Wilding Short Guide

Wilding by Jane Yolen

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Overview

The events in "Wilding" (collected in Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast) take place in a future era, a time when wolves and tigers are extinct, when green skin is fashionable, and when the science of genetics has developed a process by which people can be changed into animals for a couple of hours. Changing into animals is called "wilding" and has been legalized in New York City, so long as it is done in Central Park, which has been walled off from the rest of the city. Wilding is dangerous, even when participants follow safety precautions, but Zena regards the precautions with contempt, and she goes wilding unprotected in Central Park, where murders have been reported. Can the human side of Zena protect the animal she becomes?

About the Author

Jane Yolen was born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, to Will Hyatt, an author and publicist, and Isabelle Berlin, a social worker, puzzle-maker, and homemaker. Yolen showed early promise as a writer. As an eighth-grader at Hunter, a school for gifted girls, she composed a paper in rhyme and wrote a nonfiction piece about pirates and a seventeen-page page western novel. Yolen's first book Pirates in Petticoats, published in 1963, grew from these efforts. She also wrote a play for her first-grade class.

During her high school years in Westport, New YorkConnecticut, Yolen pursued her writing and won an English prize. At this time she also developed her lasting interest in diverse religions. She was impressed by the Quaker religion when an adored cousin-in-law gave her a copy of the journal of George Fox, its founder. She attended church with a Roman Catholic friend. The observances became a source for the rituals Yolen later wove into her stories and fairy tales. She once noted that The Magic Three of Solatia, published in 1974, is a blend of Jewish, Quaker, and Roman Catholic elements. Yolen has published a number of books, including novels and a children's biography of George Fox, that reflect her enduring interest in religious subjects.

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Many years later, in 1999, Smith College gave Yolen its Remarkable Women Award. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She became an esteemed expert on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two boys. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Setting

The setting for "Wilding" is well thought out. Although Yolen does not specify a certain time for the story's events, she drops clues about the time throughout the narrative. The slang of the teenagers is different from modern slang but carries traces of modern slang in it. For instance, the word coolish is close enough to the modern use of cool to suggest that the story does not take place very far into the future. On the other hand, the bigoted term woggers is different enough to help create a tone of otherworldliness, of being significantly different in some ways from modern times.

Furthermore, youngsters use makeup and jewelry in ways that would seem unusual in the early 2000s. Yolen makes a point of this custom at the beginning by declaring, "Zena bounced down the brownstone steps two at a time, her face powdered a light green." The brownstone steps are a link to the present when they are common in New York and other Eastern American cities, but the "light green" face, which does not seem odd to other characters, seems odd to readers.

"Wilding" focuses on Zena's outing with friends at New York's Central Park. Yolen mentions that wilding has been legalized, hinting that there may be something unsavory enough about it for it to have once been illegal. "Central Park's walls were now seventeen feet high and topped with electronic mesh. There were only two entrances, built when Wilding became legal."

One way in, one way out—it sounds like a place to spring a trap, because escape would be difficult. Yolen has the problem of how to get her characters from human to animal form and from outside Central Park to inside the park. Central Park is run like an amusement park, with a guarded entrance and space for people to gather before entering the park. Pay and enter: the second problem is solved. The first problem involves more risk and is not fully solved: the youngsters walk through different levels of radiation and with each step slowly transform into animals. This is a sleight-of-hand trick in the narrative; there is no science offered to explain what happens, but the radiation idea eases the narrative into the important part of Zena's experience. "Something to do, [Zena] remembered from the wilding brochures she had read back when she was a kid, with manipulating the basic DNA for a couple of hours." The purpose of this undefined process is to progress with the plot in the park.

The park is dark, with woodlands and a large meadow. In this place, Zena transforms into a monkey, prey rather than predator, and Yolen explores what it would be like to be a monkey, then what it would be like to be a monkey pursued by human malevolence. Central Park seen from a monkey's point of view is a very mysterious place, with plenty of danger. Being at the mercy of someone, a human being, who can think better than a monkey—seen from the monkey's point of view is terrifying.

Social Sensitivity

Yolen paints just enough of a future New York City to provide a credible background for her study of Zena and for her exploration of what it would be like to be a human inside a monkey. Her teenagers are not much different from many modern ones.

The story makes the assumption that there will be some like Zena, that teenagers will ignore their parents, that fads will be important to youngsters, and that looking good will matter more to many like Zena than actually understanding what another person's character is. There is some risk to depicting future teenagers as being similar to modern ones; although hormones and instincts may not vary much from generation to generation, attitudes can change greatly. Yolen deals with this issue in her novelette "Lost Girls" (1997), in which the girls of Neverland have never known a society in which women speak up for themselves and can take action to help themselves. The arrival of a modern American girl, Darla, in Neverland presents a conflict in attitudes between Darla and the fatalistic lost girls.

In its presentation of a future New York City, "Wilding" is pessimistic. Almost offhandedly, the narrative notes that wolves and tigers are extinct. Zena herself is bigoted, quick to scorn anyone who does not share her point of view, as well as anyone who could remotely be considered an outsider. Wilding seems to be an important form of entertainment for teenagers, and it is dangerous, so New York has walled off a park for wilding, which is close to walling off teenagers from the community altogether. It is a dysfunctional society in which Zena and those like her are set apart from the community as a whole.

