

The Bat Poet Short Guide

The Bat Poet by Randall Jarrell

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Overview

The Bat Poet is about the importance of valuing one's individuality while living in a larger society. The Bat, like anyone was Jarrell's major literary form, he also who lives in a world with other people, must learn to overcome the desire to be like everyone else. He comes to realize that being different can really be fun and interesting. Jarrell's model is the poet, in this case a bat, who is constantly at odds with his fellow bats and other animals. When the bat learns to trust his own instincts rather than follow the example of the other bats, he takes an important step in discovering who he really is.

Jarrell's story also introduces the reader to the realm of poetic observation. Although the bat does not understand the technical aspects of writing, he learns that by observing he can write as well as anyone, including the mockingbird, long praised for its song. Jarrell uses his own knowledge of poetry to help the reader explore the poetic nature of his own observational powers.

About the Author

Randall Jackson Jarrell was born on May 6, 1914 in Nashville, Tennessee. After moving to California in his youth, Jarrell returned to Nashville to attend high school and college. He attended Vanderbilt University where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1935 and a master's degree in English in 1939. While at Vanderbilt and later as an instructor at Kenyon College, the University of Texas at Austin, Sarah Lawrence College, and the Women's College of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Jarrell wrote poetry. His first book of poetry, *Blood for a Stranger*, was published in 1942. His poetic output consisted of nine volumes of poetry, two published posthumously. *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* received the National Book Award in 1960. Although poetry was Jarrell's major literary form, he also published literary criticism, translations, a novel, and children's fiction.

Jarrell became interested in fiction for young people when he was approached by an editor to translate some of the tales of the Brothers Grimm. His later stories for young readers, some of the most original children's stories ever written, combine a poetic sensibility with a simplicity of form. In fact, *Animal Family* was the Newbery Honor Book in 1966. Jarrell's intelligence and sensitivity give depth to his books for young readers, making them attractive to adult readers as well.

Setting

The story opens on a porch in a place where animals can talk and write, and humans are virtually non-existent.

From the moment the bat begins to narrate his thoughts, the place where he resides becomes irrelevant. He could be living on any porch in any place, which contributes to the universality of the tale. The bat's thoughts and experiences are those of everyone.

Social Sensitivity

Jarrell broaches the problems of being different in a society of people who do not understand. For Jarrell, and for the bat in *The Bat Poet*, the misunderstood need only observe, record those observations, and communicate with others. The most important way for the bat to find happiness with his "differentness" is to learn to trust the truth of his own perception and to share this truth with others.

The little violence in the tale is connected with the terror of the owl. To the modern reader, the owl poses no real threat, nor does it to the bat in the story.

The only conflicts in the story are a social conflict between the bat and others, and the bat's inner conflict between his desires to be different and to be like everyone else. These are conflicts familiar to most young adults, and Jarrell's methods for coming to terms with them are enlightening and challenging.



Literary Qualities

While *The Bat Poet* is a lively and imaginative children's story, Jarrell uses many of the conventions of poetry and criticism to make the tale a tool which a young person interested in poetry can use.

The use of symbolism is common in poetry. By making the characters mean something other than themselves, Jarrell gives added meaning to his narrative. In a similar way, much of the thematic unity of *The Bat Poet* would be lost if the central characters were not seen to signify something beyond themselves. Jarrell makes it easy for the reader to make the leap from the mockingbird to the critic. Like a good poet, he lays clues for the reader to pick up and then marvel at later.

Another literary device used by Jarrell in *The Bat Poet* is that of the "persona."

In many of his adult poems, Jarrell uses other characters as a mask to speak his own thoughts. The story also explores many elements of the poetic process.

When talking with the mockingbird, the bat learns about the mechanics of poetry, but it is his ability to transfer the observation into words that makes him a poet. In fact, *The Bat Poet* can be classified as a primer for young poets.

Jarrell incorporates other literary qualities within this story. Both the prose and the poetry contain poetic lines and word choices. As the mockingbird points out, the bat is good at reproducing sound, and Jarrell, as the bat's inventor, is also known for this talent.

Throughout the tale, the reader is given the sense of hearing and seeing everything from the viewpoint of the bat.

The Bat Poet is a highly sophisticated children's story, combining elements of Jarrell's poetic genius with an animal kingdom appealing to a child's imagination. It is no wonder that adults have gained much insight into Jarrell by studying this story, or that children have experienced so much delight from listening to Jarrell's animals speak.



Themes and Characters

The Bat Poet features a variety of characters, most of whom relay one or more of the story's central themes. The symbolic nature of the characters contributes to the story's richness. Each of the different animals contributes to the overall theme.

