Dance of the Snow Dragon Short Guide

Dance of the Snow Dragon by Eileen Kernaghan

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Young Sangay Tenzing left his family home where he herded yaks to be trained as a monk. He learns much and tries hard, but is not content. During a spiritual retreat, the young monk has a vision which leads him on a long journey. With the aid of Jatsang, a traveling sorceress, Sangay overcomes many perils on the road to Shambhala.

There, he finds that the king is in great danger and the kingdom is under attack both spiritual and actual. As all the king's subjects sleep under a magic spell, Sangay is the only one who can go to the mandala at the center of Shambhala and resist the spiritual menace. When he has freed the king and his kingdom from the magic spell, he is caught up in their army to fight the invaders. Successful in both struggles, the young man is honored by the people of Shambhala.

All that he has learned through his instruction as a monk and while traveling with Jatsang falls into place as Sangay realizes who he is and what he will be.

About the Author

Canadian author Eileen Kernaghan was born in Enderby, British Columbia, in 1939, daughter of William Alfred and Belinda Maude Monk. The author grew up on a dairy farm near Grindrod, a small village of 600 residents at the north end of the Okanagan Valley. After finishing elementary school in Grindrod, young Eileen went to high school in Enderby, a town big enough to have a hospital but small enough that (a few years later) even the Mayor's dog was called "Sir."

Young Eileen started writing about the same time that she learned to read, at age five. When she was very young, she loved to read the exotic adventures in antique lands of A. A. Merritt, Clark Ashton Smith, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. "I read whatever I could find on my parents' shelves," Kernaghan said in an interview for a future issue of Canadian Children's Literature. "Jack London, Rider Haggard. . . and the tattered and musty copies of Weird Tales that an uncle had left behind. I was fascinated with stories of lost cities, forgotten kingdoms— anything that was arcane and exotic." Later on, she discovered Jack Vance, Mary Renault, Ursula K. LeGuin, Gene Wolfe, and Tanith Lee. Now the author says that she enjoys reading the works of Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens as well as the new Canadian writers Gail Anderson-Dargatz and Ann-Marie MacDonald.

The earliest surviving manuscript of her writing is "Molly in Mouseland," which she described in an interview with Nancy Bennett for Scavenger's Newsletter as "a blatant rip-off of Lewis Carroll, written when I was eight or nine." Kernaghn added: "When I ran into my fourth grade teacher thirty-five years later, he told me he still had it in his files." She followed this story with a number of space adventures inspired by Flash Gordon. At twelve she sold a story of a boy's adventure in the north woods to the weekend magazine from the Vancouver Sun newspaper for $12.65. The next story she sent to the Sun was rejected, and it was twenty years before she submitted any of her fiction to a publisher again.

In junior high school young Eileen was the Grindrod correspondent for The Enderby Commoner newspaper. She was too shy to phone the neighbors and ask them for news, so her mother did the interviews for Eileen's articles.

After finishing high school, she attended the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and taught elementary school in the interior of British Columbia for several years. She married Patrick Kernaghan in 1959, and had three children in four years before beginning to write again.

Her first three book-length manuscripts were rejected by publishers, to her present relief. With the sale of a science fiction novelette, "Starcult," to Galaxy magazine in 1971, she became for about a month the only currently publishing science fiction author residing in Canada. That state of affairs quickly changed, as several authors resumed writing, others returned to Canada, and beginners made their own first sales. As of the

year 2001, there are well over a hundred professional Canadian science fiction authors and several times that number of dedicated amateur writers.

Kernaghan has contributed to two poetry collections: Light Like a Summons (1989) and Quintet: Themes & Variations (1998), and has produced her own poetry chapbook in 1999, called The Dark Gardens of the Zodiac.

She was also the coauthor of two nonfiction books: The Upper Left-Hand Corner: A Writer's Guide for the Northwest (1986) and Walking after Midnight (1990), the latter based on a documentary film by Jonathon Kay on reincarnation and near-death experiences.

Her poetry and stories have appeared in the award-winning Tesseracts anthology series and in the Canadian speculative fiction magazines On Spec and Trans Versions, as well as in many other professional and semi-professional publications.

