

Wild Talent: A Novel of the Supernatural, Eileen Kernaghan

Resource Links (February 2009, Volume 14: Number 3)

Is Jeannie Guthrie a murder? For most of the novel *Wild Talent*, Jeannie believes that her frightening powers have killed her admirer George. At the young age of sixteen, she flees Scotland where she works on a farm for the big city of London. Here she meets a kindred spirit – the mysterious Alexandra David – who takes her in and helps her to find a job with Madame Blavatsky, the “epicenter of London occultism” (p.37.) In the midst of Madame’s séances and spiritual events, Jeannie befriends Tom who takes a romantic interest in her. However, when her mistress becomes ill, Jeannie must find another job. Since her new mistress, Madame Rulenska, is also a spiritualist, Jeannie is called upon to contribute to the “impression” that spirits are communicating with her mistress. In fact, while working with benzene to trick the patrons of séances, she is getting ill! To escape the threat to her health, she leaves for Paris to join Alexandra. The two become part of the Parisian wild and exotic art scene. They even project themselves into a mysterious painting which takes them to the realm of “the Beyond.” Will they ever be able to return to the real world?

This “novel of the supernatural” written by Eileen Kernaghan is labeled as a Young Adult Novel; however, the complex issues described in this novel and the dense narrative style would be more appropriate for older teenage or adult readers. Although Jeannie is only sixteen as she flees Scotland, she has really been an adult since she was fourteen when she started taking care of herself in a harsh world. She is independent enough to decide for her own fate as she leaves for London – and later for Paris. She sends letters and money to her mother back in Scotland, but she no longer relies on anyone but herself to make decisions about her path in life.

The issues of telekinesis and astral projection would interest readers who yearn to explore the world of the supernatural. References to Victorian cultural figures such as William Butler Yeats, Conan Doyle, and even Jack the Ripper would be interesting for students of Victorian history and literature. Since Jeannie narrates the novel from her own point of view in a diary format, we come to understand her internal struggle. However, the reader often wonders why she doesn’t try to find out what happened to George to alleviate her guilty feelings. Why does such an independent and intelligent woman have to wait for a man to solve all her problems? It seems inconsistent with her character and her actions. Although there is some description of her “supernatural” powers, readers would have liked to hear much more about Jeannie’s “wild talent!”

Thematic Links: Supernatural; Spirituality; Victorian England; Poverty; Superstition; Art; Impressionism

— Myrna Junyk

The New York Review of Science Fiction (April 2009)

Acclaimed Canadian author Eileen Kernaghan is the author of several previous novels, including the award-winning *The Snow Queen*, and is known both for her painstaking historical research and her interest in diverse cultural and historical manifestations of spirituality. *Wild Talent* is no exception.

Her new young adult novel opens in Scotland, where protagonist Jeannie Guthrie is working as a farm laborer. *Wild Talent* follows Jeannie as she flees to London after she may or may not have accidentally murdered her lecherous cousin, George. In the big city Jeannie is quickly taken in hand by Alexandra David, an independent minded young Frenchwoman who finds work for her with the infamous mystic, Madame Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy.

Blavatsky holds salons during which she impresses the faithful and the curious with magical parlor tricks including the manifestation of flowers, scents, and mysterious messages and objects. Kernaghan presents Blavatsky as a likeable if crotchety sort, ambitiously working on a voluminous study of the esoteric sciences while battling illness. She is also drawn as the ultimate self-mythologizer, and as to whether or not she is entirely a fraud: who knows? The jury's still out on that one, but we are given to believe here that at least some of her powers are real.

The climax is a harrowing scene in which Alexandra and Jeannie get literally lost inside a painting at a Paris salon. Magic presented in fantasy novels does not generally pose the question, are such things possible? But because Kernaghan's book is well researched, we feel she is being sly. It is after all not only Blavatsky but many of her period who believed that psychokinesis, clairvoyance, and all manner of visitations were possible. And, as *Wild Talent* makes patently clear, they were people much like us, who lived only a century ago.

As it turns out, Jeannie herself is possessed of a wild talent. She must learn to control her power, to use it for good and not to allow others to manipulate her into using it for their gain. This is the thrust of the action-packed novel, and Jeannie Guthrie is realistically drawn as she struggles with these issues. As well, her delight as coming across as someone as generous, intelligent, and like-minded as Alexandra is both palpable and timeless, one young people experience today as ever when they set off alone with little more than faith in themselves and a beneficent cosmos.

