

# Wild Robert Short Guide

## Wild Robert by Diana Wynne Jones

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## Overview

In *Wild Robert*, issues of growing up and showing kind concern for others are presented in ways that readers can thoroughly enjoy. The issues are developed in highly imaginative scenes that involve displays of magical power. The magic starts when Robert, a young nobleman who lived 350 years ago, returns to his castle and confronts its modern curators and the tourists they host.

The plot generates both hilarity and suspense as the curators' daughter Heather tries to understand and restrain the nobleman Robert, who makes mischief. Although such contact between people of the past and present is improbable, these two characters possess qualities that make them seem human and believable.

Heather learns important lessons about maturity and compassion for others because of Robert's unpleasant magic spells.

He casts the spells because he is shocked and disgusted at the bad manners he witnesses among the tourists. He wants them to respect his ancestral estate, although his family betrayed him there and caused his death for practicing witchcraft. Through Robert's situation and behavior, Jones conveys ideas about how power can be misused and people can be misjudged and mistreated. Without preaching, Jones suggests that everybody the world over, in every family and government, should cultivate the kind of sensitivity Heather develops as she walks about her castle home with its past resident, whose heart is there.



## About the Author

Diana Wynne Jones was born on August 16, 1934, in London, England. She had an unusual and unstable childhood that greatly influenced her writing career. When Jones was five, her parents undertook the first of several dislocations because of the outbreak of World War II. She spent some months with her grandparents in Wales.

They spoke in rolling paragraphs and syllables that Jones could not understand. She noted later that these sounds remained to flow like music in her mind while she wrote.

By 1943 Jones resided in a rural Essex village, where her parents managed a young adult conference/cultural center and school.

The parents deliberately resided in the main residence apart from Jones and her two younger sisters, whom they housed neglectfully in an uncomfortable hut. The three girls, all avid readers, could never get enough books. Their father kept children's novels by Arthur Ransome locked away and allowed his daughters to have only one each Christmas. By the time she was fourteen, Jones wrote her own stories to read aloud to her sisters.

In 1953 Jones went to St. Ann's College, Oxford. There she was inspired by the lectures of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

After her marriage in 1956 to English scholar and professor John Burrow, Jones took up writing again. She decided that her three sons needed good books to read, and she wanted to write an exciting and perceptive kind. She rejected realistic treatments as too painful for young readers. Jones chose instead the medium of humorous fantasy as the way to help young people cope with problems and the difficult adults in their lives.

Publishers at first rejected the stories because Jones broke with tradition. She portrayed adults as the imperfect, thoughtless or frightening figures they can really be.

She succeeded with several plays and an adult novel (*Changeover*, 1970) before her first children's book (*Wilkins' Tooth*, later entitled *Witch's Business*) was published in 1973. Jones has since published short stories and over thirty books, concentrating on novels for children and young adults.

Honored or award-winning titles include *Dogsbody*, *Power of Three*, *Charmed Life*, *Archer's Goon*, *Fire and Hemlock*, and *Howl's Moving Castle*.

Jones typically enriches her stories with such mythical or fairy tale characters as witches, ghosts, enchanted animals, or other highly imaginative as well as realistic figures. Through the reactions of her characters to magic, Jones explores such serious themes as the abuse of power, tensions between young people and adults, the need for courage or compassion, the battle of good against evil, the nature of time. Always there is the humorous touch that makes her novels not just exciting and suspenseful, but fun.

## Setting

The story takes place in contemporary England on the grounds of stately Castlemaine, part of which dates back to the twelfth century. The summer holidays are beginning, and because her bicycle is broken Heather cannot get to the village five miles away to see her friend Janine.

Heather likes to escape when the crowds of tourists arrive daily around eleven-thirty, but on this day she mistakes the time. The tourists are already blocking her path to the private castle tower.

Heather seeks a hiding-place at an isolated mound on the edge of the castle grounds, which her father believes is the site of an old ice-house. Janine, however, says that it is the burial place of Wild Robert who did witchcraft in olden days, and of his treasure. When Heather reaches the mound and finds it too dark for reading, she cries out in frustration to "Wild Robert." To her surprise a husky voice answers: "Did somebody call?"

# Social Sensitivity

Jones presents her ideas with remarkable concern for the sensitivity of readers.

One commendable feature is the departure from gender stereotyping. Jones wisely places Heather in the role of maturation.

Emotional and childish characteristics that might convey an offensive image of women are attached instead to Robert. Jones also takes care to equalize the roles of each gender. Heather could not have developed her mature, compassionate outlook without her contact with Robert's excesses and tragic past.