Kernaghan is a part-time writing instructor and co-owner of Neville Books with her husband. A founding member of the Burnaby Writers' Society in Vancouver, the author is also an active member of the Science Fiction Writers of America and SF Canada (the Canadian association of professional science fiction writers). Another professional group of which she is a founding member is The Lonely Cry, a small group of writers who have a website and a newsletter to promote their books and readings. Kernaghan writes at home in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada.

Setting

The novel is set in eighteenth-century Bhutan, and Kernaghan bases her story on Tibetan Buddhist legends of a journey to the mystical kingdom of Shambhala, beyond the furthest snow peaks.

This novel evolved partly from the author's interest in Tibetan Buddhism. Before she began writing Dance of the Snow Dragon, she had just finished a non-fiction book, Walking after Midnight, which involved research into eastern philosophies and an interview with the Dalai Lama. About that time, a friend and writing partner, Mary Choo, had been fascinated with the Royal Bhutanese Dance Troupe when they performed in Vancouver. Choo suggested that Kernaghan try Bhutan for the setting of a new fantasy, since Tibetan Buddhism has been preserved there in a very pure form.

Though Kernaghan knew absolutely nothing about Bhutan at the time, she went to the library. After reading everything she could find on Bhutan—history, geography, folklore, travel books, and a great number of books on Tibetan Buddhism and the influence of Bon animism—a story began to develop.

Kernaghan took special care to get videos and guidebooks, photographs and travel brochures from the Bhutanese government and travelers and performers. She attended a lecture by a woman doctor who had lived in Bhutan and heard the monks of the Drepung Monastery on tour at Simon Fraser University. She even got an eyewitness account of the Kalachakra Initiation ceremony from her daughter Sue, who had attended when it was held in the Indian Himalayas.

She learned that modern life in Bhutan is similar in many ways to life in the eighteenth century.

Sangay's early home life is not full of the material comforts and leisure expected by most North American families. His family members are subsistence farmers and yakherders. But the home-grown food and shelter are more than adequate, though simple (he sleeps on the floor, near the fire). The labor is steady and shared, and the emotional comforts are sustaining for the young boy and all his family. The reader learns quickly that Sangay feels at home in his family, in his village, and in the world. He knows where food and clothing and shelter come from, and he knows what is required of him in this place where he belongs.

The monastery contrasts strongly with the simple homes of Sangay's village. Set higher in the mountains, this grand stone complex shelters dozens of monks in plain cells. The chill of the stone floors is austere compared to the size of the halls and meeting spaces. But it is in the writings and the shrines and the tapestries that the monastery reveals its wealth, a spiritual continuity with the past that will sustain the world for the future.

On his journey, Sangay learns finally about the wild places of the world he lives in, moving through barren or lush ground and navigating spiritual and mundane dangers

with the aid of Jatsang. He learns that mundane threats can be faced and overcome with effort and help; far more dangerous are human greeds and fears.

Social Sensitivity

There is no proselytizing in Kernaghan's novel Dance of the Snow Dragon. Instead, the reader can rely on the internally consistent story and on Sangay's confidence that he is part of the natural world and shapes it with his thoughts and beliefs. There is no necessity for the reader to take on or to put aside any personal faith in order to sustain interest in Sangay's adventures. The rituals and ceremonies that Sangay learns as a young monk will not offend the belief systems of most Western readers. The devotions and venerations of this young monk are compatible enough with Judeo-Christian beliefs (for example) that few readers would reject Sangay and his quest as worthless merely because of being "heathen."

When the Pope and the Dalai Lama met and talked in ecumenical friendship, they stated clearly that there is a need for greater understanding between Eastern and West ern faiths, and that each has much to learn from the other. This book is a noble effort toward that goal and as such can be particularly recommended for religious studies programs.

Young Buddhists living in North America may enjoy this book not only because Sangay is a Buddhist, but because his faith is presented in a straightforward fashion. It does not seem exotic or foreign, partly because the story is set in an isolated part of the world where it is not being compared to other faiths. It does not need any explanation or justification, any more than Sangay's mother needs to explain her love for her son. In this story, Buddhist beliefs are the norm.

