

a family apart by joan lowery nixon

Exploring "A Family Apart" by Joan Lowery Nixon: A Historical Journey

Joan Lowery Nixon's poignant novel, "A Family Apart," transports readers to a tumultuous era of American history, specifically the late 19th century, offering a compelling narrative about family, resilience, and the harsh realities faced by children during that period. This beloved historical fiction novel delves into the lives of the Shannon siblings, separated and sent to different foster homes through the controversial "Orphan Trains" system. Through their individual struggles and shared hope of reunification, readers gain a deep understanding of the era's social dynamics, the complexities of the child welfare system, and the enduring strength of familial bonds. This article will provide a comprehensive exploration of "A Family Apart," covering its historical context, key characters, plot summary, thematic elements, and its lasting impact on young readers and educators alike.

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Understanding the Historical Context of "A Family Apart"

"A Family Apart" is meticulously set against the backdrop of the late 1800s in the United States, a time of significant societal change and hardship. The novel accurately reflects the realities of industrialization,

immigration, and poverty that led to the widespread use of the Orphan Train system. This unique program, operated by the Children's Aid Society from 1854 to 1929, aimed to alleviate the growing problem of orphaned and abandoned children in overcrowded Eastern cities. Children were often placed on trains and transported to the Midwest and other parts of the country, where they were presented to potential adoptive families at public "auditions." The underlying assumption was that these children, often from impoverished or immigrant backgrounds, would find better lives in more rural and stable environments. However, the reality was often far from idyllic. Many children faced difficult conditions, labor exploitation, and continued separation from their families. Joan Lowery Nixon's meticulous research brings this complex historical phenomenon to life, highlighting both the intentions behind the program and its often-unforeseen consequences for the children involved. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the emotional weight and thematic depth of "A Family Apart."

The Orphan Train System: A Glimpse into the Past

The Orphan Train movement was a pioneering, albeit controversial, attempt to address the social issue of child abandonment in the 19th century. Fueled by a combination of religious conviction, philanthropic spirit, and a desire to populate the West, the system provided a lifeline for thousands of children living on the streets of cities like New York. The process involved taking children from overcrowded orphanages and street gangs, often after their parents had succumbed to disease, poverty, or industrial accidents. These children, ranging from toddlers to teenagers, were then placed on specially chartered trains, traveling thousands of miles to new communities. Upon arrival, they would be displayed at train stations or community gatherings, with prospective families choosing children they deemed suitable. The hope was for a new beginning, a loving home, and a chance at a productive life. However, the system was fraught with challenges. Children were sometimes separated from siblings, placed with unsuitable families, or subjected to harsh labor. The novel "A Family Apart" provides a child's-eye view of this system, humanizing the statistics and illustrating the emotional toll on these young individuals.

Life in Late 19th Century America for Children

The late 19th century in America was a period of stark contrasts. While industrialization was booming and the nation was expanding westward, a significant portion of the population, particularly in urban centers, lived in abject poverty. For children, this meant a high risk of abandonment, disease, and exploitation. Orphanages, often overcrowded and underfunded, struggled to care for the influx of parentless children. Many children were forced to work from a young age to contribute to their families' survival, or they ended up on the streets, vulnerable to crime and destitution. Immigration also played a significant role, with many newly arrived families struggling to establish themselves, leading to increased child neglect and abandonment. The legal framework for child protection was nascent, and the concept of child welfare was still developing. "A Family Apart" vividly portrays these societal conditions, showing how the Shannon children, through no fault of their own, found themselves at the mercy of a system designed to help but often resulting in further hardship and emotional distress.

Meet the Shannon Siblings: Characters in "A Family Apart"

"A Family Apart" centers on the lives of the four Shannon siblings, whose individual journeys and shared experiences form the emotional core of the novel. Their distinct personalities and reactions to their circumstances allow readers to connect with the human impact of the Orphan Train system. Nixon skillfully crafts these characters, making them relatable and memorable, ensuring the narrative resonates with young readers. Each sibling's perspective offers a unique insight into the challenges of displacement and the yearning for belonging.

James Shannon: The Responsible Older Brother

James Shannon, the eldest of the siblings, bears the heavy burden of responsibility after the death of his parents. He is protective of his younger siblings, particularly his sister, Jenny. James's maturity beyond his years is evident in his attempts to keep the family together and his unwavering determination to find them again. His journey is marked by the frustration of being separated from his siblings and the constant worry for their well-being. He often grapples with the unfairness of their situation, trying to maintain a sense of hope and agency in a world that offers him very little control. His internal strength and commitment to his family are key aspects of his character arc throughout the book.

