Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars Short Guide

Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars by Daniel Pinkwater

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, conjures two boys out of ink marks who become involved in an amazing adventure, a story so amusing and laughter-filled that it is one of Pinkwater's funniest books. It begins with the mundane and ends in the extraordinary. A "portly" kid does not get along with his school mates, but school becomes more fun when he is befriended by an unusual young man; then he visits a strange bookstore and unleashes the forces of the cosmos.

Pinkwater, as he does in many of his novels, invites us to look beyond the ordinary and discover the amazing.

About the Author

Daniel Pinkwater looks like many of the main characters of his novels—not particularly tall, chubby, bespectacled, and somewhat odd—and he has made it his career to write about eccentric children and young adults, people who, as in his own case, do not quite fit into school or the ordinary activities of daily life. These offcenter young people usually gravitate to others like themselves to form tiny groups within the larger communities of schools and neighborhoods. These creative oddballs, regardless of their circumstances, always author their own adventures, seeing the action through to the end as the key actors in their personal dramas. Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century author of some terrific thrillers, once asserted that an author's job was to find the romance in everyday life. This means finding the-amazing-in-the-ordinary by those who have eyes to see; it is also a key aspect of Pinkwater's fiction. His protagonists may be ordinary kids, but they uncover amazing places and people, usually right where they live, and they sometimes discover themselves to be also amazing.

Daniel Manus Pinkwater was born on November 15, 1941 in Memphis, Tennessee, to Philip and Fay (nee Hoffman) Pinkwater, a rag collector and a chorus girl. He grew up in Chicago, and his love for that city is evident in fiction such as The Education of Robert Nifkin. He seems to know where all the really interesting parts of Chicago are, as well as the best places to hang out. An avid reader as a youngster, particularly of adventure stories, Pinkwater contemplated becoming a writer, eventually rejecting the idea because "Writer's lives are disgusting, and writing is a horrible unhealthy activity". He attended Bard College in New York, decided to become a sculptor, and only turned to writing after four years of art study, graduating in 1964.

Pinkwater began his career as a professional writer almost by accident. He had made some drawings for a book envisioned for children, and he decided that dealing with someone else writing the text would be more annoying than writing the text himself. Even after the publication of this book, The Terrible Roar (1970), he still saw himself as a sculptor and illustrator. Nevertheless, he continued to write texts for his illustrations until he reached the point of being pulled so deeply into the creation of stories that he became a full-time writer. To this day he continues to illustrate most of his books.

Pinkwater married Jill Miriam Schultz on October 12, 1969, and they live in Hyde Park, New York. Pinkwater has been a commentator since 1987 for All Things Considered on National Public Radio; his often hilarious observations have won him a large audience. Although he has occasionally had small exhibitions of his art works, it is his fiction that has won him the most notice. Lizard Music (1976) was named an American Library Association notable book; Fat Men from Space (1977) was a Junior Literary Guild selection; The Last Guru (1978; see separate entry, Vol. 9) was named an Outstanding Book by the New York Times; and The Wuggie Norple Story (1980, illustrated by Tomie de Paola) received a Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association.

Setting

There are four significant settings in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, each with its own role to play in the development of Leonard and Alan.

The first location is their junior high school; a typically dreadful Pinkwater school that is very regimented with doltish administrators and hostile teachers who think that Leonard is stupid. Leonard, who admits that he looks like a penguin, is an outcast who does not fit in with the well-dressed, handsome boys and girls who dominate the school's social life. Even the other outsiders, weird kids of various types, look down on Leonard, who wonders who would be the lowest person in school if he dropped dead.

Leonard's response to the misery of his school is to withdraw into himself, to play the part of the stupid kid so that people will leave him alone.

The arrival of Alan at the school is an important event in Leonard's development, because Alan shows him how to resists the mind-killing oppressiveness of school life. Alan's methodstripping kids and beating up those who pick fights with him—are antisocial, but Leonard finds them liberating in his own life. He learns that he can take action to help himself, and he grows from a passive person into one who has the will to help himself.

In spite of his ability to take over classes by walking up and down aisles while discoursing on their subjects, and in spite of his ability to defend himself against all comers, Alan himself is far from a fully liberated person. He believes himself trapped and yearns to return home to "The Bronx," a place he has little hope of seeing again.

