

THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR

Author: Jean M. Auel (1936-)

First published: 1980

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Historical fiction

Time of work: The Middle Paleolithic epoch (approximately 35,000 years B.C.)

Locale: The Crimean Peninsula near the shores of the Black Sea

Subjects: Coming-of-age, friendship, gender roles, and race and ethnicity

Recommended ages: 15-18

Ayla, a young Cro-Magnon girl adopted by Neanderthals, tries to conform to the rigid and gender-specific rules of the Clan, but her innate individuality and otherness keep asserting her separate identity.

Principal characters:

AYLA, a young Cro-Magnon girl growing up with a Clan of Neanderthals who struggles with ancient Clan rules as she matures into an independent young woman

BRUN, the leader of the Clan, in whose hands the fate of Ayla often rests

IZA, the chief medicine woman of the Clan, who first finds and rescues Ayla and becomes her adoptive mother

CREB, the magician, or Mo-gur, of the Clan, who accepts her into the Clan and becomes her adoptive father

BROUD, the arrogant and brutal son of Brun, who hates Ayla

DURC, Ayla's mixed-race son, born of a violent rape

Form and Content

The Clan of the Cave Bear is a story set in prehistoric Europe during the last ice age; it has sometimes been categorized as "caveman" fiction. The novel's exact setting on the Crimean Peninsula is detailed in a map preceding the text. The heroine of the captivating story is Ayla, a Cro-Magnon girl who, at age five, loses her family in an earthquake and survives a number of terrifying events, including the attack of a cave lion, before she is found half-dead by Iza, the medicine woman of a Neanderthal clan uprooted by the same earthquake and in search of a new cave. Iza empathizes with the barely alive child and convinces her brother Brun, the leader of the Clan of the Cave Bear, to let her bring the child along. When the girl recuperates from her wounds, it is obvious that two separate worlds have met: The Neanderthal Clan members are described as short, stocky, bowlegged, dark-haired, with large heads, and communicating mostly with hand gestures; Ayla, on the other hand, is thinner, taller, blond, blue-eyed, and talking freely in a language that the Clan does not understand.

Initially, everyone is suspicious of the orphan, who is so different from them and who belongs to what the Clan terms the Others. Ayla's biggest supporter is Creb, the

Mo-gur, the mighty magician of the entire Clan of the Cave Bear. Creb, brother to Iza and Brun, is a misshapen, one-eyed cripple, who, as a child, had survived the attack of a cave bear. Ayla shows him the affection that he never received from anyone else, and a deep bond develops between the disparate pair. Creb officially accepts Ayla, who accidentally discovered the new cave, into the Clan at a special ceremony, scandalizing the Clan by assigning her the powerful cave lion totem and laying the groundwork for the hatred of the arrogant and brutal Broud, whose own manhood ceremony is eclipsed by Ayla's discovery of the cave and her totem ceremony.

From that time on, Ayla must learn how to be a Clan woman, whose tasks and rules are very different from those of the men. Ayla is especially adept at assimilating Iza's medicinal knowledge and is groomed for the prestigious role of medicine woman. Ayla's real trouble starts when she secretly learns to hunt with a sling, an enormous taboo for the women of the Clan and punishable by a form of exile. Because of her analytical skills, intuitive thinking, and tenacity, Ayla survives the exile and returns to the Clan. Broud, however, is pushing Ayla to the extreme, abusing her verbally and physically, eventually brutally raping her. The result of the rape is Durc, Ayla's son, whom the Clan wants to reject and who is eventually accepted because of Creb's influence. The novel ends as it began—with an earthquake, in which Creb is killed. Ayla is exiled by Broud, who has finally become the Clan leader.

Analysis

The Clan of the Cave Bear is an interesting novel for juvenile and young adult readers as it chronicles the coming-of-age of its young heroine, Ayla. In this initiation story, however, the main character grapples with being initiated not only into the strange world of adulthood but also into a world of an entirely different culture. Her initiation is accompanied by loss, violence, denigration, and self-effacement, yet also by grit, determination, tenacity, and triumph. Novelist Jean Auel presents the quintessential scenario of an outsider entering a homogenous group. Ayla is successfully and painfully ushered into the adult world, but her acceptance into the Clan of the Cave Bear ultimately fails.

Ayla is an outsider because she is different, both physically and mentally. Her slender, tall, blond, and blue-eyed appearance provides a stark physical contrast to the short, stocky, dark-haired Neanderthals, who consider her ugly and unmarriageable. Her analytical abilities, intuitive thinking, and inventive spirit advance her mentally over the Clan's people, whose knowledge comes from memory and who communicate telepathically during their ritual ceremonies. While they have reached the end of their evolutionary line, Ayla is the future of humankind. The Clan members are half-aware of that fact, although none of them as much as Broud, Ayla's nemesis.

As an outsider, Ayla is expected to conform to the ways of the Clan. Initially, she must unlearn her spoken language and adopt the sign language of the Clan. Because of the brain structure of the Clan's people, tasks are divided along gender lines. No one person could hold all the survival information necessary to do both the chores of men and women. Since Ayla learns by imitation and invention, she ventures into the

forbidden realm of the men: hunting. Women cannot even touch hunting weapons; if they do, the tool is considered worthless. Therefore, Ayla's ultimate offense is to learn the sling hunting method and improve on it by firing two pebbles in succession.

The evil of that Paleolithic community is personified by Broud, who has no qualms condemning Ayla to death for saving his own son from the attack of a hyena by using a slingshot. Broud is a symbol for pettiness, jealousy, machismo, and rigid, unwavering commitment to ancient tradition, and therefore a force against which maturing young people often rebel. It is ironic that Broud himself is only a few years older than Ayla, that the rejection of Ayla comes from a young person, not an old one. The more Ayla rebels, however, the more Broud oppresses her. Her determined and individualistic spirit is almost broken by the beatings and the brutal rape. It is the love of Creb and Iza that supports her in those tough times. When Creb and Iza are both near death, Ayla loses her protection against Broud, who is next in line for Clan leader. Broud's exile of Ayla represents both her failed initiation into the Clan and her triumph over Broud, whom she humiliates before the entire Clan before she goes.

Readers of all ages can benefit from the message of *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, a message about tolerance toward and acceptance of outsiders and about the destructiveness of hatred. The novel also speaks more specifically to young people about the struggles of growing up, as well as the price that one pays both for conformity and for individuality. If the novel gives young people these messages in general, it does so specifically for girls and young women, as there is a definite feminist bent to Auel's work. Among the many things in which Ayla is a pioneer, she can also be called the first feminist, since it is exclusively male dominance and brutality that she defies.

Critical Context

The Clan of the Cave Bear is the first novel in Jean Auel's six-volume, prehistoric saga called *Earth's Children*, pioneering the genre of "caveman" fiction. The novel was a huge commercial and critical success, winning the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award for excellence in writing (1980) and the Friends of Literature's Vicki Penzinger Matson Award (1981) and being nominated for the American Book Award for best first novel in 1981. The sequel to *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, *The Valley of Horses* (1982) depicts Ayla's struggle for survival after she had been cast out of the Clan. She eventually meets Jondolar, another Cro-Magnon man, and becomes his mate. Additional installments, such as *The Mammoth Hunters* (1985) and *The Plains of Passage* (1990), have been published. The sequels to *The Clan of the Cave Bear* have not been as critically acclaimed because of the many gratuitous sex scenes that they contain.

Anita Obermeier