Which brings to the real surprise of the book. In her end notes Kernaghan tells us that, while the red-headed and hot-tempered young Guthrie is an invention, Alexandra David was real. A quick Internet search supplies astonishing photographs of this brilliant young adventurer. Many of the famous names of the *fin de siècle* who cameo here remain in common parlance, including Oscar Wilde, and the poets W.B. Yeats and Paul Verlaine, but few have heard of David, who actually lived in a Himalayan cave for two years. Kudos to Kernaghan for unearthing a fiercely free-spirited woman whose life was perhaps even stranger than fantasy fiction. — Ursula Pflug

Midwest Book Review, November 2008

In 1888, sixteen years old Scottish farm hand Jeannie Guthrie fears her "gift". She believes she has good reason to do so because she thinks she used her talent to accidentally kill her wastrel cousin George who was pestering her constantly for a kiss since the dance. If anyone finds out Jeannie knows she will be burned at the stake as a witch; just like George vehemently called her as he was bleeding from the pitchfork wound she gave him.

Thus without a look back, the teen flees to London where she assumes she can hide amidst the masses. In town Jeannie and daring Alexandra David meet and the latter takes the former to the salon of renowned Madame Helena Blavatsky. There Jeannie hopes to learn more about her power especially controlling it when she is angry or threatened.

This late Victorian historical novel is a vivid exciting tale that takes readers into a strange dominion filled with artists, spiritualists and ethnologists; the irony is that this weird world is London and Paris (as well as the land Beyond). Jeannie is terrific as a rustic innocent who under the guide of her urbane friend turns from scared country bumpkin to still frightened sophisticate. Based on the real 1888 London journal of Alexandra who mentions a *jeune fille*, Eileen Kernaghan provides her bewitched fans with a great late nineteenth century tale. — Harriet Klausner

Canadian Review of Materials, Volume XV, No.7

Jeannie Guthrie is a young woman who has had a misfortunate life. Well-educated by a father determined that she become a scholar, Jeannie and her family fall on hard times when her father dies. She is forced to become a manual laborer and is constantly sexually harassed by her cousin, George. One day, George goes too far and, before Jeannie knows what is happening, a pitchfork flies across the barn and impales him. Convinced that she has killed him, she flees to London. There her luck changes, and she makes a friend, Alexandria, who is also on a journey for knowledge. Jeannie is also able to find employment with an eccentric woman who claims to have supernatural powers. Jeannie meets and falls in love with a young man of whom she feels unworthy. She is, after all, a murderess of low station, and he, the son of a baronet. Their romance of miscommunication and fumbling takes them through London and Paris, finally uniting them at the book's end with their expected marriage.

Throughout the novel, Jeannie learns to use her psychic energy and to hide it at the same time. *Wild Talent* is a rambling tale of life that dabbles in many areas. The reader sees the world of the occult in late 19th century England and gets a glimpse into the literary world of Wilde and Yeats. The status and role of women are touched on as well as the life of artists and poets in general. In short, this period in England's history is just plain weird. It is a debauched world foreign to Jeannie, and she is led through it safely by her worldly friend, Alexandria, a suspected manic-depressive who is always restless for the next adventure.

The novel is presented in diary format and told from Jeannie's perspective. Some of the plot is a bit hard to swallow, such as Jeannie's finding a safe haven and position so

soon after arriving in London. The story winds through many different characters and plot threads and does not really culminate in a point. The only resolution is that Jeannie and her beau marry, and she is able to control her wild talent of moving objects with her mind. However, *Wild Talent* describes the setting and feeling of this time period very well. The background information about Jack the Ripper is not obviously superimposed on the plot, and the character development is excellent. The reader can see Jeannie's growth from a scared farm worker to a knowing, mature woman. *Wild Talent* is a unique book worth having in any collection despite its flaws.

*Recommended.

— Jennifer Draper

Jennifer Draper is a Children's literature aficionado living in Oshawa, ON.

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Grades 8-12 / Ages 13-17.

