The Woman Who Loved a Bear Short Guide

The Woman Who Loved a Bear by Jane Yolen

Contents

Overview

"The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is an adaptation of a tale taken from Cheyenne folklore. In it, a beautiful Cheyenne woman is kidnapped by the Crow, a tribe antagonistic to the Cheyenne. Her father is murdered, and the young woman is forced to be both slave and wife to one of the murderers.

Her situation is a grim one of abuse and misery. With the help of a shapeshifter, she draws on her fortitude to make her way to freedom in a tale of magic, romance, and adventure.

About the Author

Born on February 11,1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, Pirates in Petticoats (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. 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 has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Many of Yolen's books have made recommended-reading lists such as the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults. Among these books is Here There Be Witches (1995), the volume in which "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is found.

Setting

The grandfather who tells the story says that he is one of the grandchildren of Walks with the Sun and the shapeshifter. If this were true, the events in the story would have taken place in the nineteenth century.

The reference to white people and the presence of horses also suggest that the story takes place not very long ago. On the other hand, the setting of the story has a timelessness to it, typical of many folk tales, and the basic story of hardship being turned into love through intelligence and courage is itself timeless and has application to any era.

Historically, the Cheyenne once lived in Minnesota and the Dakotas, before they moved to reservations in Montana and Oklahoma. The grandfather mentions that the Cheyenne once lived north of where he and his grandson live, suggesting that they are in Oklahoma. The Crow lived in the general area of the Yellowstone and Platte rivers.

The Arapaho lived nearby, in the region of the Arkansas and Platte rivers. As cultural groups, the Cheyenne and Crow were very different, with unrelated languages and different histories; the Cheyenne and Arapaho shared the same language roots and had customs in common. The notion that a native American tribe had slaves may surprise some readers, but before the advancing American frontier constricted their lives, many tribes had slaves.

Social Sensitivity

There are two principal levels of social interest in "The Woman Who Loved a Bear."

One is the matter of Native American culture, as represented in its folk tales. Modern writers have been taking advantage of the variety and colorfulness of Native American folklore for at least a century, and modernizations of Native American tales appear in many books for young readers.

The issue these modernizations raise is similar to one Yolen raises in her article "America's Cinderella" (Children's Literature in Education 8 (1977): 21-29). In the article, she finds fault with modernizations of the Cinderella story in which an originally tough, strong young woman is made weak and silly. In "The Woman Who Loved a Bear," she adds the modern perspective of a youngster listening to a tale told by his grandfather, which seems to be an effort on her part to invite modern readers, through the grandchild, to look at an old tale.

The Cinderella aspect of "The Woman Who Loved a Bear"—-the second principal level of social interest—raises an issue of much present-day interest, the transformation of a woman who was a man-bound wife and slave into a free, strong-minded woman. Those who hope for a doctrinal presentation of an independent woman vanquishing men and striding free into glory are likely to be disappointed, because Walks with the Sun is not particularly concerned with doctrine, and Yolen remains faithful to the Cheyenne prototype for her story. Certainly, Walks with the Sun liberates herself through courageous action and endurance of much hardship, but she is helped by a man who devises a plan for her escape and who, in his magical form as a bear, protects her and covers her tracks so that she may not be followed by the Crow. This makes for emotionally satisfying reading, because a woman and a man find love through mutual admiration.

Although the story does not emphasize it, the grandfather demands that his grandchild listen and learn the story. This would be part of his effort to pass on his culture to a younger generation. Notably, the child thinks the story is "Cinderella" and seems unacquainted with the folklore of his Cheyenne ancestors. European folklore may be substituting itself for Cheyenne folklore, a matter that seems to irritate the grandfather.

Literary Qualities

"The Woman Who Loved a Bear" has a frame structure. In literary terms aframe is a story that provides a context for another story. In the case of "The Woman Who Loved a Bear," the frame consists of the interaction between the storyteller and his grandson. Yolen says that she hopes that the grandson will give her audience a modern perspective, a way for the audience to observe and understand the events in an old tale. Having the grandfather tell the story also personalizes it. Rather than having an objective point of view, the story has a biased narrator who is trying to convey to his audience cultural values that are important to him. The effect of this on Yolen's audience may be to pay closer attention than usual to the story in an effort to figure out why the grandfather regards it as important.