Literary Qualities

"[Wilding is] not .. . good. It's dangerous. There have been... deaths," says Zena's mom. This and other hints of danger are scattered through "Wilding" to build an air of menace, as well as to imply that Zena's carelessness will get her into trouble. Some of these hints are misdirections. It seems likely that by the time Zena meets her friends, she will find herself in danger.

Thus the remark that there is "something dangerous, too, even outside the park, outside of wilding" makes her boyfriend Nick seem like the threat Zena will have to deal with.

Regarding attitude, Zena is overconfident and contemptuous of the opinions of others; she recognizes and chooses to ignore warning signs that she may be headed for trouble. She is not unusual in this; many teenagers and grownups share her attitude.

Still, with discussion of killings having taken place in the park and with friends who seem wild before they even enter the park, Zena seems to have placed herself in danger of being harmed. The monkey version of Zena thinks the name "Marnie" when it sees the injured or dead girl at the foot of a tree, a deft bit of misdirection, all in the service of building suspense.

The plot of "Wilding" is resolved by means of a technique called deus ex machina, a term from classical Greek drama which means literally "god in the machinery."

The device allows supernatural forces to resolve plot complication. One or more characters from outside the story come in to resolve the plot and affect the ending. In the case of "Wilding," neither Zena nor her friends save themselves. Granted, Zena manages to recall herself to human form in time to struggle with her attacker, but it takes outside intervention, guards who are part of "the Max," to actually prevent her being murdered by someone who is armed. What the deus ex machina in "Wilding" suggests is that the plot was not Yolen's main interest in writing the story. Given her careful characterization of Zena and the details provided of Zena's experiences while wilding, it would seem that the experience of transformation itself, plus the struggle of the monkey instincts with the human consciousness were what Yolen most wanted to explore.

Themes and Characters

"Wilding" is tightly focused on Zena, a sixteen-year-old girl living in a New York City of the not-too-far-distant future. She is an antihero, which is a literary term that became popular in the 1950s and 1960s to describe, for example, a character that is graceless, inept, sometimes stupid, sometimes dishonest—a protagonist who lacks heroic qualities. These are not qualities of the traditional heroic figure, yet the protagonist does perform heroic deeds.

Zena has unsavory qualities. Typical of her thinking is "'Wilding' is a pure New York sport. No mushy woggers need apply." This is bigotry. She is a show-off who mistakes being "coolish" with being intelligent. Much of the suspense of the story depends on her contempt for wisdom and her belief that she is smarter than she actually is. In her choice of friends, coolish is everything: "There was something coolish, something even statue about [Nick]. And something dangerous, too, even outside the park, outside of wilding." She likes Nick for being coolish, as well as for being someone who would disturb her mother. On the other hand, her friend Marnie's date is a wogger, and even though he is good looking, that means he is not coolish enough for Zena. Zena's refusal to wear a collar that would enable her to instantly transform back into a human should danger threaten verges on outright stupidity.

That said, Zena is in some ways heroic, despite her numerous negatives, and she has qualities that are appealing. For example, she is very sensitive to her environment: "Soundless, [Zena] strode along by [Nick's] side, their shoulders almost—but not quite—touching. The small bit of air between them crackled with a hot intensity." She values this sort of nonverbal communication, and it helps explain why, in a positive way, she enjoys wilding. When she feels the wind, she thinks of how in animal form in the park she will be able to read all the scents on the wind; she does want to become an animal for a couple hours just to escape life for a little while; she wants to experience what it is like to be an animal.

This fact suggests that she has an empathetic nature, that she has in her the desire to understand other points of view. Perhaps doing so will eventually help her overcome her conceit and bigotry.

Zena has at least two significant heroic qualities. One is courage, which can be seen in her reaction to being attacked. Even as a monkey, with monkey instincts screaming at her to run away, she fights back. The other is that she retains her humanness even while an animal, something most other people cannot do. She sees, "At the foot of one tree was a body, human, but crumpled as if it were a pile of old clothes. Green face paint mixed with blood." The monkey does not understand, but Zena the human being is present just enough to wonder at the body, think of Marnie, and realize that the body means that something is wrong. "She sat by the side of the body," Yolen says, "shivering uncontrollably, will-less." Yet, when attacked, she wills herself back to human form and gives the murderer a good kick. She can be forgiven a great deal for that one moment of giving evil a powerful blow.

It is hard to say whether she has grown at all during the story. One of her rescuers, Carl Barkham, tells her that he and the other rescuers are part of the Max, a group of guards for Central Park. Being able to change into human form without the protective collar and without having to wait for the effects of the radiation to wear off is something members of the Max have in common with Zena. He notes that Central Park is a fearsome place, "And it's our job to make that fear safe. Control the chaos.

Keep prime time clean." That Zena wants to join the Max is admirable, but does she wish to join because she wants to help people or because Barkham's animal-like stride is the most coolish thing she has ever seen, and she likes to be near coolish men?

