



## The Lottery

by Shirley Jackson

### In a Nutshell

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"The Lottery" caused major controversy when it was first published in the June 26, 1948 issue of *The New Yorker*. [Shirley Jackson's](#) implicit critique of the brutality underlying the rituals and values of America's small towns outraged magazine readers, many of whom cancelled their subscriptions (see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) for more on the tale's publication history).

As a side note - Jackson based "The Lottery" on her life in North Bennington, Vermont ([source](#)). Some of us here at Shmoop happen to be from that fine state, and we'd like to assure all potential tourists that despite what you may read in "The Lottery," you don't have to worry about sudden stoning in the Green Mountain State. Anyway, back to the matter at hand.

The anonymous, generic village in which "The Lottery" is set, in addition to the vicious twist the story gives to a common American ritual, enhance the contemporary reader's uneasy sense that the group violence in the story could be taking place anywhere and everywhere, right now. Jackson's skillful warping of a popular pastime has become an American classic, establishing her position as one of the great American horror writers.

### Why Should I Care?

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So, if you've ever been hanging out with a group of friends and done something truly stupid, you may have heard the refrain, "If your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?" Your answer is probably "no," but Shirley Jackson disagrees. She thinks you - and anyone and everyone - would race off that bridge if your community decided it was necessary. According to her, while individuals may be great, a group of people is another animal. An animal that eats its own.

"The Lottery" is a story of a small town basically devouring a member of its own community. It's one of the most horrifying texts you'll encounter, in high school or out of it. It's symbolic cannibalism! Forget [Saw V](#) or [Hostel II](#): "The Lottery" is truly terrifying.

Like so many great horror stories, this one has a load of social commentary. "The Lottery" is like the world's creepiest public service announcement against peer pressure. Similar to those warnings about drinking or smoking - except Jackson is warning against

unthinkingly follow along with a group.

So there's your warning about group psychology, but we want to be clear: "The Lottery" isn't about short-lived mass *hysteria* like the [Salem Witch Trials](#). No, this is a regular thing; it's like a witch trial that happens every year, where one unfortunate person becomes "the excluded one."

So, first there's peer pressure and second there's the exclusion of one person to give the remaining community members a bonding experience. The third ingredient in the horror of "The Lottery" is tradition, which is what prevents any of the villagers from questioning their roles in ritualistic murder. In other words, Jackson's all, "You think tradition's so great and meaningful, well, look how it deadens people's abilities to think for themselves!"

And it's sometimes true that we don't think about the origins or significance of many of our regular traditions. Think about Halloween and how most of the kids dressing up and asking for candy don't know that the early precursor to the holiday is [Samhain](#), an ancient Celtic ritual of bonfires and animal slaughter, when the worlds of the living and the dead were thought to intermingle.

Whether its origins are good or bad, a given tradition can seem like it's always been here. Tradition often doesn't appear to have a history or logic of its own; it just *is*, and this type of thinking makes tradition hard to question. We can read "The Lottery" as a kind of plea: if your only reason for doing something is that you've always done it, Jackson suggests that might not be a reason at all.