The most vividly drawn character is the "coffee-colored" bat who refuses to stay asleep during the day. This bat is something of a rebel. He observes things that the other bats have never seen and wants to write about them. Like the poet in society, the bat is the observer for those who are too wrapped up in conformity to truly see. As an individual, the bat must also learn what he thinks is important, even if learning this causes him great difficulty.

The other animals in the story are important because of what they teach the bat. The mockingbird, though not a villain, is the bat's harshest critic, and is symbolic of the critic in general. Even though the bat can compose good lyrics, the mockingbird adamantly denounces the bat's talent because it is unlike his own. The mockingbird, whose songs imitate the other animals, criticizes the bat for being different. For the mockingbird, different is bad; imitation is superior.

The reader and the bat learn that the mockingbird is not to be trusted as a critic because he is more concerned with his own song rather than the songs of others.

On the other hand, the chipmunk becomes a friend to the bat and to the reader. When the chipmunk first hears the bat's poem about the owl, he immediately becomes frightened of the owl and praises the bat for being able to make him fearful. He does not criticize the bat for being different, but praises his ability to make observations that are true. The bat learns from the chipmunk to always write the truth, even though others may not want to hear that truth.

Like the mockingbird, the other bats in the story are obstacles for the bat poet. Unlike him, they refuse to do anything which is different, and eventually even refuse to listen to his reports of a different experience. They are symbolic of the closed-minded, those who will do only what everyone else is doing. Although the bat poet breaks out of this conformity, he still tries to write something about them that they can understand. The bat's truth is not important unless he can get people to listen.

The remaining two characters in the story are the cardinal, who is the one creature the bat cannot write about because it is so beautiful, and the owl, whose terribleness inspires the bat. It is much easier for the bat to recount terror than beauty.

Each character plays a particular thematic role in The Bat Poet. Without the other animals, the bat would have nothing to disturb him, no community to be different from. The bat goes to each, reacts to what they are, and learns one of the lessons of the story.



Topics for Discussion

1. Of all the animals in *The Bat Poet*, the bat himself seems to be the most unusual. Why do you think Jarrell chose the bat as the main character? Do you think it was a good choice?
2. The bat and the mockingbird have a long discussion on poetry. The bat finally realizes that although he cannot sing like the mockingbird, he can write poems. Is it important to be able to sing like the mockingbird, or are the bat's words just as important, or even more so?
3. At the opening of *The Bat Poet*, the bat has no desire to write poems. What changes his mind?
4. One of the things that puzzles the bat about the mockingbird is how the mockingbird scares other animals from the yard and then imitates them. The bat never understands this trait. Why do you think the mockingbird does this?
5. At the end of the story, the bat is trying to recite his poem about bats to the other bats, but he keeps forgetting the lines. Is it important that he remember the lines? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Critics have said that the bat in *The Bat Poet* is like the artist in society. How is the world of the bat like a human world? How is the bat like an artist?
2. The bat poet notes many differences between the night world he is familiar with and the daytime world he comes to know. Why is the difference important to the bat and to the other animals in the story?
3. The bat is extremely proud of his observational skills, his ability to notice things that elude others. How important are observations to his poetry?
4. In *The Bat Poet*, some sections are written in poetry and others in prose.

What are the other differences between these two sections? What are some of the similarities?

5. Although the owl and the cardinal have completely different roles, each serves as an inspiration to the bat poet.

What roles do these two animals play, and how does the bat respond to them?

6. The bat lives on a porch that has no distinguishing characteristics. How does the fact that the bat could be living anywhere affect the story? Does it in any way detract from the story?

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Quinn, Sister Bernetta. *Randall Jarrell*.

Boston: Twayne, 1981. This extensive study of Jarrell includes an analysis of his fiction for young readers. Quinn also provides biographical details and an ample bibliography.

Updike, John. *New York Times Book Review* (November 14, 1976). In this review of Jarrell's *Animal Family*, Updike explores many components of Jarrell's fiction for young readers.

Related Titles

Although Jarrell completed three children's stories, *The Bat Poet* is the only one to make use of the bat, or of poetic techniques. In *The Gingerbread Rabbit*, the main character is a rabbit.

In *Fly By Night*, Jarrell explores the imagination of a young boy who wants to fly, and in *Animal Family*, the narrator goes on a journey only to find a mermaid and a "family" composed of animals. In all of his children's stories, Jarrell gives a different expression to the feelings of being lost alone, and somehow different.



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