Wooden Bones Short Guide

Wooden Bones by Charles de Lint

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Overview

Much of de Lint's work is written for grown-ups, although it all appeals to young adults, but "Wooden Bones" was written for a young adult audience. It features an unusual adventure of a city girl at the rural home of her aunt and uncle. A light shines in a ruined barn on a hill, a light that only Liz seems to see, and in that barn is a great mystery, and once she fathoms it, she will have fathomed her own heart.

About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, the Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmit, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmit-de Lint, was a school teacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1961. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15, 1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he was a record store manager until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends. A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His Jack the Giant Killer won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "HOMer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for The Little Country. The Little Country also was included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age, in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected Trader as one of its Best Books for Young Adults in 1998.

Setting

"Staying here was going to be like living in a junkyard," Liz notes upon arrival at her aunt and uncle's home. Her uncle is a renovator who spends more time renovating other people's property than his own.

Thus the front yard of his home on the family farm is littered with debris. Nearby are "the remains of outbuildings and barns that looked, to Liz's city eyes, like the skeletons of ancient behemoths, vast wooden rib cages lifting from the fields to towering heights." Wooden rib cages will appear again as Liz learns that in addition to a great deal of junk, the farm harbors some very old, very odd residents. That she sees the barns as rib cages may be why she can see and hear the fiddler, who views them the same way.

Social Sensitivity

"I don't do drugs, she [Liz] thought. So I've got to be going crazy." Liz carries a great deal of pernicious psychological baggage, but she is a smart youngster who has been wise enough to avoid using drugs.

Even so, it seems that people who meet her think she does. In fact, from her parents to her aunt, she is regarded as a bad kid, and she has encouraged this view with her sarcastic attitude. Her problems with self-image are laid on perhaps too thick in "Wooden Bones," but the fiddler cuts close to a truth for many young people when he notes that "Everybody saying that she was no good until she began to believe if herself, until she wore the part and made it true." It is heartening that "Wooden Bones" cuts to the heart of an emotional issue that many young adults endure, the living down to the expectations of others who abuse her.

The fiddler's suggestion that she should work to define herself, warning her that it will require as much practice as playing the wooden bones will demand, is a good one, without diminishing the complexity of Liz's interior life.

Literary Qualities

There is beauty in a well-told story, one that is well-crafted the way "Wooden Bones" is. Its pacing is superb, with only a slight bump during the somewhat preachy passage in which Liz learns to work on herself.

Place and atmosphere are sketched quickly and sharply at the beginning as Liz looks at the ruins of the family farm. Suspense begins with her situation, that of a young woman rejected by both her parents and considered wayward by everyone. Her efforts to smile and act as if she is happy with farm chores seem to gain her nothing; when she sees the light in the barn and mentions it, the notion that she is abusing drugs almost immediately comes up. Out of this situation grows tension; the conflict in the story is both within Liz, who doubts herself, and between her and the low expectations others have of her. The elegant summary of her situation arrives in the music of the fiddler, and suspense reaches it peak when Liz confronts him. The mysterious fiddler turns the story into an adventure within Liz's imagination, with her imaginative breakthrough coming when she realizes that she can take charge of herself and 468 Wooden Bones make herself into someone better than she and others expect of her. Thus, idea and form are one in "Wooden Bones," with the story of rising suspense also being a story of rising expectations for Liz.

Themes and Characters

"Wooden Bones" is a tale of images conflicting with reality. For instance, Liz's first impression of the family farm is a mistake: "Staying here was going to be like living in a junkyard." Liz is mistaken about what the farm can do; a big clue for readers is the profession of her uncle, a renovator. When Liz feels "Abandoned just like the rusted machinery and outbuildings up on the hill," she needs what the broken buildings around her need: renovation. Thus when she first sees the fiddler's barn, she sees a wreck on a hill. Later, when she seeks out the light, she sees a wondrous place: An oil lamp lit row upon row of wooden carnival horses, all leaning against each other along one side of the barn. Their polished finish gleamed in the lamplight, heads cocked as though they were listening to the music. Their painted eyes seemed to turn in her direction.

Under the right light, the wrecked abandoned barn is new, with amazing contents that can only be seen by those who look for them in the right way. Master of the barn is the fiddler, a man with a rabbit's head. He is a renovator like Liz's uncle, but he is a renovator of people.