Some readers, their parents, or concerned adults may wish to be aware that Robert's legendary past includes terrible mistreatment by family members. The event is handled, however, with the sensitivity Jones typically displays in her stories. The impact of bitter betrayal and gruesome death is softened by an absence of graphic portrayal.

Details are reported by the remote phone voice of Heather's friend Janine, and they are steeped in the aura of a retold legend. In addition, the act bears directly upon the novel's important theme of abuse of power.

Finally, Robert himself is portrayed as a character of enduring life.

The family feuding created by Robert in turn is portrayed indirectly, in a fantastic and hilarious scene. Readers and parents may wish to be advised that the scene does contain a mildly profane utterance. Some may wish to know that Robert's background also raises sensitive issues of an adulterous relationship and illegitimate birth. However, the relationship occurred between Robert's father and a woman thought to be a fairy. They married after Robert was born.

Again, these events are shrouded tactfully in retold legend and placed within the context of a humorous tale. While Robert shows Heather the site of secret meetings between his father and mother, he supplies only the details of their names. Robert's family past is balanced, too, by the portrayal of Heather's home life. Heather's parents are together and gainfully employed.

The need for Heather to grow up and appreciate her family and her security is an important part of the novel's message.



# Literary Qualities

While *Wild Robert* seems to be a fairly straightforward story, it is cleverly crafted.

Jones sets the scene clearly in the first chapter, with tight writing that includes essential background about Castlemaine and Robert. She also begins her novel in a realistic setting. This is a technique often used by writers of fantasy (C. S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, for example) to make magical aspects of the story seem more believable when they appear. By the chapter's end, the startling words compel the reader to continue: "Did somebody call?"

Symbolism, a common technique of fantasy, is important to the introduction of Robert. Jones employs light and dark images to create the appropriate mood for the voice. When Heather reaches Robert's mound, "hidden in the mass of yew trees," she notices filtered light that looks "sort of smoky." When Heather calls out the name "Wild Robert," sunshine intensifies the smoky mist. Robert is repeatedly described afterward in terms of light. He is an "oddly bright figure," or a "clear, bright shape."

This device heightens the sense of mystery about Robert.

Descriptive images of light are employed to evoke the sense of Robert's dark, tragic side. His face "brightens" or gives way to a "bright smile" whenever he hides his inner hurt. Robert comes alive during daylight, and his magical powers die out at dark.

Jones ingeniously employs the symbol of a buried treasure to communicate Robert's lack of heart or unfeeling manner toward people. She continually anchors the story in Heather's intrigued, sympathetic or exasperated reactions, so that the reader will respond to Robert in a similar way and correctly interpret the theme.

These reactions also highlight the immaturity in Robert's behavior and the degree of change in Heather. Jones employs repetition to hammer home her theme of maturation. It is not long before Heather refers to Robert as a "small boy who has got his own way," or a "very small child," or a "spoiled baby." Always, Jones lightens her message with the humor that typifies her writing.

Jones constructs imaginative and appropriate images for each humorous occasion.

Snarling Mr. McManus turns into an ugly, growling dog. Monster ice-cream wrappers rise from the pond to rebuke the schoolchildren's disrespectful littering. The wrappers are much louder than the schoolteacher, whose shrieks at her unresponsive class cause Robert to pose the hilarious question: "Is this a school for the deaf?" The Feud Room scene in which rival family members leap angrily from their portraits illustrates the deft use of humor to support the idea that family fights are silly.

The feuding ancestors also show how Jones uses history to enrich the story. Robert himself is drawn from the Jacobean period in British history. Besides being dressed in a



style centuries old, Robert speaks in historical terms. He regards Heather's Dad as a "seneschal" or "steward" who has too large a "court" of followers.

Jones also enriches the story with images from myth and fairy tale. Robert's mother is seen as a tiny, floating fairylike woman.

The romping teenagers in a wooded area of Castlemaine are seen as gowned young women and furry creatures with hooves, after Robert transforms them. Greek mythical deities of the woods provide the basis for this scene. The shout of "IO" from the teenagers refers to a myth associated with the Greek supreme deities Hera and Zeus.





## Themes and Characters

The primary characters are Robert Toller, who appears by magic and casts spells, and Heather Bayley, whose viewpoint defines the story. Their relationship is at the center of the novel's major themes of maturation and misuse of power. Before Robert's appearance, Heather is childishly fretful and very bothered by the tourists who provide her family's income. She hates the way the tourists litter the grounds, but she also resents the time her curator-parents spend taking tour groups through. Heather thinks of the tourists as "bestly sheep."

She declares at one point, "I hate living at Castlemaine!"

Robert, on the other hand, loves his ancestral home. When he emerges from the mound, he claims ownership as the last living member of the Castlemaine Tollers.

