As Is Short Guide

As Is by Robert Silverberg

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

"As Is is a cheerful tale of a man's experiences with an extraordinary automobile. The automobile itself is a mystery: No one, not even the automobile dealer knows what make it is, although everyone seems sure that it must be a foreign make. The dealer thinks it is only a few years old, a 1964 or 1965 model. Its trunk is welded shut, "somebody had fixed this car so the trunk couldn't open." The story is an account of the wonderful surprises the trunk contains.

About the Author

Robert Silverberg was born on January 15, 1935,in New York City to Helen (nee Baim) and Michael Silverberg, an accountant. He began writing for publication while still in his teens. After graduating with a B.A. from Columbia University in 1956, he married an engineer, Barbara H. Brown, and plunged into a full-time writing career. He proved to be an incredibly prolific writer whose work included short stories, novels, and nonfiction 4436 As Is books, produced at a rate sometimes exceeding two million words per year.

During the early years of his career he was regarded as a competent but not necessarily good writer.

In the mid-1960s he began serious research for details that soon became significant elements in his speculative fiction. By the early 1970s some critics regarded Silverberg as a writer who created good literature. Although there have been significant pauses in Silverberg's production, including a four-year hiatus in the 1970s, his work has continued to draw significant critical attention, and he is generally regarded as one of the most sophisticated writers of science fiction and fantasy, although his nonfiction has considerable merit, too.

He separated from his wife in 1976, and they divorced in 1986. The following year he married Karen L. Haber. In the late 1970s he needed to earn money to buy his wife her own house; this, he says, pushed him back into writing after his long break. He received $127,500 for Lord Valentine's Castle, which became the foundation for a series of novels and short stories.

Critics have noted that Silverberg's fiction of the 1980s and 1990s has been marked by brilliant descriptive prose; Silverberg has made strange, alien places come alive, notably in Letters from Atlantis (1990; see separate entry, Vol.7). His work of these decades has also seen a fusion of fantasy and science fiction elements, a trend found in much recent fantastic fiction. This quality is shown to good effect in Letters from Atlantis, in which the science fictional ideas related to time travel and space travel are merged into an account of a mythical, fantastic land in which each successive king merges his personality with all those who have gone before and potions can give timetraveling visions of the past and future.

Silverberg has won numerous awards, including Hugo and Nebula Awards, the most coveted honors for science fiction writing. Hugo Awards are determined primarily by a vote of science fiction fans and bestowed annually at the World Science Fiction Convention. Silverberg won the 1956 Hugo Award for "best new author."

He won best novella awards in 1969 for "Nightwings" and in 1987 for "Gilgamish in the Outback." He won the prize for the best novelette ("Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another.") in 1990. In 1970, he was the guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention.

Nebula Awards are given annually by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Silverberg won the Nebula Award for best short story in 1970 for "Passengers" and in 1972 for "Good News from the Vatican." He again won the Nebula for best novella in 1975 for "Born with the Dead" and in 1986 for "Good News from the Vatican." He won the Nebula Award for best novel in 1972 for A Time of Changes. In 1962, he won the New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival Award for Lost Cities and Vanished Civilizations; in 1967, he won it again for The Auk, the Dodo, and the Oryx: Vanished and Vanishing Creatures. In 1960, Lost Race of Mars was named a best book for children by the New York Times.

Setting

The story is set during January in the late 1960s. Sam Norton has been transferred from his job on the East coast to a West coast job in Los Angeles. His firm has given him four tourist class airplane tickets, and he has used three of them to send his wife and children ahead. He has cashed in the fourth ticket to purchase an automobile and to rent a trailer in which he packs the family's belongings. A sign of the times is the cost of the automobile—the dealer asks for $250 and after some dickering accepts $200. In the late 1960s, one could still purchase a brand new Volkswagen beetle for about $1,000, hence purchasing an automobile only a few years old for a couple hundred dollars would not be unusual—especially if it had a significant flaw, such as a welded shut trunk that the dealer seems unwilling to try to open.

