

Dark Lord of Derkholm Short Guide

Dark Lord of Derkholm by Diana Wynne Jones

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Contents

Dark Lord of Derkholm Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16

Overview

In *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, Diana Wynne Jones sets up the premise that people from a world like ours can sign up to take an adventure tour in a magical otherworld— but she tells the story from the point of view of the otherworld's inhabitants. The result is what might be termed a living enactment of a fantasy role-playing game. The world's inhabitants would like to put a stop to the tours, but Mr. Chesney, the all-powerful tour manager, is under the protection of a demon and cannot be gotten rid of.

For each annual tour, natives of the otherworld are forced to take on fantasy roles such as the Evil King and the Dark Lord for the pleasure of the tourists. In the process, they might have to engage in battles with dragons or have their lands despoiled by rival armies. Being chosen Dark Lord for the year is thus more of a burden than an honor.

The choice for this year's tour falls on Derk, a peaceful breeder of magical animals. His son Blade is chosen as the Wizard Guide. The other members of Derk's eccentric family, including his wife Mara (herself a powerful enchantress), his daughter Shona, and several talking griffins, pitch in to help.

Almost immediately, Derk is injured in a confrontation with a formidable dragon, Scales, and the family has to cover up for Derk's absence and essentially act as a group understudy.

The body of the story deals, from several viewpoints, with what happens on this year's tour. The account is told in a matter-of-fact manner, liberally laced with humor, rather than in a mystical or monumental high fantasy style. The story is resolved with several surprise twists, and few characters are taken more by surprise than Mr. Chesney himself.

Dark Lord of Derkholm is an involved book with a large cast of characters and an intricate plot. The story is especially likely to appeal to readers who enjoy a complex and detailed setup. The reader who keeps track of the many paths of action in this book will be rewarded with a satisfying conclusion. This is not a book to read quickly or shallowly, but Jones's mastery of the fantasy form keeps everything believable.



About the Author

Diana Wynne Jones was born on August 16, 1934, in London, England. Her parents, who were educators, devoted themselves to their work rather than to their three daughters. For some reason, the girls' father was reluctant to spend money on books for his children. As a result, Diana took it upon herself to write the stories that she and her younger sisters craved. She created two long, elaborate tales to read aloud to her sisters. Later, Jones said that this early practice helped instill the confidence to be a novelist, because "you must know you can finish a book."

For long years after her adolescence, Jones did not write any fiction. She got a university degree (from St Ann's College, Oxford), married, and had three sons. She wanted her sons to have the good books she had missed out on, but she found that there were not too many books available at that time that had the humorous, unpredictable spirit her sons liked best. So she began to write her own books. In 1973 she published her first children's book, *Wilkins' Tooth*, published a year later in the U.S. as *Witch's Business*. And she was off and running. A prolific author who never seems to lack for inspiration, Jones has sometimes published two or more books a year. Her novels have won many awards, including England's Guardian Award for *Charmed Life*.

Unlike many writers who develop one type or pattern of book and continue to write in the same vein, Jones has created an astonishing variety of stories. She has written a cycle of traditional medieval-style otherworld fantasies (the Dalemark series, starting with *Cart and Cwiddler*), stories with modern settings (*Fire and Hemlock*), stories that border on science fiction (*A Tale of Time City*), stories with child protagonists (*Power of Three*) and with young adult protagonists (*Howl's Moving Castle*), light-hearted stories (*Castle in the Air*), grim stories (*The Homeward Bounders*), and stories that defy easy categorization (*Archer's Goon*). She is an expert at mixing moods, so that even in her humorous works, peril may lurk just around a bend of the plot, and her most extravagant tales may have moments of romance.

The main hallmark of a Diana Wynne Jones novel or short story is probably the wild inventiveness of the plot and situations.

Because of the abundant richness of her ideas and the textured vitality of her writing, her books can be enjoyed by adults as well as by young adults and perceptive children.

Setting

Since Jones intends to use the conventions of fantasy, she has set *Dark Lord of Derkholm* on a "typical," almost generic fantasy world, with many of the features familiar to readers of fantasy: a thinly populated landscape containing villages, inns, temples, castles, and such. But Jones always adds her own touches. For example, she does not depict a purely medieval-style culture. One of Derk's human children plays the piano, and one of the griffin children designs "gizmos" that use electronics. The result is a world that is at once familiar and unpredictable.

The family's sprawling residence, Derkholm, is far more individual than the standard fantasy castle. More than merely giving expression to Jones's own inventiveness, Derkholm also serves to reflect the ingenuity, eccentricity, and diversity of the family who lives there. Moreover, the way in which Derk, his wife Mara, and the rest of the family must use magic to transform the home into a fearsome stronghold (including moving a small forest) to prepare for the tour emphasizes the upheaval caused by Mr. Chesney and the tours.

