapers. After graduating, Yolen settled in Greenwich Village and began working for various publishers in New York City. In 1962 she became an assistant editor of juvenile books at Alfred A. Knopf. Her first book, *Pirates in Petticoats*, was published the following year.

Yolen is best known for her creative use of folk themes, borrowed from many cultures worldwide. She is especially fond of Arthurian legends, as reflected in her novels *Dragon's Blood* (1982) and *Merlin's Books* (1986). Her talent for comedy is demonstrated in *Commander Toad in Space* (1980) and *Piggins* (1987), both of which present a cast of animals. In 1988 Yolen published a book about the Holocaust—*The Devil's Arithmetic*—in which a girl is magically transported from her comfortable home in the present to a death camp in 1942. Here she learns to better appreciate the recent tragic history of her people. Yolen has been granted honors for her writing in numbers that come close to rivaling her vast output. In 1988 Yolen received the World Fantasy Award for Favorite Folktales from Around the World, the Parents' Choice Silver Seal Award, the Jewish Book Council Award, and the Association of Jewish Libraries Award for *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and the Kerlan Award for "singular achievements in the

creation of children's literature." Yolen received the Skylark Award and the Smith College Medal in 1990, and the Regina Medal in 1992, for her body of work.



Setting

A wild winter storm rages around a large house that is isolated from the rest of the world. Traditionally, the Wild Hunt appeared around the time of Epiphany— January 6 in the Church Calendar—when winter was at its most severe in Northern Europe. No country is specified, but this is, after all, a fantasy world. The house is both a comfortable dwelling with a large library in keeping with Jerold's quiet personality, and a parallel setting that matches Gerund's much more active one. A hundred yards from the house is a granite outcrop where the Hunt gathers: "This rock might have been a thousand miles away. Or a thousand years."



Social Sensitivity

In the essay, "Magic Mirrors: Society Reflected in the Glass of Fantasy," Yolen writes, "The good news is that fantasy books deal with issues as thoroughly as realistic fiction—but one step removed." *The Wild Hunt* presents the forces of nature, which are indifferent to the ideals of humans.

Mercy has no part in them. The world depicted in the novel is not the so-called real world, but no attempt is made to soften winter's cold, the destructive changes that can blight life, or the impact of death itself.

Mully dies because he could not curb his appetite. Had Jerold drunk from the river of blood and eaten the spoiled fruit in the garden, he too would have died. Mully is appealing, but he is not sentimentalized as are the animals in some Disney films.

In Yolen's fairy tale *The Girl Who Loved the Wind*, a father tries to shield his daughter from the pains of human existence, in effect preventing her from experiencing reality. In her sheltered existence, the girl is still aware of the wind outside and learns to love its wildness. The wind visits her and explains that the world is cruel, but it is also joyful and constantly changing. The girl escapes with the wind and takes her chances in the world. Fantasy may help a child to come to terms with a world in which calamities happen, but the human spirit has to cope with them. The same world offers both beauty and happiness, albeit mixed with events that can be devastating.



Literary Qualities

It is a credit to Yolen as a writer that she can create a magical realm and convince the reader that it is real. The house she describes is like the one that she and her family occupy in Scotland during the summer. This house is in two worlds: one in which it is a comfortable home with plenty of books and a well-stocked pantry, and an alternate world in which the house is full of noisy motion. Yolen has taken a stock idea from science fiction for this part of her story. The houses are also part of the gothic tradition. The Wild Hunt, Herne the Hunter, with his antlered helmet, and the Moss Man are stock figures in medieval folklore, although in some parts of England people still believe that the Wild Hunt occasionally rides. Suspense is necessary for a ghost story, and Yolen maintains it quite well.