Joey Shannon: The Youngest and Most Vulnerable

Joey Shannon, the youngest of the siblings, represents innocence and vulnerability. His young age makes him particularly susceptible to the emotional trauma of separation. Joey's memories of his parents and his longing for familiarity are palpable. His experiences in different foster homes often highlight the stark contrast between the ideal of a loving family and the often-disappointing reality. Nixon portrays Joey's simple needs and his deep attachment to his siblings, making his plight particularly poignant. His journey underscores the profound impact of family connection on a child's emotional development and security.

Kevin Shannon: The Spirited and Independent

Kevin Shannon is characterized by his spirited nature and a strong sense of independence. He often acts out against the injustices he faces, sometimes getting into trouble due to his rebellious spirit. Despite his outward defiance, Kevin deeply misses his siblings and the comfort of their presence. His experiences in foster care often involve him testing boundaries and seeking ways to assert his autonomy. Kevin's resilience is a significant aspect of his character, as he learns to navigate the world on his own terms while still holding onto the hope of reunion. His journey showcases the different ways children cope with trauma and displacement.

Jenny Shannon: The Sensitive and Observant Sister

Jenny Shannon, the only sister, is often portrayed as sensitive and observant. She keenly feels the emotional undercurrents of their separation and is deeply affected by the experiences of her brothers. Jenny's innate empathy allows her to form connections with others, but she also carries a deep sadness over the loss of her family. Her journey often involves finding strength in unexpected places and holding onto the belief that they will be reunited. Jenny's perspective provides a valuable emotional dimension to the narrative, highlighting the importance of emotional support and connection.

Plot Summary: The Orphan Train Journey in "A Family Apart"

"A Family Apart" chronicles the devastating separation of the Shannon siblings and their subsequent journeys through the Orphan Train system. The narrative begins with the tragic death of their parents, leaving the four children orphaned and vulnerable. Faced with no other options, they are placed on an Orphan Train, a journey that marks the beginning of their fragmented lives. The novel follows each sibling as they are sent to different families in various locations, detailing their individual struggles, adaptations, and the constant hope for reunion. Nixon masterfully weaves their separate stories together, creating a compelling and emotionally resonant narrative about their shared longing for family.

The Initial Separation and Departure

The novel opens with the immediate aftermath of the Shannon parents' death, setting the stage for the children's impending separation. The stark reality of their orphaned status forces them into the care of child welfare authorities. The decision to place them on an Orphan Train is presented as the only viable solution, a system that, while intended to offer a better future, instills a sense of fear and uncertainty in the children. The emotional farewell between the siblings, as they are separated at the train station, is a pivotal moment, emphasizing the cruelty of their circumstances and the deep bond they share. This initial separation is the catalyst for the entire narrative, highlighting the profound impact of family disintegration.

Individual Experiences in Foster Homes

As the Orphan Train progresses, each Shannon sibling encounters different foster families, each with its own unique set of challenges and dynamics. James, as the eldest, often finds himself in positions where he must adapt quickly and try to maintain a sense of order. Joey's journey is marked by his innocence and his need for consistent affection, which he doesn't always find. Kevin's rebellious spirit often leads him into conflict, but also demonstrates his resilience and refusal to be completely broken. Jenny's sensitivity makes her acutely aware of the emotional landscape of her new surroundings, often experiencing both kindness and neglect. These individual experiences provide a nuanced exploration of the varied outcomes for children within the Orphan Train system, showcasing the importance of individual disposition and the

luck of the draw in finding a supportive environment.

The Unwavering Hope for Reunion

Despite the physical distance and the individual hardships they face, the Shannon siblings are united by an unwavering hope for reunion. They find ways to communicate through letters, postcards, or chance encounters, reinforcing their commitment to finding each other again. This shared hope serves as a powerful driving force throughout the novel, motivating them to endure their difficult circumstances. The narrative emphasizes that their strongest bond is with each other, and this familial connection is what sustains them. The quest for reunification is a central plot point, driving the characters' actions and providing a beacon of optimism amidst the adversity.