Social Sensitivity

Diana Wynne Jones writes for an audience that enjoys fantasy and feels comfortable with elements such as the use of magic and the mention of gods and demons. It should be stated that although Jones does set up a world where demons exist, these beings do not spend much time center stage.

Several demons do make a personal appearance, but this novel is not a work of occult horror or darkness. Nonetheless, elements of this book may be incompatible with the beliefs of some people.

As with any adventure story, there are certain scenes of conflict, but these also are not dwelled on. The death of a dog is briefly mentioned to underline the unpleasant nature of a group of soldiers, and Derk is injured by the fiery breath of a dragon, but these matters are dealt with quickly and without graphic detail.

Many of the issues Jones treats or touches on, although presented in the context of fantasy, will be meaningful to readers. For example, several of the main characters are different from the norm in obvious ways and must find a place for themselves in their world. Most young readers can identify with that situation and find parallels to it in their own lives. Additionally, issues that Jones raises concerning the responsible use of magic power can apply equally to the use of any kind of power or authority in the real world.

Jones's books, and this one is no exception, present strong, interesting female characters. This book includes Derk's wife, Mara, three of the griffin siblings: and the formidable Querida.



Literary Qualities

Jones is known for her exuberant, convincing writing style which allows her to give fantasy the feel of realism. While many writers of fantasy use lyrical, poetic language to evoke the otherness of an imaginary world, Jones adopts a matter-of-fact style. This is tricky to do since it invites the risk of making the extraordinary seem mundane or even flat and lifeless. But Diana Wynne Jones's sure touch gives every inch of her tale the crackle of vitality. She creates realistic effects with vivid, particular details of narrative and description. For example, the dragon Scales has "a deep, windy voice, like somebody blowing across the top of a very large bottle," and Querida's living room is "full of feathers in jars, nicknacks, patterned cushions, patterned shawls, patterned rugs..." Jones almost makes readers believe that if they could just find the right dimensional doorway, they could get into Derk's world.

Jones has always been highly regarded for her ear for natural, unstilted dialogue.

She especially excels in rendering the speech of young people. In this book she captures the rhythms of family affections, resentments, frustrations, and loyalties. Even her indirect dialogue vividly reveals her characters: "Kit said something muffled and dire into the cushion."

Diana Wynne Jones makes liberal use of humor, another element that is especially hard to carry off in fantasy. Her humor results partly from her extravagantly imaginative situations, but it also depends on her deft use of language. Her books have more than humor; they have wit.

Any adventure story depends on its plot, and Jones is one of the best plot producers in young people's literature. Her stories are fast-paced, with very few moments of rest.

Dark Lord of Derkholm is richly studded with crises, rescues, secrets beneath secrets, and unexpected occurrences. The storyline can almost appear chaotic, with events nearly colliding with one another, but that is deceptive, for Jones keeps everything on its own clear path.



Themes and Characters

One of Jones's intentions, as in virtually all her novels, is to play out an interesting idea. What if one lived on a world of magic that was visited and practically taken over by tourists expecting an Adventure Experience? On one level, *Dark Lord of Derkholm* can be read just for the fun of seeing how this premise is worked out.

On another level, the story can be read as a spoof of the adventure fantasy genre. All the conventional elements are there—wizards, dragons, people on a quest, even a Dark Lord—but these elements are turned sideways. The people on a quest have paid admission; the Dark Lord is drafted to play the part. The parody aspect of the book is reinforced by the fact that just before writing *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, Jones published *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, a humorous sendup of both travel books and fantasy role-playing. *The Tough Guide*, written as if for a visitor to a fantasy role-playing type of world, describes that world by means of alphabetical entries such as Barbarian Horde, Mutant Nasties, and, of course, Dark Lord. It is easy to see how the novelist in Jones would feel compelled to flesh out such an idea into a fully realized story.

But Jones is incapable of writing a story that fits into a flat frame. Her characters are too richly multifaceted and her plots too inventive. At the most complex level, *Dark Lord of Derkholm* is a serious story that stands on its own terms. As such, it investigates several themes in subtle, dynamic ways.

One theme is the consequences that arise when powerful outsiders, accountable to no one, exploit an environment for their own ends. The inexorable demands of Mr. Chesney and his company, and their damaging effects on the otherworld, may easily be compared to the way multinational corporations can adversely affect communities on our own world.