Kernaghan states in an interview with Mary Choo for Canadian Children's Literature, her belief that anyone living in Canada becomes aware of and is affected by cultural diversity. For thirty years, she lived in a suburb of Vancouver, an increasingly multicultural community with neighbors from every corner of the globe, including a household of Tibetan monks. Growing up in a largely Ukrainian farming community, the author became aware early on that there are many different patterns of belief and many different ways of looking at the world.

Her fascination with how people of other cultures perceive their world finds its way into her writing, as does her fascination with how people are alike in many ways in spite of apparent differences.

Literary Qualities

The novel is divided into several parts, most of them longer than a chapter, each dealing with a different part of Sangay's life. This is a practical division and less arbitrary than short chapters. At the climax of the story, his time in Shambhala is described under the title "Dance of the Snow Dragon," a title fittingly assigned to the entire book. (It is a far more suitable title than, say, "Sangay the Monk" or "Adventures in Shamhala" would be.) The Snow Dragon is a mythical and symbolic beast, an elemental that is summoned to protect the kingdom of Shambhala and the knowledge by which Shambhala sustains the mundane world.

A metaphor maintained throughout the novel is that the dances the monks study reproduce in microcosm the world itself.

The Snow Dragon moving in its dance makes up the world and sustains it. This is a far more active metaphor than the Midgard Serpent of Norse Mythology: picture Ourobouros not only girdling the world but marking out its borders and defending it from destructive invaders. What has previously been the story of one monk who sees a little farther than his own small life is entered briefly by a creature too grand to be seen in its entirety.

In this novel that includes so many meals and footsteps, Kernaghan achieves not only heroic deeds but grand metaphor and philosophy, and brings the reader home for a feast.

Both Sangay's early life with his parents and his long journey on foot are described with great attention to sensory detail. The closest many North American readers come to some of Sangay's experiences could be on a prolonged camping trip or a wilderness retreat. Kernaghan does not shy away from the aches and pains that Sangay endures, nor does she make a tedious list of all possible complaints. Realism, for this author, does not get in the way of the narrative or the advancing plot.

Throughout the novel, Kernaghan uses sounds and smells, warmth and chill, hunger and satisfaction to give the reader a strong sense of Sangay's experiences. This is a multi-sensory narrative, which uses more than mere visual images and dialogue to tell a story. It would have great appeal when read aloud, but may mean most to readers who can gallop through the pages at their own pace.

Themes and Characters

The cast of characters includes Buddhist monks, ancient warriors, and kings in their mighty palaces. A young apprentice monk seems very small in a world including all these people, plus the grand mountains and weather in many forms.

Even more clearly depicted than Sangay, the young yak-herder who becomes a monk, is Jatsang, the sorceress who decides to accompany him on his journey. That is partly because for the first half of Sangay's story, he is much like the other young people in the village and the monastery. However, Jatsang has a motley assortment of talents and character traits that make her more unique than anyone else in the story.

The monks and Abbot may have taught Sangay for seven years, but Jatsang is able to teach him much in a journey of some weeks.

In the early part of the novel, Sangay works and plays with other children—his girl-cousin Dechen from his village and young apprentice monks in the monastery.

Kernaghan's experiences as a mother (or excellent recall from her own childhood) have helped her write realistic interactions among these children. In the latter part of the novel, Sangay sets out on a journey which sets him among less ordinary people—bandits and hermits, and strange creatures like yeti and tulpas. Kernaghan manages to bring a sense of wonder to these interactions while still making them seem believable.

The home life of young Sangay is both comforting and interesting. Though he has more responsibilities than many North American children who dwell in cities, the duties of a yak-herder are not too much for a five to eight-year-old boy. There is time to play with his cousins and sibling, just as there is for children in modern farm families. An on-going theme throughout the novel is that there is always useful work to be done, for daily maintenance, for training, and even after one has had visions.

This novel is a clear depiction in fiction of the truth of a Zen Buddhist saying: "Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water."

But there is more than only work at home and, later, in the monastery. It is clear that Sangay's parents both rely on their son and care for him deeply. They give him useful, handsome gifts when he is sent to the monastery. The knowledge of their love sustains the boy even when he is far away.

It is also clear that Sangay's teachers see him as more than a pair of hands to sweep floors. He is given a fine education and taught to use his mind and body well by teachers who are concerned for his moral development and expect him to accomplish more than polishing shrines.