Robert is older than Heather, perhaps in his late teens, and good-looking despite his outmoded, black silk garment adorned with a white collar. Robert displays complex qualities that Heather seeks to understand better as the day goes along. Sometimes he flashes bright smiles to hide a deep inner hurt which evokes her sympathy, and sometimes he looks lost, or haughty, or childishly naughty. Heather feels at once compelled to befriend and guide Robert, but soon she also feels that she must protect others from the spells he casts.

Robert reacts to the presence at his home of tourists and staff members by using magic in ugly and thoughtless ways, as a small boy would do. He cannot grasp the changes that have taken place since he was "put down" for witchcraft centuries ago. He cannot accept Heather's explanations of the custodial role her parents hold at Castlemaine as employees of the British Trust. Robert's responses address the theme of inevitable change and the need for individuals to adjust.

The character of Robert also relates to ideas of respect for the past and its lessons, especially the need to see improvement in family relations and an end to violence.

According to legend, Robert suffered betrayal by family members and a gruesome death because he used witchcraft. This terrible act on the part of people he trusted, along with the hurt feelings he tries to hide with smiles, would make Robert a totally sympathetic character if he had not also transgressed. He severely harassed a sister-in-law with his magic, and he retaliated against his family by starting a lasting feud.

Robert's past includes a childhood spent with a doting father who ceaselessly pampered him. As Heather comes to realize that Robert irresponsibly uses his magic arts because he never really grew up, she develops greater maturity herself. The pity she first felt for Robert grows into an improved understanding, and a genuinely concerned approach to others. This change in Heather suggests that she has been better off because her parents have not been able to indulge her. She also begins to appreciate the way her parents earn their living.



As busy curators and tour guides who care about their daughter, Heather's Mum and Dad resemble many contemporary working parents. As two of the few staff members who pop in and out of the story, these characters are minor but significant.

Heather's Dad is the type of individual who has no imagination, and he offers wholly rational explanations on the subject of Robert. He barely notices Robert and is oblivious to the magic spells. Heather's Mum, on the other hand, responds to the spells with nervous bewilderment.

Mum is especially dumbfounded when Robert magically transforms her tour group into sheep who bleat and mill about the Feud Room they came to view. In this case as in others, Robert uses his magic in ways that reflect Heather's unkind thoughts. "But you think of them as sheep yourself," he accuses Heather. When Robert also surrounds her hardworking, innocent Mum with his feuding ancestors from portraits come to life, Heather is strengthened in her new commitment to regard others with compassion. It is Heather's Mum who eventually confirms the new approach: "How grown-up and considerate you're getting, Heather."

An early step in Heather's maturation process is Robert's transformation of Mr. McManus, the gardener. Mr. McManus hates the tourists and treats them quite rudely.

He always treats Heather the same way, and on this day he annoys her new friend Robert as well. Heather hopes Mr. McManus will "tread on a rake and get concussion" until she sees what Robert does. Mr. McManus turns by magic into an animal his wife cannot recognize, and Heather has the misgivings that begin to dispel her peevish outlook.

Among the numerous, unnamed tourist characters Robert affects harshly with his magic are romping teenagers and schoolchildren who carelessly discard ice-cream wrappers and drink cans on the castle grounds. These groups represent disrespect for sites established to preserve the past and its legacy. They also highlight another message of this novel: littering is wrong.

Eventually Heather's friend Janine emerges as a significant character, although she is never more than a friend who is missed and a voice on the phone. Janine supplies Heather with the full information about Robert and his legendary past. What Heather learns from Janine allows the story to end, as fantasies usually do, in hope. That night, Heather falls asleep "thinking of ways she might even rescue the treasure that was really Wild Robert's heart."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Very early in the novel Heather says, "I hate tourists!" What reasons does she have, and what do they reveal about her outlook before Robert comes along?
2. Robert emerges into daylight from a mound. What convinces Heather to walk about the grounds with him?
3. Mr. McManus is rude to Heather and then to Robert. When Robert changes Mr. McManus into an ugly spotted dog, why is Heather "not quite as amused or as pleased as she expected to be"?
4. What part do the Franceys play in Robert's past? The Tollers? What part did Robert play in their feud, and how does it relate to themes in the novel?
5. Heather continually tries to keep Robert away from her Dad. Why?
6. Jones does not reveal at the novel's beginning the full details of the legend surrounding Robert. Why? What effect does this have on the unfolding of the story?
7. When Robert sees thoughtless teenagers throwing empty cans and later observes schoolchildren littering his property with ice-cream wrappers, has he a right to complain? What is the purpose of a historical site like Castlemaine?
8. By the time Robert turns the tourists into sheep in the Feud Room, Heather is "horrified." Why? And why does she feel "like Robert's elder sister?"
9. When Heather decides to phone Janine and learn more about Robert, Mum limits the length of the call. How does Heather react? Why?
10. At the novel's conclusion Heather falls asleep "thinking of ways she might even rescue the treasure that was really Wild Robert's heart." What does she mean? What thematic aspect of the novel does the "heart" represent?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jones believes that humor is a good way to communicate ideas. What are some humorous scenes in *Wild Robert*?