The second setting marks the beginning of Alan's growth, as well as the continued growth of Leonard. The boys go comic book hunting in the city of Hogboro, and they discover some unusual bookstores and diners that start them on an adventure of selfdiscovery. They acquire from one store the books that help them to discover their powers of mentally influencing the actions of others and moving objects just by thinking. They even meet Clarence Yojimbo, experienced traveler among the different planes of existence, and learn that they too have the ability to travel among them. Pinkwater frequently writes about odd, often hard to find bookstores and gathering places; these invite readers to look through the outwardly dull cityscapes to find the abundance of colorful city life in constant but obscured activity around them.

Hergeschleimer's Oriental Gardens serves as both a transit point to further strangeness for the novel's plot and a leverage factor in the growth of the boys, who begin to change from passive reactors to the pressures exerted by other people to positive actors in life responsible for themselves and what they do. When they enter the Gardens, put their mental powers to use, and shift themselves into WakaWaka, the boys find themselves in a place where they are the agents of their own caretaking—out of reach of parents, school, and police.

In Waka-Waka, they put their intelligence and developing common sense to good use. The Waka-Wakians they meet are so afraid of an imaginary monster, the Wozzle, that they cower passively in caves rather than taking action to rid themselves of this perceived threat. They represent as a group what Leonard nearly became as an individual at the beginning of the novel: all hiders who refuse to take action against those who oppress them. By the time they reach WakaWaka, both Leonard and Alan know better than to sit inertly by while being taken advantage of by bad people; even if Alan is a step ahead of him in finding a solution to the Waka-Wakians' problem, Leonard has grown enough to know that action must be taken.

Social Sensitivity

Schools tend to be bleak places in Pinkwater's fiction. This may partly reflect his own experiences in school, although he has so far given few public hints of how he views the schools he attended. On the other hand, he is open about the audience he hopes to reach— the outsiders, the nonathletes, and all young people bedeviled by uncompassionate adults, pimples, and academic regimentation. The presentation of a hostile school environment has a harder edge to it in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars than in most of Pinkwater's other books because of how Alan and Leonard respond to it.

Both seem to be trapped in the routine of attending a school that cannot or will not meet their intellectual and emotional needs before they have grown into people capable of independent, positive action. Alan therefore amuses them both by tripping the good-looking, well-dressed, snobbish, and ultra-popular kids, the ones who treat them like dirt. When they learn to influence people's thinking with their mental powers, they at first make students, teachers, and the principal do embarrassing things in public such as patting the head and rubbing the tummy for no reason. They also make the principal babble over the intercom like a crazed idiot, and Leonard gives his homeroom teacher a terrible craving for a cigarette and a student an urgent desire to go to the bathroom.

These are all revenge fantasies, bound to appeal to many people besides unhappy young adults, but they are largely negative acts, accomplishing nothing beyond making some annoying people uncomfortable.

It is very significant that the boys learn that such vengeful behavior is ultimately unsatisfying and even boring. Leonard, in particular, changes his behavior in school. As he grows his maturity and discernment improve, in contrast to the school that remains the same haven of stupidity that it always was. He takes charge of his education, reads books beyond the school texts about the subjects his classes are studying, and he comes to class prepared with a wealth of information to share. This vision of education and learning is crucial to Pinkwater's fiction for young people. Education is ultimately an individual responsibility for every young person; one learns by action, by trying to learn, and by learning how to learn.

Learning is not passive in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

Even though schools in Pinkwater's fiction are nearly always awful places, he has a more positive view of American society in general. As in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, his novels tend to have cities that are alive with off-the-beaten-track places to visit and interesting people to meet. It is people who give cities exciting environments, and Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars takes delight in eccentric bookstore owners, bizarre chess players, folk-singing motorcycle gangs, and other people who seem all the more real for being atypical defiance of stereotypes. Cities are their people, Pinkwater implies, and in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, the city of Hogboro is a place for self-discovery as well as for growth and entertainment.

Literary Qualities

shows off the full range of Pinkwater's masterful storytelling skills. The life of Leonard Neeble is superbly paced as it glides along at a natural gait, beginning in an ordinary American junior high school and moving from one small surprise to another so that by the novel's end he has journeyed between alternative planes of existence as if that were an entirely logical thing for him to do. The narrative is notable not only for its pacing, but for its depth and comedy. Leonard and Alan, for instance, begin their work on the Hyperstellar Archeology course: The course, which was really just a book, told how there were clues to the existence of ancient civilizations all around us. It gave a lot of examples. It said that certain words in modern languages are really Lemurian or Atlantean words. It said that Haya and Doon were the two most important Nafsulian gods, and when people meet in America and Australia and say "How're you doing?" they are actually repeating an ancient Nafsulian greeting.