Key Themes Explored in "A Family Apart"

"A Family Apart" delves into several profound themes that resonate deeply with readers, particularly young adults. Joan Lowery Nixon skillfully uses the historical context of the Orphan Train to explore universal human experiences such as the importance of family, the nature of resilience, and the search for belonging. These themes are woven throughout the narrative, offering opportunities for reflection and discussion.

The Enduring Power of Family Bonds

The most prominent theme in "A Family Apart" is the enduring power of family bonds. The Shannon siblings, despite being separated and facing immense challenges, consistently draw strength from their shared memories and their unwavering desire to reunite. Their love for each other transcends the physical distance and the individual hardships they endure. The novel illustrates how these familial connections provide a sense of identity, security, and belonging, even in the most trying circumstances. The siblings' efforts to find each other underscore the intrinsic human need for connection and the lengths to which people will go to maintain these precious ties.

Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Resilience is a crucial theme explored through the experiences of each Shannon sibling. They are forced to confront loss, separation, and often unkind treatment, yet they demonstrate remarkable strength and adaptability. James's maturity, Kevin's defiance, Jenny's sensitivity, and Joey's innocent spirit all contribute to their collective resilience. The novel shows how these children learn to cope with their circumstances, find moments of joy, and hold onto hope, even when faced with overwhelming odds. Their ability to persevere and adapt highlights the innate strength of the human spirit, particularly in the face of adversity.

The Search for Belonging and Identity

The Orphan Train system inherently disrupts a child's sense of belonging and identity. The Shannon siblings are torn from their familiar environment, their home, and their parents, leaving them adrift. Throughout the novel, they grapple with finding a new sense of place and understanding who they are in their new surroundings. The search for belonging is a powerful motivator for their desire to reunite, as they seek the comfort and security that only family can provide. Their experiences in different homes and with different people shape their developing identities, and the desire to find a stable sense of self is a central arc for each character.

The Nuances of the Orphan Train System

"A Family Apart" also explores the complexities and often-overlooked nuances of the Orphan Train system itself. While it offered a solution to child abandonment, the novel does not shy away from depicting the potential for exploitation, emotional distress, and the challenges of assimilation. Nixon presents a balanced portrayal, acknowledging the good intentions behind the system while also highlighting its inherent difficulties and the varied experiences of the children involved. The book encourages readers to think critically about historical solutions to social problems and their impact on individuals.

The Significance of "A Family Apart" in Historical Fiction

Joan Lowery Nixon's "A Family Apart" holds a significant place within the genre of historical fiction for young adults. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to blend historical accuracy with compelling storytelling, making a challenging period of American history accessible and relatable to a younger audience. The novel has been lauded for its sensitive portrayal of a significant social experiment and its focus on the human element within historical events.

Making History Accessible to Young Readers

One of the primary strengths of "A Family Apart" is its success in making a complex historical period and social issue understandable and engaging for young readers. Nixon avoids dry historical accounts, instead immersing readers in the emotional lives of the Shannon siblings. Through their relatable struggles and triumphs, children can grasp the realities of life for orphaned children in the late 19th century, including the reasons behind the Orphan Train system and its impact. This approach fosters historical empathy and encourages a deeper understanding of how societal conditions have evolved.

Award-Winning Recognition and Literary Merit

"A Family Apart" has received critical acclaim and numerous awards, underscoring its literary merit. The novel's ability to tackle mature themes of loss, family, and resilience with sensitivity and authenticity has resonated with educators, librarians, and young readers alike. Its inclusion on various "best of" lists and its continued popularity in classrooms and libraries is a testament to its lasting impact and its value as an educational tool. The writing style is clear, engaging, and age-appropriate, allowing the powerful narrative to shine through.

Educational Value and Classroom Discussion

The novel serves as an excellent resource for classroom discussions on American history, social studies, and literature. It provides a springboard for exploring topics such as child welfare, immigration, poverty, and the evolution of social institutions. The character development and thematic depth allow for in-depth analysis of plot, character motivation, and literary devices. "A Family Apart" encourages critical thinking about historical events and their human consequences, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the past and its relevance to the present day.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of "A Family Apart"

"A Family Apart" by Joan Lowery Nixon remains a powerful and important work of historical fiction, leaving an indelible mark on its readers. Through the poignant story of the Shannon siblings and their journey on the Orphan Trains, Nixon masterfully illuminates a significant, yet often overlooked, chapter of American history. The novel's exploration of universal themes like family, resilience, and belonging continues to resonate with audiences, making it a staple in young adult literature. Its ability to foster empathy, encourage critical thinking about historical social issues, and deliver a deeply human story solidifies its enduring legacy. The Shannon siblings' quest for reunification serves as a timeless reminder of the unbreakable bonds of family and the profound strength found in hope and perseverance.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of 'A Family Apart'?