Charlotte's Library

<http://charlotteslibrary.blogspot.com>

In Scotland in the 1880s, Jeannie Guthrie, a sixteen-year-old girl raised by her school teacher father to love books, dreamt of being a famous author. This dream died with her father's untimely passing, and she was hired out as a farm girl. That life too came to an abrupt end, when, cornered in the barn by her lecherous cousin, Jeannie stabbed him with a pitchfork. Without picking it up.

"He clutched his shoulder and stared at the blood welling up between his fingers. "You've killed me," he said, and there was a kind of puzzlement as well as anguish in his look.

"I haven't," I cried. "I didn't." Something had happened, sure enough, and George without question was wounded; yet I felt it had naught to do with me. "You're a witch," he said, and what I saw in his now as hatred, and bewilderment, and fear."

Terrified that she has killed her cousin, and fearing that she will be accused of witchcraft, Jeannie flees to London. The fortuitous friendship with a free-spirited French girl, Alexandra David, leads Jeannie to a job as assistant/dogsbody to the formidable Madame Helena Blavatsky, a mystic seeker for spiritual truth, keeper of a salon frequented by the likes of Yeats, and a medium. Recognizing Jeannie's wild talent, Madame draws on her power to convince her audiences of her own spiritual abilities. And Jeannie meets Tom, a young, handsome, and skeptical student of zoology.

But when Madame's health fails, there is no longer a place for Jeannie in her menage. Jeannie's new position, assisting a charlatan in deceiving gullible audiences, is depressing, and, she fears, has alienated Tom. She flees to join Alexandra, who is now living a wild bohemian life in Paris, frantically seeking her own path to what lies beyond. When Alexandra goes too far, and actually enters the realm of spirits, it become clear that Madame's earlier warnings are true — that land is not inhabited by the the dear departed, but by much more sinister forces. Jeannie must follow Alexandra, or leave her trapped in a horrible otherworld.

In a book called “Wild Talent,” I expected a lot more about Jeannie learning to live with her gifts, exploring their power, struggling with the how, the what, and the why of it all. There is a little bit of this, but the focus of the book is more on the historical fiction side of things — painting a detailed picture of life among the mystics of late Victorian London, and the artists and poets of Paris. The actual journey into the spirit world takes place late in the book, and only lasts 28 pages.

So if you enjoy well-written historical fiction, with particular reference to spiritualism, this is a book for you. Alexandra David and Madame Blavatsky were actual people, who led fascinating lives. Jeannie herself is a believable character within this historical context. On the other hand, if you are looking for wild magic, this might not be quite what you’re looking for. — *Charlotte’s Library*

Wild Talent has been nominated for the Cybils Awards, in the Science Fiction/Fantasy category.

Fantasy Literature Net

While *Wild Talent* is very different from Eileen Kernaghan’s 2000 novel, *The Snow Queen*, there are two major themes that the two novels have in common. Both feature young girls striking out precipitously on their own into an unsafe world. Both also address the frustrations of intelligent women up against the repressive mores of Victorian society. The result, in both cases, is a gently feminist coming-of-age tale with a strong sense of place and time.

Wild Talent tells the story of Jeannie Guthrie, a young Scottish farm girl who flees her home suddenly, fearing charges of witchcraft and murder after a telekinetic talent helps her fight off a would-be rapist. She reaches London, where she befriends Alexandra David and finds employment with Helena Blavatsky. The historical characters are fascinating, and Jeannie herself is delightfully complex — unusually courageous in some ways and so very unsure in others.

The greatest strength of *Wild Talent* is its vivid portrayal of the tumultuous times in which Jeannie lives. The drudgery of rural poverty, the decadence of absinthe-soaked artists, the glamour of the Paris world’s fair, and the spiritual debates among London’s occult circles are all handled with skill. When I finished *Wild Talent* I felt that I’d paid a visit to the late 19th century, that I’d been right there with Jeannie all along.

Also well-handled were the questions of what is “real” and what is not. The book is teeming with the supernatural — some of it real, some of it staged by charlatans, some of it in that gray area of uncertainty where the reader isn’t sure whether it’s real or a dream.

There’s a spot toward the middle of the book that was rough going in a way, and ironically, it’s because of something Kernaghan did very, very well. As the reader, I was feeling a little adrift and not sure whether the story was moving, and then a little light bulb went on over my head and I realized it was because Jeannie felt adrift and wasn’t sure whether she was getting anywhere. Alone in London, with her fondest dream postponed for the sake of day-to-day survival, Jeannie is understandably depressed. Kernaghan’s portrayal of Jeannie’s depression is true to life and really made me feel for the character.