Much of the adventure takes place on highways as Sam drives through Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Texas, and New Mexico. Norton departs amidst snow, thinking that at least he would leave the cold behind, and he travels through shifting climates until he reaches the dry, barren one of New Mexico. What this does for the plot is to make Norton increasingly isolated; when he has emergencies early in his journey, he can reasonably hope for a police car to come by, and he watches several cars pass him. But by the time he is in New Mexico, towns are spread far apart, and mountains separate him from places where he can buy gas: "there wasn't a tree in sight tall enough for a man to hang himself from, not even a telephone pole." This adds some suspense to the story, especially when he decides to test the car and deliberately run out of gas far from help.

Social Sensitivity

"As Is" is not particularly concerned with social issues. It touches on the matter of a family being uprooted and moved at the whim of an employer indifferent to the trouble it causes the family, a common practice in America.

Even so, the sudden transfer of Sam Norton serves primarily as the motivation for setting the plot in motion, and it is not examined in detail. The social significance of this may be that the practice of uprooting families and sending them across a continent is so common that Silverberg does not believe that he needs to explain it to his audience.

Another issue that is bound to interest some readers is that of ownership of the automobile. It was left at an automobile dealership for repairs, with money to cover the repairs and a month's storage. After several months, the dealership sells the car to pay for the additional storage time. This is probably legal throughout the United States, and it may do some good to point this out to young adults—who will be, if not already, drivers themselves. Thus, under the law, the automobile legally belongs to Sam.

Literary Qualities

"As Is" is a lighthearted tale meant to amuse. It resembles stories by James Thurber, which often feature men confronted by magical apparitions like unicorns, but without the sense of persecution common to Thurber's work. A feature that elevates "As Is" above the ordinary is its structure, in which the comical collision of magic and the modern world is worked out from opposite directions, blending together at the conclusion. The main plot involves Sam Norton, and the comedy involves this thoroughly modern American—he is a computer salesman, after all—in events that defy rationality. His car's trunk is magical, and he learns to deal with its manifestations as he journeys across America.

This makes his journey not just a physical act but a spiritual passage as well; as he travels out of the familiar cold and wet of his home to the alien dry landscapes of his future home, he learns to cope with extraordinary events that could panic other people.

Paired with the main plot line is a subplot featuring the little man. He is magical, able to call up storms, and he is used to a way of life that would seem bizarre to most people; calling up a flying horse rental service is ordinary for him. But like Sam, he needs to make adjustments; the world is changing and he needs to change, as well.

Thus, he moans about the quality of flying horses; he is easily distracted from his business, making unnecessary detours; and he needs to computerize his business in order to keep up with a magician's life in the modern world. The result is a funny story that resolves itself into a satisfying conclusion in which the representatives of science and magic, Sam and the little man, find common ground, and in which Sam even manages to make a big sale.

Themes and Characters

Sam Norton is a modern man in a modern business, "he was a computer salesman," who has a decidedly modern problem. He needs an automobile that will tow a trailer full of his family's belongings to Los Angeles, where his firm has transferred him. With money being in short supply, he hunts for a bargain and finds one, a foreign car of unknown manufacture that is in very good condition—except for its trunk. His journey to California turns out to be a mind-broadening trip, not just for the sights along the way but also for a trunk that behaves as no proper trunk should.

When he slides off the road in a snow storm, he seems truly stuck. But when he gets out of the car to have a look, he notices the trunk, supposedly welded shut, has popped open: "The interior had a dank, musty smell" and "He had the impression that the things in the trunk were moving away from his hand, vanishing into the darkest corner as he reached for them." Then he finds tire chains, which he attaches to his tires, while the "lid slammed shut as he worked." He has had his introduction to the mysterious trunk and he handles it well. He has experienced a remarkable event and put it to practical use. He had hoped the trunk concealed treasure such as gold doubloons but found, at least, something useful. When he later removes the chains, the trunk pops open, and after he sets the chains carefully near the outer edge in the trunk, the lid snaps shut. "There was no telling what else might turn up back there at the right time," he realizes.

Having begun his journey anxious about the automobile's lack of a spare tire and tools for emergency repairs, he finds that "Spending a dozen hours a day behind the wheel was evidently having a tranquilizing effect on him," he seems to be shedding his cares, learning to accept what will come.