The central theme of 'A Family Apart' is the struggle for identity and belonging within a fractured family structure, particularly focusing on the resilience of children facing separation and the search for stability and love.

Who are the main characters and what are their roles in the story?

The main characters are the Jesse family children: Lou, the oldest and most responsible; Norman, who is timid and often overlooked; and Sarah, the youngest and most emotionally vulnerable. Their grandmother, Grandma, also plays a significant role as a maternal figure trying to hold them together amidst their father's absence and the family's financial hardship.

What historical context does 'A Family Apart' take place in?

'A Family Apart' is set during the Great Depression, a period of immense economic hardship in the United States. This setting significantly impacts the family's struggles with poverty, unemployment, and the subsequent forced separation of the children.

How does the father's absence affect the Jesse children?

The father's absence, due to his inability to find work and his eventual departure, leaves the children vulnerable and responsible for their own survival. It forces them to mature quickly, rely on each other, and grapple with feelings of abandonment and uncertainty about their future.

What is the significance of the title 'A Family Apart'?

The title 'A Family Apart' directly reflects the novel's core conflict. The family is literally torn apart by economic circumstances and the father's departure, forcing the children into different living situations and creating a deep emotional distance between them, even as they yearn to be reunited.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to *A Family Apart* by Joan Lowery Nixon, with descriptions:

1. *The Secret of the Missing Girl* by Phyllis A. Whitney

This novel follows a young woman who travels to her estranged grandmother's isolated estate, only to discover it holds dark secrets and a missing person. She must unravel the past to find the truth, facing escalating danger as she gets closer. The story blends mystery with family history and the emotional weight of uncovering hidden truths.

2. *Trouble River* by Gary Paulsen

This historical fiction novel tells the story of a young boy and his younger sister who are sent down the Missouri River in a canoe during the Great Depression. They must rely on their wits and each other to survive the wilderness and the challenges of the time. It's a story of resilience, responsibility, and the unexpected bonds formed in the face of adversity.

3. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan

Set in the late 19th century, this tender story focuses on a family living on the prairie who send for a mail-order bride from Maine. Sarah arrives to become their new mother and wife, bringing her own quiet strength and experiences to their lives. The novel beautifully explores themes of loss, hope, and the building of new family connections.

4. *The War that Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

This book centers on nine-year-old Ada, who has been kept hidden away in her London apartment by her abusive mother due to her clubfoot. When the Blitz forces children to be evacuated, Ada seizes her chance for freedom and is sent to the countryside with her brother. It's a powerful story about finding family, courage, and self-worth in the midst of hardship and war.

5. *The Orphan of Ellis Island* by Elvira Woodruff

When a young boy named Dominic visits Ellis Island, he learns about his own family history and the experiences of immigrants who passed through the island. He embarks on a journey through time, encountering his own ancestors and understanding the sacrifices they made. The narrative weaves together themes of identity, immigration, and the enduring power of family ties.

6. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor

This classic novel tells the story of the Logan family in Mississippi during the Great Depression, as they face racism and economic hardship. Cassie Logan, the narrator, learns valuable lessons about justice, pride, and family loyalty as her family strives to hold onto their land. It's a deeply moving portrayal of Black resilience and the fight for dignity.

7. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell

Based on a true story, this book follows Karana, a young Native American girl who is accidentally left behind on her island home. She survives alone for eighteen years, forming a deep connection with the island's wildlife and overcoming immense solitude. It's a testament to human endurance, self-reliance, and the profound relationship between humans and nature.

8. *Homeless: Growing Up Orphaned and on the Streets* by Gloria Norris

This poignant memoir recounts the author's difficult childhood after her parents' deaths, leading to her becoming a ward of the state and experiencing homelessness. She navigates foster care, institutions, and the harsh realities of life on the streets. The book offers a raw and honest look at the challenges faced by children without a stable family structure.

9. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

In a seemingly utopian society that has eliminated pain and conflict through "Sameness," young Jonas is chosen to be the Receiver of Memory. He begins to understand the true meaning of emotions, color, and love as he learns about the past. This thought-provoking novel explores the importance of individuality, memory, and the complexities of human experience, even within the context of societal control.

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