Themes and Characters

The main character of "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is Walks with the Sun, a young Cheyenne woman who, while helping her father retrieve some buffalo meat, is taken prisoner by a Crow raiding party and made a slave. Little space is given to describing her, except that she was beautiful. One learns of her character primarily through her behavior, rather than through exposition. She is submissive to the Fifth Man Over, her Crow owner and husband, and she does not defy Fifth Man Over's two other wives, who abuse her every chance they have. This quiet submission does not bode well for her development into a strong person, but she is intelligent and perhaps realizes that Crow hunters would be able to track her down if she ran away.

Being a slave does not seem to offer Walks with the Sun opportunities to mature, to grow into a stronger person, but once the Arapaho slave creates an opportunity for her, she grows quickly. Such growth is an indication of good, well-rounded characterization. Her youthfulness is evident in her romantic view of the buffalo hunt, for "she would have loved to see the buffalo in their great herds and the men on their horses charging down on the bulls, even though they were Crow and not Cheyenne"; she had heard that the thunder of a herd of buffalo "was a music that made the grasses dance." When Walks with the Sun takes the Arapaho's advice and begins making more moccasins than she, Fifth Man Over, and the other wives need, she shows that she can hope and that she has the wits to prepare for the chance of escape based on just her hope and the word of a stranger.

Her preparedness helps when the instant arrives that can she run away. When she makes good her escape, she not only shows that she is a good judge of character —"She looked straight into his face and saw that there was no deceit there"—but shows that she can think on her feet and take quick action when necessary. Her asking the Arapaho man whether he will escape, too, shows that she can be both grateful and concerned about the welfare of another even when she is under great duress. Her long journey back to her Cheyenne people is a journey of character growth as well as an adventure. Walks with the Sun proves herself to have great physical endurance, including the will power to overcome weariness and pain, and she proves herself to be a flexible thinker who can adjust to the presence of a large bear, something that had frightened her when she first saw it. She grows in courage and fortitude as she faces her trials and overcomes them.

The Arapaho slave is an enigmatic figure, as befits a shapeshifter. The grandfather says, "He was not straight and tall like a Cheyenne but limped, because his left foot had been burned in the raid that made him a slave. But he had a strong nose and straight black hair and he spoke softly to the Cheyenne woman." That he is more than he seems is hinted at when he declines to join Walks with the Sun, saying that he will be with her anyhow. It is unlikely that anyone will be surprised that he is the bear that follows her. The bear is helpful; his scaring away Walks with the Sun's horse may have been part of the Arapaho's plans— after all he had told Walks with the Sun that she would have much walking to do (during the day, it turns out, which suits her name). With her on foot,

the bear can walk behind her and place its paws in her footprints, disguising them. By using his talent as a shapeshifter, he not only frees himself, but he wins the heart of Walks with the Sun, a strong woman worthy of a magical man.

Care for her safety shows that he is worthy of a strong woman.

The narrator of the story, the grandfather, and his grandson are not significantly developed. The boy's questions show him to be an intelligent listener who pays attention to the details of the story. When the grandfather says of the bear, "But you cannot see it unless you listen," the youngster replies, logically, "I see with my eyes. I hear with my ears, Grandfather." As a good storyteller might, the grandfather asserts, "You must do both, child. You must do both." The give-and-take between grandfather and grandson is not intrusive on the main story, and it adds some depth to their characters, revealing the grandfather to be patient, loving, and proud of his heritage and revealing the youngster's inquisitive nature, as well as his loving his grandfather in return.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Walks with the Sun not immediately try to run away?

2. Why does she put up with the abuse of the two Crow wives? Why would she not tell her Crow husband of their cruelty to her and show him the bruises?

3. The grandfather says that it is time for "old men to dream by the fire." What does he mean by this? What might he dream of?

4. How does the grandfather explain why shapeshifters and magic seem to be rare nowadays? Is it a good explanation?

5. What is the significance of the bear's foot being wounded at the end of the story?

6. "While she slept, she heard the bear speak to her." Does the bear talk to Walks with the Sun within her dream, or is he talking to her while she sleeps and she hears while sleeping? What is the grandfather's explanation?