At first, not only does Liz think of herself as junk, she appears to be out of place on a farm. Her cousin Annie Bohay seems much more suited to the environment: Annie Bohay wore her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She had a roundish face, with large brown eyes that gave her the look of an owl. Her taste in clothing leaned toward baggy jeans, running shoes, and T-shirts, none of which did much for her plump figure.

This is a fine picture of the stereotypical farm girl. But Liz is the picture of an urban rebel: In contrast, Liz was bony and thin, her own jeans tight, her black leather boots narrow-toed and scuffed, her T-shirt cut off at the shoulders and emblazoned with a screaming skull's head and the words Motley Crue, her blond hair short and spiky.

After such a description, Liz seems to be an alien in the farm environment. Her seeming unsuitedness to her surroundings makes the environment seem dangerous; her inexperience with rural life could get her into trouble if she wanders far without supervision. When she does wander away, she seems to be moving into a menacing landscape: "Moonless, with clouds shrouding the stars, there wasn't much to see at all. A pinprick of uneasiness stole up her [Liz's] spine." Yet, the image of Liz herself is as wrong as is her image of herself and her surroundings.

The fiddler is a curious figure. When she peers into the barn, Liz notes that "His clothes were so patched that it was hard to tell what their original color had been." The fiddler's music calls to her, but whether it calls to do her good or do her evil is not clear. Then she realizes that "Those weren't ribbons hanging down from under his hat.

They were ears." He is a frightening figure, mostly human, but with a rabbit's head.

That Liz loses consciousness and awakes in the yard of the house with no notion of how she got there adds to the impression that the fiddler and the barn may be up to something that will do Liz harm.

Neither cousin, uncle, nor aunt put credence in what Liz says. Their opinion of her has already been formed. Aunt and uncle fear that she has abused drugs. Annie teases her by embellishing Liz's already fearful notions of what she has seen: "He [the fiddler] hides in the trees, a big old bear of a man, smelling like a swamp and playing his fiddle, trying to lure unwary travelers close so that he can chew on their bones." This is a skillful bit of misdirection by de Lint; in the form of Annie's teasing he imparts to his audience the notion that the rabbitheaded man may be a menacing being.

But the images are false. Liz does not abuse drugs, and she is not an insolent fourteen-year-old city girl. The reality of the fiddler is much stranger than Annie's account of a nasty old-man-of-the-woods.

He is, he eventually explains, one of the old people who had populated the land before human beings came along. The magic of his music is not that of a siren, calling Liz to her doom. Instead, it heals the spirit. The fiddler tells her that she is carrying "baggage [that] was like the rot that gets into an old tree sometimes." She hears in his music "Her father's voice, her mother's voice. Her aunt, her teachers. The policeman who'd caught her shoplifting. Everybody saying she was no good until she began to believe it herself, until she wore the part and made it true." It turns out that the seemingly inhospitable farm was exactly where she needed to be; it is "a place where two worlds meet," that of the new people like Liz and that of the old people like the fiddler.

The music tells Liz that "The old people made the lost welcome—for some the old world became their home; for others, it was a resting place until they could go on again."

For Liz, it seems to be a resting place. The music gives her spiritual sustenance, and through its images she sees that she is not what she and others saw in her, that she could be better. The fiddler gives her a pair of wooden music sticks: "Bones. Wooden bones," says the fiddler. "They're usually made from ribs of animals, but I like the sound of the wood, so I make them from the ribs of the old barns instead." The seemingly dead old barns are like once living things to the fiddler; the barn in which he plays seems alive and new when he is there, not the ruin it had first appeared to be. This seems to be part of the fiddler's lesson for Liz, that outer images are not necessarily valid images, that what seems dead may actually be alive. Liz, who has seen herself as another wreck among the farm's wrecks is as transformed as is the old barn by the fiddler's music; she is no more a wreck than the wooden carnival horses. Her epiphany comes with the gift of the wooden bones.

They require practice to be played correctly, just as Liz needs to practice being the good person she wishes to be. When she leaves the barn with the wooden bones in hand, again appearing in the yard of the house as if her experience had been a fantasy, she shows herself to be a doer, someone who is only resting before moving on. She is not

running away from her unpleasant life of abandonment, but is about to actively engage in life, knowing that with work she can learn to play her life's music herself.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the fiddler appear only to Liz and not to Annie or Liz's aunt and uncle?