How do they reveal themes?

2. Robert is a highly imaginative creation.

What techniques does Jones use to make Robert appear unusual, mysterious or otherworldly? Does he seem less human or sympathetic a figure because of these unusual qualities?

3. Heather's dad says at one point that he thought Heather was with a friend who "had a sort of Jacobean look." Explore the word "Jacobean." What does it mean in British history?

4. What kind of person is Heather when the story begins? How does she change in the course of the story? Trace her reactions to Robert, and do not limit your discussion to the way he uses his magic arts. Consider as well his effect upon Heather's understanding of her parents and of the value of history.

5. Jones has said that children bring about a third of their miseries upon themselves, and the rest are caused by inconsiderate, frightening adults. Compare Heather's family life with Robert's, including his relationship with his father. How much is Heather responsible for her troubles when the novel begins?

To what extent are Robert or members of his family responsible for his behavior when he is with Heather?

6. Discuss the roles of minor characters in the novel. How do Mr. McManus, Heather's mum, the romping teenagers, the schoolteacher and children, and the departing, bored tourists relate to thematic aspects of the novel?

7. Examine in greater detail the concepts of "magic arts" and "witchcraft." What is generally meant by these terms? How do they apply in the novel?

## For Further Reference

Alderdice, Kit. "Diana Wynne Jones." *Publishers Weekly* (February 22, 1991): 201-202.

In this interview, Jones comments on influences in her writing, her technique, and her approach to children's literature. Jones is serious but not didactic: "There's nothing like being able to laugh at a thing to free you to use your mind."

"Diana Wynne Jones." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 12*. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 101-108. A valuable biography is provided in the context of critical commentary about selected titles, as well as lists of publications by Jones and her awards, and a bibliography of review sources.

"Diana Wynne Jones." In *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Volume 56*.

Edited by Jeff Chapman and John D. Jorgenson. Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 228-231.

Provided are updated lists of publications by Jones and sources about her, with brief critical commentary that includes her own remarks.

"Diana Wynne Jones." In *Something About the Author, Volume 70*. Detroit: Gale, 1993, pp. 115-118. Quotations from an interview with Jones appear in a biographical sketch that includes a critical overview and lists of her publications, awards and honors.

"Diana Wynne Jones: Writing for Children."

*Locus* (April 1989): 5, 62. In this interview, Jones discusses her preference for writing fantasies designed for the younger reader, her childhood "book starvation," and the development of some of her books.

Jones, Diana Wynne. In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983, pp. 166-167. Jones candidly tells how her childhood and having her own children influenced her to write.

Jones, Diana Wynne. *Speaking for Ourselves, Too*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993, pp. 106-108. Jones tells how she was inspired to write and how her first attempts to publish were rejected because she would not include the ages of young characters or portray adult characters as perfect.



## Related Titles/Adaptations

An unabridged audiocassette edition of *Wild Robert* was published in 1992 by Chivers Audio Books, with Jane Asher as the reader.

Jones typically writes humorous fantasies involving family problems and the uses of magical powers. *Aunt Maria* (1991) is a deftly crafted young adult novel that features the subduing of a family and an entire town by the magical powers of elderly Aunt Maria. Themes of maturation, family tension, and totalitarianism emerge as young Mig and her brother Chris seek to overturn the magic.

Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* and its sequel *Castle in the Air* blend magic with the element of romance for young adults. In the hilarious *Howl's Moving Castle*, a young hatter named Sophie is transformed by a witch into a bossy old housekeeper. She ends up in the castle of a vain, selfish wizard named Howl, and they bicker constantly. *Castle in the Air* follows the humorous fortunes of a young merchant named Abdullah, whose newly purchased magic carpet flies him in and out of his daydreams about noble birth and romance with a beautiful princess.

A popular fantasy series of novels by Jones is the *Chrestomanci* Cycle. It begins with the award-winning *Charmed Life* and features a government employee named Christopher Chant, the "Chrestomanci" who sees that magic is not used for the wrong purposes. Novels that follow are *The Magicians of Caprona*, *Witch Week*, and *The Lives of Christopher Chant*.



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