When he blows a tire, he returns to the trunk, open again: "he expected to find the tire chains at the outer edge of the trunk, where he had left them. They weren't there." But a jack is, as well as a brand new spare tire and tools for installing it. Much of the humor of the story derives from Sam's calm reaction to extraordinary events; it takes him time to begin to worry, "the more he thought about the trunk and the tricks it had played, the more bothered by it all Sam Norton was. The chains, the spare tire, the jack—what next?" Therefore he asks a mechanic in Amarillo to open it up for him, who thinks an acetylene torch would do the job, "But Norton felt an obscure terror at the idea of cutting into the car that way.

He didn't know why the thought frightened him so much, but it did."

As long as he accepts the trunk for what it is, he is calm, but when he thinks of forcing it open, something, perhaps the trunk, makes him afraid.

By the time he reaches the desert and its almost barren mountains, he has become determined to test the trunk. Thus, he has gone from worry, to tranquility, to fear, and lastly to boldness. He deliberately drives past the last gas station before Roswell without

filling the gas tank, and he runs out of gas about two mountains later. A careful man, and this was the first time Sam had ever run out of gas.

This time the trunk offers up only a rope: "What good is a rope to a man who's out of gas in the desert?" Perhaps the trunk was angry with him because this time he had deliberately created a problem. "Angrily he hurled the rope into the air. It uncoiled as he let go of it, and one end rose straight up. The rope hovered about a yard off the ground, rigid, pointing skyward.

A faint turquoise cloud formed at the upper end, and a thin, muscular oliveskinned boy in a turban and a loincloth climbed down to confront the gaping Norton." The scene is a comic juxtaposition of the bizarre and the expected; a boy climbing out of a cloud is strange, but his grumpily calling Sam an "idiot" seems like what many people would do in the same circumstances.

The last step in Sam Norton's development begins with his meeting the man who originally owned the car.

The story has built suspense not only with the crazy behavior of the trunk, but by interspersing the narrative about Sam with a story line about a mysterious little man who plainly should not be trifled with. He becomes very angry when he discovers that the automobile dealer has sold his car.

When he leaves a storm appears and, "When the thunder came rumbling in, every pane of plate glass in every window of the showroom shattered and fell out in the same instant." The implication is that the little man has had his revenge.

He also lives in a world that is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Just as ordinary people would rent a car, he seeks rental transportation to catch up to Sam Norton; he calls a rental agency, of which there are apparently many in major cities, turns down the offer of a magic carpet because he does not like the way they handle bad weather and settles on a flying horse.

Silverberg has his comedy here both ways, With Sam Norton he has a modern man contrasted with magic; with the little man, he has a magical person contrasted with everyday concerns.

He even sounds like a modern person complaining about modern life: "You didn't get a whole lot of miles to the bale with the horses available nowadays, the little man thought sadly."

By the time he catches up to Sam, Sam has made some major adjustments toward accepting remarkable events even if he does not understand them, "And so it did not upset him at all when a handsome reddish-brown horse with the wingspan of a DC-3 came soaring through the air." Nor does he panic when the little man flies next to the automobile while it is in motion and talks to him. He even has learned to keep his wits well enough to dicker over the cost of the car with the magical little man. In fact, he even

sells the little man a complete computer set up for his business, "mostly dowsing now, some thaumaturgy, now and then a little transmutation."

This last step in Sam's growth is his learning to respect what he does not know. When, at the little man's request, he spreads a tarpaulin over the automobile and the little man, "In moments the tarpaulin was less than three feet high. In a minute more, it lay flat against the pavement." Sam keeps the tarpaulin carefully put away, knowing better than to use it.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Sam give up his automobile as easily as he does? He bought it legally, it is supposed to be registered to him, and it has a wonderful trunk, so why give it up?

2. Is Silverberg too vague at first about the horse, or were you able to figure out before he tells you that the horse could fly and probably had wings?

3. Why does Silverberg maintain a matter-of-fact tone when discussing flying carpets and flying horses?

4. Why would Silverberg make the boy who climbs down the rope so irritable? What effect does it have on how you view him?

