

A Summoning Stone

Jan Shaffer

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Two roads diverged in a wood and I—

I took the one less traveled by

And that has made all the difference.

*—*Robert Frost *The Road Less Taken* (1915)

Once each generation an adolescent member of the isolated community of Hope is selected to try and complete a journey to the Tree of Truth. Within that tree a parchment is stowed which details the secret for survival. Three attempts have failed due to errors in judgment or wavering of will and time is running out. The tree is dying the secret will soon be lost. Without it there will be no more births in Hope.

The last chance is linked to an ancient prophecy and the assistance of a girl who travels through fantastic means to Hope from another time presumably the future. The girl Danielle joins forces with Kirk the community's last born each attempting to cover the deficits of the other with their own comparative strength. They confront emotional barriers such as fear and doubt wrestling with the advice of their guides whose real goals may to help or hinder.

A Summoning Stone suggests to pre-teens the value of finding one's individual direction in life. It introduces literary symbolism and the concept of allegory to a target audience of fifth graders but does so quite simplistically. At an age where children began the transition between basic obedience and independent reasoning Shaffer puts the right message into the mouth of a slightly older near-peer: "...we had better start thinking for ourselves instead of letting other people make our decisions for us."

The connection between the quest object and the community of Hope's arrested birth rate is not elucidated. Details regarding Hope's origin and customs are sketchy although Danielle began the story in current-era New England. "The community looked like the simple settlers' houses she had seen when she had toured Plimouth Plantation." The minimalism is a function of the book's intentional brevity but the impression is that readers are only privy to half the available story. To be fair though *The Summoning Stone* is a hero's quest not a study of place.

The winner of the 2006 WriteStuff Golden Journey short story contest Jan Shaffer is a retired junior high and elementary school lead teacher. She was recognized with Indiana University's Armstrong Educator Award. True to her credentials the author has gone the extra mile by creating an associated study guide and quiz which teachers may download at no cost from: www.asummoningstone.com. The package of book supplementary materials and a classroom teacher's own input stands a good chance of spurring the beginnings of analytical thinking. A recommended read.

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