Sarah F. Layzell, "Entry on: The Vandemark Mummy by Cynthia Voigt ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/960. Entry version as of November 02, 2026.

Cynthia Voigt

The Vandemark Mummy

USA (1991)

TAGS: Egypt Kleïs Sappho





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Vandemark Mummy
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America; Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1991
First Edition Details	Cynthia Voigt, *The Vandemark Mummy*. New York: Atheneum, 1991, 234 pp.
ISBN	9780006744221
Official Website	cynthiavoigt.com (accessed: February 24, 2020).
Genre	Mummy films, Novels
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Cynthia Voigt , b. 1942
(Author)

Cynthia Voigt is an American author best known for the Tillerman family novels. She is the author of 33 books for children and young people, and two books for adults, spanning a range of genres and audiences. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Voigt graduated from Smith College in 1963 and later became a secondary school English teacher. Her novels have won numerous awards, including the prestigious Newbery Medal for *Dicey's Song* in 1983. The first Tillerman novel, *Homecoming*, was nominated for a National Book Award in 1982.

Source:

Official Website (accessed: 04 September, 2019).

Bio prepared by Sarah Hardstaff, University of Cambridge, sflh2@cam.ac.uk

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Additional information

Translation

German: *Kann Efeu Niesen?* trans. Cornelia Krutz-Arnold, Unionsverlag, 1999.

Italian: *Il Segreto della Mummia*, trans. Ada Arduini, Mondadori, 1999.

Swedish: *Mumiens Gåta*, trans. Birgitta Gahrton, Bonnier Carlsen, 1994.

Summary

Phineas Hall, aged 12, and his sister Althea, aged 15, arrive on the campus of Vandemark College, where their father has taken a job teaching classical languages. Their mother has taken a high-powered political job on the other side of the US and the children are concerned about what this might mean for their parents' marriage. A surprise bequest to the college sees Mr. Hall appointed curator of a collection of Egyptian artefacts, including a mummy from the Roman era. A line-up of potentially suspicious characters is introduced prior to a break-in to the room where the collection is being stored. During a second break-in, the mummy is stolen and later found with its feet smashed. Althea is then kidnapped, leaving behind a coded message naming the perpetrator. Overlooking the message, Phineas instead follows his intuition to find Althea locked in a college storeroom that is not due to be opened for many weeks. Althea reveals that her father's academic colleague Ken Simard kidnapped her and stole the mummy in order to claim discovery of a Sappho poem. Written to Sappho's daughter Kleis, the poem was on the papyrus used to wrap the mummy's feet. Ken is arrested. Meanwhile, the question of whether Phineas and Althea's parents will get divorced is left unresolved.

Analysis

From the outset of the novel, with its university setting and the bequest of the Egyptian collection, Voigt emphasises the importance of classical artefacts and the study of the classics. The plot hinges on Althea's knowledge of ancient Greek and the poetry and life of Sappho. Yet the limitations of a classical education and isolated study are also brought into view, with the less scholarly Phineas saving the day. As Suzanne Reid writes, Phineas's knowledge, gained from

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observing people, settings and situations, is "experiential or subjective" while Althea's study of classics is an example of "procedural scholarship" (1995, 59): both approaches are valued and needed.

The novel's exploration of feminism and gender roles has been interpreted in different ways. Reid includes *The Vandemark Mummy* in her discussion of the ways in which Voigt's work meets the criteria of inclusive, non-sexist literature (106–109). However, John Stephens claims that the novel "can be read as a satire on what are perceived as some feminist positions" (1996, 24) and ultimately "seems to reflect a conservative orientation" towards changing gender roles in society (26). Stephens also notes the story's structural similarity with "Little Red Riding Hood": the combination of classical and folklore themes and motifs is a typical feature of Voigt's work.

Neither Reid nor Stephens mention the parallels between Althea and her mother on the one hand, and Kleis and Sappho on the other. Rather than unilaterally celebrating or condemning all successful women, Voigt instead hangs the plot on a historically important woman's relationship with her daughter, modelling a sort of reconciliation of career and care, as well as emphasising the importance of listening to women and girls and taking them seriously.

Finally, the novel brings into question the ethics of scholarship on historical artefacts, mainly through Phineas's sense of connection with the mummy, wondering who she was and whether she should have been disturbed: "Phineas had the odd, angry idea that she should have been left alone, left where she was found, left buried in her own country, in her own time." (Voigt 1991, 113) The humanity of the mummy is further underscored by the similarities between her and Althea, who is around the same age. When Althea is entombed in the storeroom by Ken, she shares in the mummy's experience of being buried and eventually rediscovered.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Egypt Kleïs Sappho

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Authority Communication Divorce Family Gaining understanding Gender Gender expectations/construction Heritage Historical figures Intellect Isolation/loneliness Judgement Justice Knowledge Learning LGBTQI Life Morality Parents (and children) Past Relationships Siblings Teachers Truth and lies

Further Reading

Christenson, Tracy, “The Vandemark Mummy”, *Forgotten Books and Stories*, forgottenstoriesweb.wordpress.com (accessed: October 7, 2019).

Hylton, Jaime, “Exploring the ‘Academic Side’ of Cynthia Voigt”, *The ALAN Review* 33.1 (Fall 2005).

Reid, Susan E., *Presenting Cynthia Voigt*, New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Stephens, John, “Gender, Genre and Children’s Literature”, *Signal* 79 (1996): 17–30.

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