Each chapter is built up in three stages— Chapter One, Chapter One Sort Of, and Chapter One Almost. Some critics have found this device irritating and wish she had told her story straightforwardly. The Wild Hunt is assembled on a ledge a hundred yards from the house; while it rides in all directions, its main target is the house in which Herne knows that the White Goddess' heroes have been receiving instruction. An owl gives the signal for the Hunt to begin, which is another established tradition, as is the belief that rowan trees are protection against evil magic. As in every well-told story, no detail is wasted. The white cat first appears as she is climbing through a broken pane of glass. The same broken window permits a small sliver of the Horned King's anger in the form of a bit of gray fog to enter the house. Jerold writes his name in the frost on the library window, and the cat warns him never to reveal his name in any form. The Moss Man reports the name when winter and summer confront one another. Since the name appears in reverse, it does not reveal Jerold's identity.

The magic of names plays a crucial role in the story's conclusion. The dark, foreboding basement is mentioned in Chapter Two. Jerold avoids this part of the house, but entering it later will be the first test of his courage as the White Goddess' hero. It is a realm of death and decay, and prepares him for his meeting with Herne, the king of death and destruction. Here he also meets his alter ego, Gerund, who has been captured by Herne. In addition to her suspenseful plot, Yolen's language is both powerful and impressive. Gerund is named because he enters "running, falling, leaping, plopping, slipping"; he has no name other than this. Upon her first appearance, the cat mentions that she has "been walking up and down and to and fro upon the earth," echoing the Book of Job in which Satan uses these words. She is a cat with unusual power, not satanic exactly, but not a mere mortal either. Mully, the doomed hound, howls at the end of Chapter Thirteen: "It was a sound like the end of the world." Mully and Jerold are the White Goddess' defenses against Herne's great power. Jerold's reading had prepared him, partially, for his great encounter with the Wild Hunt, but some of the book's material had mystified him.



Themes and Characters

Yolen has created a world in which magic is the prime moving source, the natural realm of the human imagination. Animals talk as they do in Aesop's fables and fairy tales. Good and evil, life and death, are personified in this world as forces of nature that implacably perform their rituals year after year. Two boys and a dog play roles in the contest between winter, personified as Herne the Hunter, and summer, the White Goddess, who appears in the story as a white cat and prefers to be nameless. The White Goddess requires heroes to win her contest with Herne, and these heroes must be innocent. The two boys, Jerold and Gerund, for the most part are innocent—tainted slightly, however, by their humanity. As the cat/goddess says: "It is hard to purchase innocence today. Even childhood has been corrupted." Mully, the dog, is completely innocent.

Belief in the Wild Hunt originated in the Middle Ages when demonic forces were accepted as part of a world in which Satan had free play. The Hunt seems to have come out of the mythology of Scandinavia, and its original leader was Odin, God of storms and death. Later leaders were King Arthur, Herne the Hunter, and other legendary figures. The oldest of English histories, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, contains one of the first references to the Hunt in English. In 1127 a new bishop, Henry of Poitou, was appointed abbot of the abbacy in Peterborough. He owed his appointment to the fact that he was related to Henry I and because of his own "great stratagems," which had enabled him to get similar positions in France. Once established in Peterborough, he robbed both the abbacy and the surrounding countryside of everything he could grab, sending it overseas.

The Wild Hunters appeared as soon as the abbot came, "big and black and loathsome," mounted on black horses or goats and accompanied by hounds as black and loathsome as their masters. They stayed from February 6, 1127, until Easter. The chronicler cites these events as if they were not at all remarkable, but what could only be expected when a corrupt churchman controlled the abbacy. The leader of the twenty or thirty black huntsmen is not mentioned.

Herne, with his antlered helmet, would assume that role in later years, a more typically English demon than Odin. Yolen portrays the other figures of the Wild Hunt simply as companions to the leader rather than as the seekers of lost souls, as in the original legend.

Herne has a number of names for his opponent in the annual confrontation. She is the Summer Queen, the Lady of Light, Albina, Gaia, Maia, or Luna. She never tells him her real name. If he knew that, his mastery would be complete. She is a much more attractive figure than he, but is equally in control of those around her. Most of the time she appears as a cat. She and Herne are husband and wife, but they meet only once a year to determine which will prevail, summer or winter. During this meeting she assumes the form of a woman, but Jerold notices that one of her feet is a cat's paw. He also notices "that wherever she stepped, the white flowers of the trefoil sprang up."