The wordplay in this passage is typical of how the narrative has fun with words and entices readers to share in the verbal fun. But looking beneath the joke, we find a well-crafted, concise paragraph that conveys considerable information that is important to the story, most importantly that ancient lost civilizations still have their influence on our society, and this becomes even more significant when the lost civilizations turn out to be alternative planes of existence.

Themes and Characters

Leonard Neeble says, "I used to spend time trying to pick the one who would be the lowest person in school if I dropped dead." Characters who sit around only feeling sorry for themselves are usually not much fun to read about, but Leonard has a mordant sense of humor about himself and his experiences that makes him interesting. Fortunately for Leonard, Pinkwater quickly introduces Alan Mendelsohn, the one kid in school willing to be Neeble's friend. Leonard, with Alan as an influence, soon learns about tripping people, distracting onlookers, and avoiding being bored to death in class. The two become united battlers against hypocrisy, stupidity, and dullness, and as they develop they become increasingly able to distinguish between appearances and underlying reality.

"I am a short, portly kid, and I wear glasses," notes Neeble, who prefers "portly" to such terms as "fat boy," which his gym teacher calls him. The fact that he is overweight but with hidden potential is just the beginning of the development of the theme of false appearances. Neeble manages to stumble around in his classes so much on his first day at Bat Masterson Junior High School that he convinces his teachers he is stupid. Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars is narrated by an outwardly unimpressive young man, but his sense of humor and sensitivity to his environment tell readers that there is underlying substance to him.

As Leonard journeys on his voyage of self-discovery, he learns (as do readers) that he is more than a bored junior high school student. He has the very rare ability to use his mind to influence the behavior of others, to even mentally move inanimate objects (he thinks about levitating his school), and to cross between different planes of reality. Alan, although at first better able to cope with school, also has discoveries to make about himself; that he can move between planes of reality is as surprising to him as it was to Leonard.

Pinkwater embodies the central theme of the novel in his two principal characters, creating a tightly focused narrative in which the plot does not wander (something plots sometimes do in other Pinkwater novels such as The Last Guru. Each new idea instead follows logically upon another until the boys are transported from everyday life into vast worlds of potential exploration. The theme of surface appearances versus underlying reality is developed in additional ways as they continue to make discoveries about themselves. Samuel Klugarsh, for instance, appears to be a con man; his mimeographed texts and ridiculous radio for teaching how to reach the twenty-sixth level of consciousness seem like obvious frauds, which they are to a degree. Klugarsh lies when he claims to be able to reach the twenty-sixth level of consciousness, which he later admits that he never has. It turns out, however, that there are underlying truths to his outwardly fraudulent "courses" for developing the powers of the mind. Disreputable in appearance and manner, with a unsuccessful small bookstore, he actually has been trying to learn about the powers of the mind; in spite of his failures, he gives Leonard and Alan what they need to begin the development of their powers. The boys have met many people by the end of the novel who are not what they at first

appear to be, including a chess player who appears to be able to be in two places at once, a motorcycle gang that turns out to be folk-singing monks, and even "the ineffable ickiness" that turns out to be three Nafsulians conning the gullible people of WakaWaka.

The adventure in Waka-Waka is the triumph of the boys' learning to perceive the truth beneath appearances.

Their transfer to Waka-Waka from the old remains of Hergeschleimer's Oriental Gardens is symbolic of their growing maturity. While transferring, they can see both the earthly setting and the Waka-Waka setting, that is they can see and distinguish between differing realities simultaneously.

Their uncovering the reality behind the illusion of the Wozzle is the culmination of their learning to perceive the hidden truth behind appearances. It is only logical that Leonard would return to school a different person from the shy boy he was at the start of the novel. That he has matured and learned how to find truth is manifested by his intense reading in school subjects and his zeal to tell the truth behind the image, as when he points out the Crusaders' failure to bathe and their other unattractive traits that the teacher and the textbook would have glossed over.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the Waka-Wakians fall for the hoax of the Nafsulians?

2. The word Nafsulian contains an anagram of the word snafu. What other examples of wordplay are there in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars?

3. Does reading Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars make going to school more bearable?

4. How well developed are the characters in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars? Are they mostly just jokes, or are they fleshed out?

5. When did you realize that Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars was not going to be just another book about a lonely kid who does not like school?

Were you surprised with the direction the plot took?

6. "It's a work of art," he said. "You don't have to know what it means."

What does Uncle Boris mean by this?

7. Clarence Yojimbo says, "But none of that stuff about spacemen building the great monuments of the ancient world is true. All those things were done by humans using their human gifts." What does he mean by this?