It is both a duty and an honor for each family to send a son to be trained as a monk.

A country which provides a marginal living for a limited number of people cannot sustain a growing population without limits. Conscripting so many young males to be monks is partly a form of population control and partly a way to train a standing army for defense. Some may say it is among the gentlest ways possible to do both.

The training of a Buddhist monk encourages acceptance and obedience rather than heroic individual action. Kernaghan worked to make her protagonist faithful to the tenets of his Buddhist faith, yet capable of strong, independent action in the face of danger and adversity. "And so," Kernaghan says in an interview posted on The Lonely Cry website, "I gave my young hero Sangay as role-models the warrior-monks of earlier times who bore arms in defense of their country; and as mentor, the fiercely independent-minded Bon sorceress Jatsang."

It will not escape the reader who knows anything about the high mountains of the Himalayas that she also gave Sangay the name Tenzing. Tenzing Norgay was the Sherpa guide who, with Sir Edmund Hilary, first climbed Mount Everest safely to the summit and returned.

Sangay's quest to find the King of Shambhala bears some resemblance to the Quest for the Holy Grail and to the story of Percival. It is fascinating to note that a novel (written by a Canadian) which makes something of Tibetan Buddhism understandable to English-speaking readers, can touch on traditional story elements from the Grail Quest's blending of Celtic myth and Christian imperialism (composed by authors influenced by the Norman French). Perhaps the reason lies in both stories being composed by authors who intended to improve cultural understanding in their multi-cultural audiences, in addition to writing a good adventure story.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the story start so long before Sangay's adventure?

2. Why is there a tradition for one son from each family to become a monk?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of this tradition?

3. What are the responsibilities of Sangay and the other children in his family?

4. What are the boys being taught in the monastery? For what are they being prepared?

5. Why are so many of Sangay's adventures described? Why does not the author just write "after many hardships, Sangay arrived at Shambhala" and then concentrate on his actions there?

6. If Jatsang is a woman, why does Sangay have no romantic attraction to her? Is he too young?

7. If writers are expected to "write what they know," how could Kernaghan write a novel set long ago in a place she has never been?

8. Why does the author describe so much of the natural world so thoroughly? Is not what Sangay says and does the important part of the story?

9. Why does Sangay have a companion for much of his journey? Why does Jatsang leave Sangay to complete his journey alone?

10. What are some reasons the author might have had for Jatsang being young and female? What difference would there be if Jatsang had been very old and withered or male?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In most cultures and communities, who are the people who take up "the religious life" in one form or another? Is this avocation different for those who live in a cloister or from those who minister in the community?

2. What are the necessary elements for a quest story? What is sought during a quest? What does the protagonist find by the end of the quest? How is a quest resolved?

3. Outline parallels between Dance of the Snow Dragon and the Grail Quest of Percival. What elements make each story unique? What elements are common to both stories?

4. What does Joseph Campbell say about the nature of heroes and quests in his book Hero with a Thousand Faces? Take Sangay and his quest through the analysis that Campbell makes of myths. Is Sangay a hero by Campbell's definition?

5. When one son from each family is sent to become a monk, is that considered conscription? What parallels are there between being sent to become a monk and being drafted into the army? For what are these young monks being prepared? What is the effect upon the community to have one boy from each family cloistered in a monastery?

6. Compare the short story "The Nine Billion Names of God" by Arthur C. Clarke with Dance of the Snow Dragon.

Why are there so many story elements in common? Can you discover any indication that Kernaghan has read Clarke's story? What differences does it make that there are Western men in the short story?

7. Create a sound experience of a morning in Sangay's training as a monk, either as an audio recording or a live performance. Include such elements as chanting mantras, turning prayer wheels, and fluttering prayer flags, as well as the sounds of polishing brass, sweeping floors, and other mundane duties of the young monks. A live performance could include a Tibetan garment or cloth displayed for color, or perhaps burning incense and juniper, and also clarified butter in small lamps for scent. Consider preparing a written hand-out to accompany the sound experience, detailing each element included.

8. Compare and contrast animism with Christian beliefs. Are there any similarities between a patron saint and a genius loci? As Christian beliefs became more widespread across Europe, what faiths were being replaced?