She is the female principle, the spirit of life and growth; Herne, the Horned King, is the spirit of frost, snow, and death. Doubtlessly Yolen has read Robert Graves's *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), but her Queen of Summer is a more sophisticated figure than Graves's primitive moon goddess. Yolen's queen uses her barbed wit on her three innocent heroes, incapable of showing them any degree of warmth.

Jerold and Gerund are somewhat similar physically, but are very different in temperament. Jerold is quiet and studious; Gerund is constantly in motion. They live "in that same house, but in a different time or perhaps in an alternate world." Jerold reads many of the books in the library of his house; Gerund never reads and dislikes books. They have no memory of their pasts, and their innocence is the quality they have in common. Perhaps the most appealing character in the story, Mully is the only fatality. He speaks in the baying tones of a hound, his bounding energy matching that of Gerund. He destroys that sliver of the Horned King's anger that penetrates the house and assumes the form of a mouse. He drinks from the river of heroes' blood that flows in the subterranean part of the second house, and eats the decayed fruit in the garden that he crosses with Jerold and the cat en route to their battle with Herne. His death is a sacrifice for the White Goddess' triumph. The Moss Man is one of Yolen's additions to the Wild Hunt legend. He may remind the reader of the Ents in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, but he is a more sinister character than those benign tree men. Only he can enter the grounds of the house, protected by its ring of rowan trees.

He sees the name on the windowpane, but fortunately has to read it in reverse.



Topics for Discussion

1. What qualities make *The Wild Hunt* appealing to adults as well as to children?
2. Why is "Summer and Goodness and Light," as she calls herself, presented in the form of a cat?
3. What aspect of her personality is expressed in the White Goddess' prediction of what she will do to the Moss Man? She reminds Jerold of a queen in a fairy tale "and not the good queen either."
4. Is the characterization of Gerund convincing?
5. What is the function of the armor that Jerold dons before beginning his trip to the realm of winter?
6. How do the characters of Jerold and Gerund complement one another? Why does the cat choose both of them as heroes?
7. The atmosphere in *The Wild Hunt* is essentially dark and brooding. How does Yolen attempt to lighten it? Does she succeed?
8. Is there anything at all attractive in the character of Herne, the Horned King?
9. How successful is Yolen in blending the various elements of folklore that she uses in *The Wild Hunt*?
10. Where in this novel would you say that Yolen's writing is most powerful?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Does *The Wild Hunt* belong in that category of folktale that the psychologist Carl Jung describes as archetypal? The widespread legend can be found in some Indian epics and Malayan traditions as well as in Northern Europe.
2. Myths, legends, folktales, and fairy tales are similar in many ways. Describe some of these similarities. In which category does *The Wild Hunt* belong?
3. In dreams, events occur spontaneously without apparent cause. In some of Franz Kafka's stories—"The Country Doctor," for example—this dreamlike quality is present. Yolen's story has events that are similar—for instance, the sudden appearance of the river in Chapter Ten *Sort Of*. Analyze the use of dreams and dreamscapes in modern fiction.
4. What is the origin of the myth of the White Goddess? Has her image changed over the centuries?
5. *The Wild Hunt* is a story in which youth and innocence are pitted against seemingly invincible evil forces. What other stories have this theme? Is innocence itself a kind of armor against such forces?

RELATED TITLES/ADAPTIONS In 1971 the *Wild Hunt* was used as part of the plot in a novel for young adults by Pamela Lively. *The Wild Hunt of the Ghost Hounds* was published in England as *The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy*. The vicar of Hagworthy, a village in the West Country of England, decides to revive the ancient Horn Dance in an attempt to keep alive the traditions of the village. Village boys are to perform the dance. Old villagers fear it will bring back the *Wild Hunt* of supernatural hounds, led by an evil antlered rider similar to Yolen's Herne. Teenager Lucy Clough is vacationing in Hagworthy. Her friend Kester is one of the dancers. At the climax of the novel, Lucy saves Kester just as the *Wild Hunt* is closing in on him. Despite warnings that to see the *Hunt* is to become part of it, Lucy does look—seeing "in the far distance something else come moving effortlessly down the hill, floating dark and silent over the ground a shape that was crowned with a great spread of antlers." Lively's handling of the legend is more traditional than Yolen's. She is intrigued by the influence that old superstitions may still have on rural English society.