Why is it important to the themes of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars?

Why does Pinkwater make this point?

8. Is Alan's behavior at school admirable or deplorable (or somewhere in between)?

9. Leonard says that Alan "never hated them [the other students] the way they hated him." Why is this important?

10. Why would Dr. Prince believe he had gone insane when he meets the Order of the Laughing Alligator? Why does he not accept what he is experiencing the way Leonard does?

11. When did you realize that Alan really was from Mars? Why would Pinkwater keep it in doubt for as long as he does?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a story about Leonard's summer vacation with Alan on Mars.

Would Mars have some of its own connections with different planes of existence?

2. The Waka-Wakians make a big fuss over drinking fleegix. What foods in our culture do we make a big fuss over? What are the rituals involved?

3. Do you ever look for bookstores in the city you live in or one you live close to. What kinds do you favor?

Provide a guide to your favorite bookstores and what they sell.

4. Leonard's father is in the rag business. What is the rag business? What services does it provide? How does it make a profit?

5. What are the civilizations mentioned in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars? Which ones did Pinkwater invent? Which others are imaginary but part of cultural tradition (for instance, Atlantis)? Are there any real ancient civilizations mentioned in the novel?

Why would Pinkwater mix the civilizations and traditions the way he does?

6. What are the parallels in characterization and narrative structure among Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars; The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death (1982; see separate entry, Vol.

9), and The Education of Robert Nifkin (1998; see separate entry, Vol. 9)?

For Further Reference

Card, Orson Scott. The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction 76, 1 (January 1989): 39. Highly recommends Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

"D(aniel) M(anus) Pinkwater." In Contemporary Literary Criticism. Volume 35. Edited by Daniel G. Marowski, Roger Matuz, and Jane E. Neidhardt. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, pp. 317-321. A gathering of snippets from reviews of Pinkwater's novels.

Haskell, Ann S. "The Fantastic Mr. Pinkwater." New York Times Book Review (April 29,1979):32, 43. About Alan Mendelsohn, the Boyfrom Mars, she says, "The writing is adequate, no more, no less. But for imaginative plot and decorative detail, Mr. Pinkwater's scores go off the charts."

Hearne, Betsy. Booklist 75, 19 (June 1, 1979): 1493. Hearne finds both plot and characterization to be poor in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

Lantz, Fran. Klatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide 15, 6 (September 1981): 14. Lantz says, of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, ". . . well , maybe you'd better just read the book. It's terrific! And then give it to your favorite young adult to enjoy."

Pendergast, Tom. "Pinkwater, Daniel Manus." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Volume 38. Edited by James G. Lesniak and Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, pp. 335-338. A brief summary of Pinkwater's career.

Sutherland, Zena. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 33, 3 (November 1979): 54. "If nothing succeeds like excess, the author has achieved a triumph of improbable folderol," Sutherland says of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

Telgen, Diane. "Pinkwater, Daniel Manus." In Something about the Author. Volume 76. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 177-181. An overview of Pinkwater's career with quotations from an interview of Pinkwater.

Related Titles

Pinkwater's novels generally have much in common: disaffected protagonists, awful schools, and strange but friendly eccentrics. Closest to Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars in theme and setting may be The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death and The Education of Robert Nifkin. Each of these novels develops plot and characterization in the same way. They open with unhappy young men who appear to be fat (he is "portly," Leonard says defensively) who are pushed into inhospitable schools in which they feel like utter outsiders. They escape their schools in various ways. Nifkin simply does not bother to show up for his Alan Mendelsohn, the Boyfrom Mars classes; Walter Gault and Winston Bong in The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death skip school some days to go adventuring and sneak out of their homes at night. Each novel gradually increases the strangeness of events until the main characters have become men of action who control at least part of their destiny. Although Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars employs the most obvious fantasy of the three novels, it is not necessarily the most imaginative. Walter and Winston's adventures are as unusual and fantastic as those of Leonard and Alan, even though they remain earthbound.

The principal characters of these novels mature from passive misery to people who make the events in their lives happen. As the narrative becomes increasingly strange, the boys become increasingly thoughtful, openminded, and determined to shape their lives. Leonard ends up taking over classrooms with his ravenous desire to learn and to express what he has learned; Nifkin takes charge of his education and makes himself into a self-starter that any good college would want to admit; and Walter develops an appreciation for the complexity of society as well as a willingness to take risks to help friends. One of the most hopeful signs in each of their lives is their learning how to make friends of the people they meet and how to be good friends to them in return.

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