Another important theme in this book is self-determination. On a personal level, Derk wants to be left in peace to use his powers as he sees fit, creating animals with new powers. Blade, Derk's son, wants to set the plan for his own life by receiving training as a wizard. On a larger scale, and most fundamentally, the people of this otherworld want to be free from the yoke of the tyrannical Mr. Chesney and his tours, which devastate the harvest, overrule the local authorities, and put the population at risk of life and limb.

Another idea fundamental to this story is the relationship of close, devoted family members. The vividly depicted members of Derk's family, human and griffin, are fascinating as individuals and as a group. Although they have their share of disagreements and spats, they support and sustain one another in times of crisis. This is actually an unusual premise for a Diana Wynne Jones book. Frequently, for example in *Fire and Hemlock*, *Eight Days of Luke*, or *The Time of the Ghost*, Jones's protagonists are young people who must overcome difficulties caused by neglectful, self-absorbed, or downright abusive parents or guardians. But though Blade begins by feeling a bit resentful of his father, Derk, who has forbidden him to go to the University for wizard's training, it is clear that father and son care about each other. In sum, Dark



Lord of Derkholm portrays an intact family with two loving parents who get along well with their children.

The members of Derk's family are but a few of the characters we come to know in this story. In fact, Diana Wynne Jones has created a teeming horde of characters. In addition to Derk, Mara, and the human and griffin children, readers meet the imperious but trustworthy High Chancellor Querida, the world's most powerful wizard; King Luther; Regin, head of the Thieves' Guild; the formidable dragon Scales; not to mention elves; soldiers; townspeople; demons; gods; some very odd members of the tourist group; and the unscrupulous Mr. Chesney, who has several goals that are even more nefarious than growing rich from tourism.

Jones has a gift for making each character stand out as an individual and not just a type or a mouthpiece for an idea. Unlike many authors, she is able to render subsidiary characters who are as vivid and threedimensional as the main characters. This enables the reader to empathize with many characters, not just Derk or Blade.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think the dragon Scales is a sympathetic or an unsympathetic character? Give your reasons.
2. Jones follows the paths of several characters through the book. If you had to say that one was the main character, would you choose Derk, Blade, or some other character? Explain why.
3. How does Jones prepare for the revelation of who the Pilgrim Professor Ledbury really is?
4. When Diana Wynne Jones appeared in a children's bookstore in the late 1980s to give a reading and sign books, the store was packed, and nearly everyone in the sizable crowd was an adult. What traits of a book such as *Dark Lord of Derkholm* would make it appealing to adult readers? What traits would make it appealing to teenagers or younger readers?
5. Do you think that Derk is right to keep Blade from attending University? Do you think that Blade is right to want to learn as much about his powers as he can? Explain your answers.
6. Compare and contrast the characters of two or more of the griffin siblings: Elda, Don, Callette, Lydda, and Kit. Which one seems the most appealing or interesting to you? Why? How do they compare in terms of their importance to the story?
7. Describe the home of Derk and his family. How does it reflect the personalities and needs of its inhabitants, human and animal? How must it change to suit the needs of Mr. Chesney?
8. Do you think that the role played by the demon results in a contrived ending for the story? Why or why not? What other ways might Jones have used to bring about a just ending to the story?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In the essay "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," fantasy and science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin says that style is the most important ingredient of a work of fantasy because "in fantasy there is nothing but the writer's vision of the world." ("From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," 1973; in *The Language of the Night*; New York: HarperCollins, 1993.) Does Diana Wynne Jones's style add to or detract from the believability of the fantasy setting? In what way?

2. Research dragons in Eastern and Western mythology and legend. Tell what aspects of the myths and legends seem to have influenced Diana Wynne Jones in her creation of the dragons in this novel, especially Scales, and how her conception of a dragon differs from traditional dragons. You might also use for comparison or contrast one of the following works of modern fiction: *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *A Wizard of Earthsea* or *The Farthest Shore* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey, *Dealing with Dragons* by Patricia C. Wrede, or *Dragon's Bait* by Vivian Vande Velde.

3. Trace one of the following characters through the book: Professor Ledbury, Mara, Querida, Scales, Shona, or Regin.

Write a brief account of the events of the story from this character's point of view.

4. Compare *Dark Lord of Derkholm* to another novel by Diana Wynne Jones, such as *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Fire and Hemlock*, *Archer's Goon*, or *Charmed Life*.

As part of your comparison, examine the way a protagonist from each book is portrayed in terms of main goals and relationships with parents or guardians.

5. Why might fantasy be a good way to deal with issues that can also be dealt with in realistic novels, such as family relationships, the growth of a character's inner strength, or the use and misuse of power?

6. Read *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, Diana Wynne Jones's spoof of a travel guide to a fantasy world. Tell how the story *Dark Lord of Derkholm* reflects ideas presented in the guide, and how the story deepens these ideas.