Spoiler Alert:

The ending leaves open the question of whether Jeannie achieves her goal of becoming a writer — but as I remembered her musings at the beginning of the book about the power of words, I realized that the novel's text itself was meant to be the answer. Well played. — Kelly Lasiter

Locus

A young woman becomes involved with some of the leading occultists in 1888 London in this evocative young-adult historical fantasy. Scottish farm worker Jean Guthrie fends off a rapist with a previously unexpected psychic talent, and fearing retaliation flees to London. There she is befriended by Alexandra David, a young Frenchwoman interested in mysticism and the occult. Jean had once dreamed of being a writer and is excited to find herself working for the famous Theosophist Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Jean quickly realizes that Madame Blavatsky is something of a fraud, but there are things she can't explain. Jean herself is in denial about her own psychic abilities, but as she gets better acquainted with the world of occultists and spiritualists in both London and Paris has to come to terms with her own abilities to save herself and her friend Alexandra. There's a tentative hint of romance, but mostly this is a charming *bildungsroman* and an intriguing historical look at Victorian occultists and French Decadents, with cameos by figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Paul Verlaine.

— Carolyn Cushman

Saskatchewan Publisher's Group Weekly Book Pick

Jeannie Guthrie, a sixteen-year-old Scottish farm worker, discovers that she has a frightening talent the day she is attacked by her cousin. Believing that she has killed him and fearing that she will be branded as a witch, she flees. The only thing she takes is a journal through which she tells her intriguing tale of myth and magic.

Lost and alone in London, she becomes a companion to Alexandra David, author and seeker of mysticism. She also works for a time in the famous theosophist salon of Madame Helena Blavatsky. Slowly Jeannie begins to understand the source of her mysterious powers. As she becomes more comfortable with her psychic abilities, demands are placed on her to perform. Not able to bear these unscrupulous people, she once again flees.

Eventually, she locates and joins Alexandra in Paris, where she gains even more insights into her abilities. Throughout their wanderings, they cross paths with famous artists, radical thinkers. Their experiences grow, leading them into dangers.

Jeannie tries to come to terms with the talents that are an intrinsic part of her, but her life is still paralyzed in other areas. Fears of retribution for her assumed crime continue to haunt her.

Historic references and details included from the real lives of her two acquaintances in this late Victorian time and of those in Paris add a richness to Jeannie's story. This 'authenticity' makes Jeannie's story even more fascinating to follow.

— Judith Silverthorne

Canadian Children's Book News (June 2009)

As a child, Jeannie Guthrie dreamed of writing books and exploring the wonders of words. In reality, she knew that this would never be her lot in life and she accepted the days of backbreaking farmwork that came once she was hired out as a bondager to raise money for her family. However, never did she imagine that she would be forced to flee her native Scotland out of fear that she would be accused of witchcraft!

Yet flee she has, after an accident in which she believes has left her loathsome cousin dead. She makes her way to London where the energetic and adventurous Alexandra David takes her under her wing. Jeannie soon finds herself immersed in the world of spiritualists and theosophists, especially once she is employed by the renowned and colourful Madame Helena Blavatsky, head of the British theosophist movement. Reluctantly, Jeannie must face her own frightening abilities – the strange powers that she possesses and deeply fears.

Her life continues to take unexpected turns which lead her ultimately to Paris, where the world's fair beckons and her dear friend Alexandra once again introduces her to a whole new world – one of artists and anarchists, rebels and would-be reformers. As Alexandra becomes increasingly introspective and begins entertaining some dark and disturbing thoughts, Jeannie knows she must find a way to bring her friend back to a better place within herself.

Eileen Kernaghan creates a richly atmospheric tale that captures a range of realities of the late nineteenth century. It is an evocative and mesmerizing tale, told through the eyes and in the voice of an earnest and endearing young woman. The vividly realized setting and quietly appealing protagonist lend this story an irresistible allure, both to readers of historical fiction and those who will be drawn by its more fantastical and otherworldly elements.

– Lisa Doucet, Assistant Manager of Wozzles in Halifax.