Topics for Discussion

1. Is Zena worthy of the life-and-death responsibility of being a Max?

2. What motivates Zena to want to become a Max?

3. What does Zena believe is "coolish?"

What does she believe is not "coolish?"

What does this reveal about her personality?

4. Is Zena admirable? If yes, in what ways? 5. In what ways is Zena ordinary?

6. Does wilding sound like fun? What would be the best part of it?

7. Newspaper reports about people being killed in Central Park worry Zena's mother, as it would most parents. Why would it not worry Zena?

8. The Max sounds like a very serious organization. Is Zena serious enough to join? Would she have to change at all in order to be part of the Max? What does Barkham seem to think (if anything) about it?

9. Why would wilding have been illegal? Why would it have been legalized?

10. Why does Zena the monkey look at the girl at the foot of the tree and think of Marnie?

11. Why would a serial killer find the Central Park of "Wilding" an attractive place?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In the science of genetics, can scientists change genes to change an organism?

What are its limitations in this regard?

2. What are the ways Yolen tries to make the society in "Wilding" futuristic?

When in the future does the story take place? How can you tell?

3. Write a story about how Zena joins the Max. What does she need to learn?

What adventure would she have? Would Carl Barkham turn out to be too old for her? What would happen to Nick, or is he even part of Zena's life anymore?

4. Write a story about living from an animal's point of view. Research the life (called "natural history") of the animal, and then envision a human living inside of the animal the way Zena lives inside the monkey.

5. Wolves and tigers are extinct in "Wilding." Pick either wolves or tigers and tell about how many different kinds there are and about what would be pushing them to extinction. Can wolves or tigers be saved?

6. Zena becomes prey in "Wilding." Write a story about her becoming a predator in Central Park. How would her perspective change? What would she do?

Would the Max have to protect others from her? Would she have fun?

7. What is a brownstone? When were brownstones first built? Where are they to be found? How have they changed?

Are they likely to survive into the future in which "Wilding" is placed?

8. Compare "Wilding" to Yolen's 1994 story "The Woman Who Loved a Bear," which can be found in Here There Be Witches (1995). Compare and contrast the animal-human transformations in each story. How are the characters affected by their transformations? How does Yolen use the transformations to advance the plots of her stories?

9. Returning to nature is an idea that often appears in literature. What is the impulse that makes someone like Zena want to live in nature like an animal?

10. Yolen's collection of stories Twelve Impossible Things Before Breakfast features some willful young heroines. How does Zena compare to these other girls? How well does her characterization, especially its realism, compare to the characterizations of the others?

For Further Reference

Golodetz, Virginia. School Library Journal, vol. 43, no.12 (December 1997): 132. In this article, Golodetz lauds the stories in Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast, in which "Wilding" appears.

"Jane Yolen." Writer, vol. 114, no. 3 (March 2001): 66. Yolen says that she writes constantly, beginning from the moment she wakes up, and she says that by having several works in progress at once she never has writer's block, because when she is stuck on one project, she shifts to another for which she has ideas.

Sherman, Chris. Booklist, vol. 94, no. 5 (November 1,1997): 463. In a review of Twelve Impossible Things before Breakfast, Sherman says, "Yolen consistently writes fresh, off-the-wall stories that even children who don't normally read fantasy will enjoy."

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." Children's Literature in Education, vol. 8 (1977): 21-29. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retelling.

"Yolen, Jane." In Something about the Author, vol. 75. Edited by Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 223-229. This is a list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

"Yolen, Jane (Hyatt)." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series, vol. 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale, 1990, pp. 463-469. This entry contains a summary of Yolen's publications and a brief interview of Yolen.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In "Wilding," Yolen creates a sense of place, a you-are-there feel to the narrative.

She often does this in longer works such as her Merlin trilogy of novellas (Passenger [1996], Hobby [1996], and Merlin [1997]), in which a medieval forest and the customs of its denizens are recreated. The sense of place is not always so strong in Yolen's short stories, though "Merion's Angel" (1996) is remarkable for how vividly it recreates a Renaissance house. From its garden to its kitchen to its private quarters, a setting is vividly constructed while telling the story of Merion, a girl who has perhaps an even more severe attitude problem than has Zena.

In "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" (1994), Yolen paints a picture of NativeAmerican life that captures the vastness of the American wilderness while it tells about a woman who is a slave. Through courage and fortitude, however, she regains her liberty, with the help of a man who can change himself into a bear.

Not only is Yolen capable of painting vivid settings for fantastic futures and mystical pasts, she can make modern settings come alive, as she does in "Fallen Angel" (1996). In this story, three modern youngsters work together creatively to help a wounded angel regain its ability to fly while bustling about a vividly depicted modern, semi-rural home with a backyard that stretches out into wilderness.

Related Web Sites

http://www.janeyolen.com. Accessed September 4, 2002. This author's official Web site contains a list of her works with brief summaries and reviews, a biography page of photos and links, a list of awards and pages for writer, teachers, and young adults.

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