5. Why does Sam deliberately run out of gas?

6. Does Sam react the way most people would react the first two times that he uses the trunk? Does his behavior enhance or detract from the story?

7. Why is Sam not upset when he sees "a handsome reddish-brown horse with the wingspread of a DC-3"?

8. A key element in characterization is a character's growth. How does Sam grow during the story? What is he like at the end of the story that he was not like at the beginning?

9. What would you do with the tarpaulin? Why would Sam be afraid to get rid of it?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The magician who owns the automobile seems very absentminded and prone to wandering off. What if he again leaves his car too long in one place and it is sold to pay for the costs of storage? Who would buy it? What adventures might he or she have with the vehicle?

2. What are the laws governing storage of automobiles and other property in your community? Do the laws offer any protection for the people who put property in storage? What must the owners of storage facilities do in order to sell property when the property owners have left their belongings in storage too long without paying? How long is too long?

3. Two hundred dollars for a recent model automobile may seem like a good bargain in modern-day terms.

What were prices of automobiles like in the late 1960s? Could you dig up some old model advertisements and make listings that show what a car would have cost at the time "As Is" takes place?

4. The little man seems sad that flying horses are not what they used to be. He does not care much for flying carpets. Where did he rent his flying horse? What other items might be available for rent at such a place? How would it avoid being noticed by most people? Who would be its clientele?

Have some fun with this group of questions and let your imagination run with it.

5. Let us take Silverberg's idea from another direction. Imagine that someone leaves his flying horse too long in storage. What happens to the horse?

What does the flying horse dealer do?

Does he sell it? To whom? Does he chase down the owner and demand his money? How? Would ordinary people be caught up in the story, the way Sam is in "As Is"?

6. What were computers like in the late 1960s? Why would Sam think that he could not just carry one around with him to show to his clients?

7. What was a computer salesman's job in the late 1960s? How did he or she earn enough money to support a family? What companies would have employed computer salesmen full time?

8. What was the state of America's system of highways in the late 1960s?

What exists now that did not exist then? Why would Sam have taken the route he does in "As Is"?

9. What are the techniques one should use when negotiating to buy a used automobile? What techniques will a dealer likely use? How does one work out the best deal?

10. Silverberg mentions some cities and towns as the story progresses?

Which of these places are real? Where are they to be found on a map of the United States?

For Further Reference

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Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 1650-1654. Offers a list of publications, summarizes Silverberg's life and career, and provides a short list of secondary resources.

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In Something about the Author. Detroit: Gale Research, 1978, pp. 206208. Almost entirely a listing of Silverberg's publications, with little information about his life.

Elkins, Charles L. and Martin Harry Greenberg, ed. Robert Silverberg's Many Trapdoors: Critical Essays on His Science Fiction. Westport , CN: Greenwood, 1992. A gathering of essays by scholars for scholars.

Platt, Charles. "Robert Silverberg." In Dream Makers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction. New York: Berkley Books, 1980, pp. 261-268.

Platt describes Silverberg and presents an interview with him. Silverberg remarks, "I like wonders, I like a certain amount of excitement, but, moderation, moderation even in excess."

Silverberg, Robert. Reflection and Refraction: Thoughts on Science-Fiction, Science, and Other Matters. Grass Valley, CA: Underwood Books, 1997. This collection provides insights into the themes of Silverberg's fiction.

——. "Robert Silverberg." In Third Book of Junior Authors. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1972, pp. 265-266. This is a short autobiographical sketch by Silverberg. He says, "Writer is what I set out to be, writer is what I very quickly became, with (I now see) amazingly little difficulty along the way."

Related Titles

Writings for young adults were a significant part of Silverberg's production in the 1960s, but faded away for a time while he concentrated on complex adult themes. In the 1980s he returned to writing for young adults, mostly science fiction or nonfiction, not fantasy like "As Is," with the notable exception of the Majipoor Chronicles, a collection of short stories of heroic fantasy set on the world of Majipoor, where the Lord Valentine novels are set, beginning with Lord Valentine's Castle (1980). The Valentine novels tend to be very atmospheric with slow-moving plots.

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