7. Does the grandson do a good job of asking his grandfather questions you would ask? What questions would you have liked him to ask?

8. "This is a true story, from the time when children played games suited to their years and spoke with respect to their grandfathers," says the grandfather. What does he mean by this? Does his remark carry more than one meaning?

9. "She looked straight in his face and saw that there was no deceit there. She did not look at his crooked leg." What is significant about Walks with the Sun not looking at the Arapaho's leg?

10. If the Arapaho slave is as clever as he seems to be, why has he not long ago escaped his Crow masters?

11. Why do the Cheyenne give the shapeshifter many honors?

12. What does the grandfather mean when he says, "But you cannot see it unless you listen"?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What Midwestern Native American tribes practiced slavery? Whom did they enslave? How did they acquire slaves?

2. Did the Crow actually practice slavery, as claimed in "The Woman Who Loved a Bear"? What were their customs regarding marriage? Were they polygamous as they are in the story?

3. Did the Cheyenne practice slavery as the Crow do in "The Woman Who Loved a Bear." How did they protect themselves from Crow raiders and other enemies?

4. Horses are important in "The Woman Who Loved a Bear." What role did horses play in the lives of plains Native Americans?

5. Are shapeshifters an important part of Cheyenne folklore? Are they important in the folklore of other Native American tribes? What are they usually like?

6. Buffalo and buffalo hunting are significant aspects of "The Woman Who Loved a Bear." What role did buffalo play in the lives of the Cheyenne or the Crow? Why would it be important that the grandfather and his grandson be sitting on buffalo hide?

7. What were the marriage customs of the Cheyenne? How would Walks with the Sun have married her husband? What would be expected of each after being married?

8. Walks with the Sun is a colorful and beautiful name. What customs governed how the Cheyenne named their young? What are some examples of Cheyenne names?

9. If the Crow were intent on tracking someone, what techniques would they use? Would having a bear walk in Walks with the Sun's tracks prevent them from tracking down Walks with the Sun?

10. The Arapaho slave has a "crooked leg." Such a figure may be called a "limping hero," a figure found in much folklore. What are some examples of other limping heroes? Do they, like Walks with the Sun's Arapaho husband, have suit e Woman Who Loved a Bear pernatural powers that seem to compensate for their bad legs?

11. What was the role of a man with supernatural powers in the Cheyenne society? What was expected of him?

For Further Reference

Hurt, Karen. Booklist 92, 4 (October 15, 1995): 397. If not enthusiastic, Hutt at least likes Here There Be Witches.

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

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463-69.

A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview of Yolen.

Scanlon, Donna L. School Library Journal 41, 12 (December 1995): 110. A review of Here There Be Witches that praises its poetry as well as fiction.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In Something about the Author. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." Children's Literature in Education 8 (1977): 21-9.

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 retellings. "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is an example of her continuing interest in the Cinderella figure, particularly the strong, courageous version she finds in the original tales but not in many modernized versions.

——. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

——. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

——. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales." Locus 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

——. Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie lore in the Literature of Childhood. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

——. The Writer (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, and discusses why she enjoys writing.

——. Writing Books for Children. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.

Related Titles

Yolen has long had an interest in the folk tales and religious beliefs of cultures other than her own. In the case of "The Woman Who Loved a Bear," she retells a Cheyenne story that she found in her reading. It is interesting that she chose to include it in her collection of stories and poems Here There Be Witches, because the magical figure is male, not female. This may be because he shares in common with the witches in Yolen's other tales the ability to transform experience through his magic, and like the witches in "The Face in the Cloth" (please see separate entry), his wisdom holds the key to a woman's liberating herself. In "The Face in the Cloth," a woman liberates herself from her mother's image, aided by hints from three magical sisters; in "The Woman Who Loved a Bear," a woman liberates herself from a society in which she is both wife and slave. Yolen herself sees a link between the magical figures in the stories, saying, "All cultures recognize people of power. Sometimes they are called witches, sometimes wizards, and sometimes, as in this story ["The Woman Who Loved a Bear"], they are shapeshifting shamans."

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
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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

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