9. Write a short story about a young person making a spiritual journey, based on the teachings of your own faith. This story should be comparable in length to the first two chapters of Dance of the Snow Dragon, rather than to the entire novel. Consider having the young person enter a cloister or a program of religious studies, or perhaps take a journey in the wider world.

For Further Reference

Barbour, Douglas. "Snow Dragon Breathes the Magic of Life's Journey." Edmonton Journal (November 26, 1995). In this review, Barbour stated, "Kernaghan tells this story like an ancient fable, and the magic of Sangay's travels is subtly underlined by the understated quality of her prose."

Beaty, Mary. Quill & Quire (June 1995).

Comparing the latter chapters of the book to J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, Beaty gives Dance of the Snow Dragona positive review, saying "Kernaghan unwinds this tale with powerful force and tight control."

Bennett, Nancy. "The Women of the Lonely Cry." Scavenger's Newsletter (November 2000): 2-4. An interview with Bennett about her early writing efforts.

The Blue Jean Collection. Edited by Peter Carver. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Thistledown Press, 1992. Anthology of young adult short fiction, including Kernaghan's "The Tulpa," an excerpt from Dance of the Snow Dragon.

Choo, Mary E. Canadian Children's Literature (2001). An interview with Bennett for a future issue.

Deakin, Andrea. Sun (Vancouver) (August 26, 1995). In this review of Dance of the Snow Dragon, Deakin claimed that "This is one of the best fantasies for young people that I have read for some time."

Kirk, Heather. Books in Canada (October 1995). Kirk describes Dance of the Snow Dragon as "Lushly cinematic with visual splendours of flora, fauna, costume and creature—magic, dreamed, real, and combinations thereof."

Lyons, Terri L. "A Spiritual Quest: Dance of the Snow Dragon." Canadian Children's Literature (1996): 81. Lyons writes, "This is an extremely detailed, beautifully written novel."

Tesseracts 7. Edited by Paula Johanson and Jean-Louis Trudel. Edmonton, Alberta: Tesseract Books, 1999. Part of an ongoing series publishing select Canadian science fiction stories, this volume includes "Seven Things I Know" by Kernaghan.

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Ninth Annual Collection. Edited by Terri Windling.

New York: St. Martin's, 1996. An anthology that includes "Dragon-Rain," a story that features Jatsang, by Kernaghan.

Related Titles

Kernaghan has written no sequels to Dance of the Snow Dragon, nor "prequels" (which are becoming almost as common among fantasy authors). However, she did write a spin-off adult novelette with Jatsang as the protagonist. "Dragon-Rain" appeared first in a small press anthology called Magic and was reprinted in the ninth annual collection of The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.

Kernaghan's earlier novel Journey to Aprilioth, is a historical fantasy—this time set in the Bronze Age, before the fall of Atlantis. Her most recent novel, The Snow Queen, is set in the more recent past, about the late 1800s. It is a good novel for a young adult to read after exploring the works of Hans Christian Anderson and before embarking on Leo Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina.

The Snow Queen retells Andersen's tale of Gerda searching for Kai. Both Dance of the Snow Dragon and The Snow Queen explore a different form of spiritual or metaphysical belief: Tibetan Buddhism, Saami shamanism, and the emergence of modern science. These novels are recommended reading for any young person who is exploring different belief systems or who wishes to discuss humanity and the natural world.

Related Web Sites

Choo, Mary E. "The Road to Shambhala: Interview with Eileen Kernaghan." The Lonely Cry Online http://www2.portal.ca/~lonewolf. March 28, 2001. Features an interview with Kernaghan that discusses Dance of the Snow Dragon.

Dumars, Denise. Fandom http://www.fandom.com. August 18, 2000. Review of Dance of the Snow Dragon. Dumars suggests that "Kernaghan's novels are exciting adventures that take the reader into strange lands and remote, fascinating cultures. . . . [H]ighly recommended for fantasy fans and lovers of magic and myth."

Dumars. "Magic and Myth: The Young Adult Fantasy Novels of Eileen Kernaghan." Fandom http://www.fandom.com. August 18, 2000. Interview with Kernaghan about Dance of the Snow Dragon.

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