For Further Reference

Bradburn, Francis. Review of *The Wild Hunt*.

Booklist 91 (June 1-15, 1995): 1755. Yolen's intriguing chapter format—Chapter One, Chapter One Sort Of, Chapter One Almost—is her way of indicating the uneasy boundaries between reality and perception much as they are in *Through the Looking Glass*. The format may be simple, but the story is a complex blend of various European myths, legends, and folklore.

Briggs, Katherine, and Ruth L. Tongue.

Folktales of England. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, Chapter 18. "The Haunted Soul" gives an account in the rural dialect of Somerset of an old woman's experience with the Wild Hunt. The authors went into the countryside for their materials, and supply complete references for each legend and folk tale.

Hole, Christina. *English Folklore*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1945. Almost every English county has its tradition of the Wild Hunt.

It usually rode on stormy nights, but occasionally by day or when the moon was full. In northern counties the leader was usually Woden. Elsewhere, King Arthur or even the Devil himself led the Hunt. In parts of France, it was King Herod looking for more Jewish children to kill.

Jobes, Gertrude. *Dictionary of Mythology*.

New York: Scarecrow Press, 1961. The Wild Hunt was mostly associated with winter, especially the season of Epiphany. Its ghostly leader was accompanied by ratchet hounds, who created such noise that they made earthly dogs howl.

They were hunting living souls, especially at crossroads.

Jones, Allison. *Dictionary of World Mythology*. New York: Larousse, 1996. This book supplies short entries covering every aspect of mythology. For mortals to see the procession of the Wild Hunt was to invite death or disaster.

Kelly, Walter K. *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folklore*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1863, Chapter X. "The Wild Hunt: The Twilight of the Gods" gives full coverage of the legend as it was known in the mid-nineteenth century. Woden's role as the leader of the Wild Hunt in Germany is stressed. Woden's name means "the stormy or furious goer."

Krappe, Alex H. *The Science of Folklore*. New York: Norton, 1964. Explains how legends develop. Some are the outcome of dream experiences. The Wild Hunt presupposes popular fancies of a truly venerable age, which embraced the notion that the dead ride in the night wind and vent their spite on the living.

Schott, Joanne. Review of *The Wild Hunt*.

Quill and Quire 61 (July 1995): 64. Yolen has married the legend of Herne the hunter rather uneasily with other concepts from the world of legend. The chapter subdivisions seem "almost too subtle for most young readers and also for some reviewers." A negative review.

Sutton, Roger. Review of *The Wild Hunt*.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, 49 (September 1995): 50. Maintains that, despite the power of Yolen's writing, her latest novel is too artful for its own good.

It is difficult to become engrossed in the book, but after a while the parallel narratives produce a tension that matches the suspense of the story.

Whitlock, Dorothy, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961. The oldest English history is a fascinating record of events ranging from before the days of King Alfred the Great to 1154. In addition to actual events, the reader learns of the superstitions of the time, the cast of mind that led to the acceptance of the Wild Hunt.

Yolen, Jane. "An Empress of Thieves." *Horn Book* LXX (November-December, 1994): 702-05. Yolen defends the multicultural approach to her writing by saying that "stories go beyond race, beyond religion even when they are about race and religion. Crosscultural fertilization invigorates stories."

———. "Magic Mirrors: Society Reflected in the Glass of Fantasy." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 11 (Summer 1986): 88-90. "Fantasy authors reflect the society they live in just as authors of realistic fiction do, though their work is like the wicked queen's magic mirror that did not always give her the answer she expected." Under the guise of fantasy, the author presents her moral view of the world, and may teach adult values to her young readers.



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