7. Diana Wynne Jones has been compared to other writers of fantasy who make use of humor and adventure, such as Joan Aiken and J.K. Rowling. Read one of Aiken's fantasies, such as *Dido and Pa* or *Is Underground*, or one of Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Compare the book you choose with Jones in terms of some of the following factors: inventiveness, plot construction, suspense, use of traditional fantasy elements, humor, characterization, or the treatment of real issues such as the use of power or family relationships.



8. A coming-of-age novel is a story in which a young character takes a major step toward maturity and begins to find his or her place in the world. Often this involves rising to a challenge that involves danger or making decisions.

What elements of a coming-of-age novel are found in *Dark Lord of Derkholm* ?

Which character or characters would you say come of age? In what way?

What details from the novel show this passage toward adulthood?

For Further Reference

Alderdice, Kit. "TW Interviews: Diana Wynne Jones." *Publishers Weekly* (February 22, 1991): 201-2. In this interview, Jones discusses her life and her method of creating and developing stories.

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989. This brief article provides a complete (to 1989) list of Jones's works, a brief quote by Jones, and an interesting analysis of her books.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 9. Detroit: Gale, 1976. The profile here is presented largely as a conversation by Jones; this format provides a welcome insight into her personality as it was reflected near the start of her career.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *The Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1983. Diana Wynne Jones provides a witty, autobiographical sketch.

Lynn, Ruth Nadelman. *Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults: An Annotated Bibliography*, Fourth Edition. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker, 1995. This bibliography provides a useful list of articles and studies about Diana Wynne Jones published in the U.S., Britain, and Australia.

Olendorf, Donna, and Diane Telgen, eds.

Something about the Author. Vol. 70. Detroit: Gale, 1993. The profile here gives fuller information about Jones's early life as well as updating the earlier article from this series (see the entry for Anne Commire). Additionally, a list of works cited includes many books and periodicals useful for further exploration.

Silvey, Anita, ed. *Children's Books and Their Creators*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

This article provides an insightful commentary on Jones's life and major works.

Review. *The Horn Book Magazine* (November/December 1998): 732-33. This favorable review says that "readers will find themselves deeply involved in the convoluted plot."

Review. *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (November 1998): 102. The reviewer calls the book "a fine-tuned, intelligently funny fantasy."

Review. *Publishers Weekly* (October 1998): 82. The novel is said to be "on a par with Jones's best.. .thought-provoking and utterly engaging."

Review. *Booklist* (September 1 1998): 110.

This favorable review calls the book "a side-splitting, sometimes scary tale that will intrigue readers of the very fantasies being spoofed here."

Review. School Library Journal (October 1998): 136. According to this reviewer, there is "a suspenseful edge to all the fun."



Related Titles

The Tough Guide to Fantasyland (1996) is the humorous "travel guide" that Diana Wynne Jones wrote before publishing *Dark Lord of Derkholm*. It is a different treatment of some of the fantasy elements that Jones satirized in her novel.

Other books by Jones that might be of interest include: *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) which presents the wizard Howl, whose castle really does move about the landscape, and Sophie Hatter, who takes him on after the Witch of the Waste casts a spiteful spell on her. As a reviewer in *Horn Book* says, "The plot does not so much unfold as erupt. ... " The central relationship of this novel is between a man and a woman (unlike *Dark Lord*, where the central relationship is between members of a family). This allows for an added element of romance, which is largely absent in *Dark Lord of Derkholm*.

Fire and Hemlock (1984), which was inspired by two traditional legends of young men captured by fairies or elves: Thomas the Rhymer and Tarn Lin. Jones's version is set in modern times. Its inventive freshness is exemplified by the near-anagram wordplay used for the titles of the book's sections: "New Hero," "Now Here," "Where Now?" and "Nowhere." This book combines adventure with an emotional depth that is rare in fantasy novels.

Archer's Goon (1984) really cannot be summarized or even described, although the British newspaper *The Guardian* comes close by calling it "a brilliantly wayward fantasy. ... " Archer's goon, massive and menacing, shows up in the Sykes family's kitchen one day. But who is Archer? And how many other powerful beings will show up to make life precarious for young Howard Sykes, his scrappy little sister Awful, and the rest of the family?

Charmed Life (1977) is the first book in the Chrestomanci series. It introduces the multiple worlds where magic is a commonplace, inborn talent. Unlike Blade in *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, Cat Chant lives in a perilous family where he can't count on anyone.

How Cat discovers his own gifts is the heart of the story. The memorable, debonair enchanter Chrestomanci was introduced in this book.



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