2. What objections does Liz have to her aunt and uncle's home?

3. Why do people suspect that Liz abuses drugs?

4. Why does Liz feel abandoned "just like the rusted machinery and outbuildings up on the hills"?

5. What is the significance of the "wooden carnival horses"?

6. How is it that the fiddler knows about Liz's life and her feelings?

7. Why does Liz not run away or hide from the fiddler? Why seek him out as she does?

8. Why cannot everybody see the "old people" and visit the "old world"?

9. Why does Liz's aunt want to get rid of her?

10. Is Liz's life going to be better because of her experience with the fiddler?

11. What does the fiddler mean when he says, "Build on the hurt. Let it temper who you become instead of wearing you down"?

12. Is Liz a quitter, someone who gives up too easily?

13. What is the point the fiddler makes with the wooden bones?

14. De Lint seems to be counting on his readers having read other supernatural tales about mysterious men in the woods, ones in which there is much danger for the main character, in order to lure his audience into false impressions that will later be corrected. How successful is he in playing on your expectations of where the tale will go?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The fiddler has the head of a rabbit.

What folk tales have figures that are human except for animal heads? What seems to be a common reason for depicting such characters?

2. De Lint's tales more often take place in urban settings than rural ones. Does he use techniques in "Wooden Bones" that are similar to those in his urban fantasies such as the Newford stories? For instance, note the pervasive decay in "Wooden Bones," with junk scattered about, old farm buildings abandoned and decaying, and even a spot where a house burned down and was not replaced, all reminiscent of decaying urban neighborhoods.

3. Are Liz's psychological problems common among young adults? What do psychologists have to say about her fulfilling other people's low expectations of her?

4. The fiddler says, "Look for me, and I'll be there.... Listen, and you'll hear me."

Write a short story in which Liz does as the fiddler advises. What are the reasons she looks and listens? How will the fiddler manifest himself? How will it help Liz?

5. Music plays an important role in Liz's adventure. De Lint uses music in many of his tales. How does he present music? What are its effects on characters?

What does it represent? How typical of de Lint's work is the presentation of music in "Wooden Bones"?

6. "Wooden Bones" uses a great deal of symbolism to get its point across. What are the symbols, what do they mean, and how do they advance the narrative?

7. In what other stories is music portrayed as having healing power? (You might start your research with Peter S. Beagle's The Last Song of Sirit Byar; see separate entry.) How do these stories portray the interaction of music with their characters? How are they similar to "Wooden Bones"? How do they differ?

8. A different tack on the idea of topic 7 is to focus on only de Lint's writings, perhaps on his Newford stories, which often echo themes found in "Wooden Bones."

For Further Reference

de Lint, Charles. http://www.cyberus.ca/ ~cdl. An exceptionally fine author's web site with information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and an FAQ (frequently asked questions) section in which he answers questions about himself and his views. In the FAQ page, he says, "My own beliefs probably run more closely to an idiosyncratic form of animism, which isn't to say that I actually believe that trees, stones, wells, whathave-you actually have souls, but at the same time everything certainly seems to have a spirit of some sort, something that goes beyond what we see when we simply look at it."

——. "Interview with Charles de Lint."

Conducted by Chuck Lipsig. De Lint says, "This interview first appeared in an on-line magazine called Sphere, albeit in a much altered form." The present writer has not been able to find the original interview, but the version to which de Lint refers is to be found at his web site. In the interview, de Lint says, "I write in what I call a very 'organic' style of writing. In other words, I'm finding out every day what happens, the same way a reader would."

——. "An Interview with Charles de Lint."

Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine no. 32 (Summer 1996). Conducted by Lawrence Schimel. This interview was conducted via written correspondence.

Although the interview is extensive, it remains throughout well focused on de Lint's literary work. In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world." A copy is available in de Lint's Internet web site.

——. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint." The Wordsworth 8,4 (January 1998). Conducted by Mike Timonin. A longer version of this interview appears in de Lint's web site. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."

Hutcheson, Barbara. School Library Journal 35, 14 (October 1989): 139. In this review of Things that Go Bump in the Night (edited by Jane Yolen and Martin H. Greenberg), in which "Wooden Bones" appears, Hutcheson finds the stories to be uneven in quality.

Vasilakis, Nancy. Horn Book Magazine 66, 1 (January-February 1990): 73-74. In this review of Things that Go Bump in the Night (edited by Jane Yolen and Martin H. Greenberg), in which "Wooden Bones" appears, Vasilakis finds some good reads.

Related Titles

De Lint is a prolific writer of short stories. Most of them take place in urban settings, especially fictional Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life.

These stories often feature an outsider such as Liz and make use of the buildings and other environs of the city as symbols much the way structures are used in "Wooden Bones."

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