The Bear Went Over the Mountain Short Guide

The Bear Went Over the Mountain by William Kotzwinkle

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Characters

The relatively minor characters in The Bear Went Over the Mountain are sketched with Kotzwinkle's characteristically deft, precise eye for a memorable, slightly odd trait that locates them firmly but unobtrusively within the narrative. Arthur Bramhall is developed in greater depth, but also in relatively straightforward fashion, his gradual displacement from human society and his eventual happy union with the natural world presented with an evocative clarity that makes his emotional turmoil affecting and quite understandable. The real challenge for Kotzwinkle is the character of Hal Jam, the bear. How can he be both bear and man, separately and simultaneously, and be authentic and convincing in this guise?

Kotzwinkle has written from the perspective of a nonhuman being many times before, as in the insect equivalents of the Sherlock Holmes characters in Trouble in Bugland (1983) or the supernatural entities in Hearts of Wood, and Other Timeless Tales (1986), and most prominently, in his alteration of the narrative consciousness in his superb novelization E. T.: The Extraterrestrial (1982) from the boy Elliott to the cosmic creature. In somewhat similar fashion, he has written much of The Bear Went Over the Mountain from Hal Jam's perspective, and has located a significant portion of the narrative within Jam's mind, delineating the struggle of the "bear" to find appropriate verbal gestures to convey his responses to the world and his efforts to communicate with what seems like an alien but definitely allied co-species.

Jam is like an innocent abroad in his reactions to the journey from the Maine wilderness to the unreal city of the late twentieth century, his way of seeing the world uncorrupted by the exigencies of human experience. This gives the story a plausible base, but Kotzwinkle depends on the formation of thought through a battle with linguistic form to make Jam's mind accessible and to give it a recognizable shape and style. Jam is like a child encountering the wonder of words— their ramifications, reverberations, resonances, and resistance to complete control. When he is introduced, he is described as one who "lived for his stomach." When he picks up the manuscript, he discovers his mind. This is a kind of evolutionary leap—perhaps forward but definitely in another direction. There is no way to reverse the process. As Jam enters the human universe, his task is to adjust without losing the qualities that accounted for his previous survival —"he was wise to the ways of the forest." Similarly, as Bramhall returns to the forest, he thinks, "This is all I ever want." He is in danger of diminution, a reduction from the Shakespearean apotheosis "What a piece of work is man," as Hamlet puts it.

Even if Bramhall is content in the forest, does this mean that his entire experience in the world of men and women was a waste?

Bramhall's disappointments are sufficient to make his departure from the world seem like a positive transformation.

Jam's life in the forest, on the other hand, seems like pretty good preparation for the jungle of the city. Not only are his survivalist and predatory instincts put to very good

use, his deviance from certain social norms actually enables him to fit in nicely in neighborhoods where appropriate mainstream behavior is regarded with suspicion and even loathing. In Greenwich Village and in Harlem, the realm of bohemian extravagance and the region of racial diversity, Jam is not only accepted immediately—the "hairy guy" in the Village; "Big Buster" in Harlem—but is able to fit his innate skills—to dance with grace; to sing in harmony ("for bears are tuneful beasts at heart") with a rap group—to the activities of people he meets. In these places, eccentricity and individuality are regarded as welcomed, whereas any unusual or unpredictable patterns of behavior among successful careerists is shunned. In Maine, as well, the singularity of the people in the small community near the university where Bramhall worked is taken as a matter of course. Jam's terse replies and comments are partly the result of incomplete comprehension but are also a version of the laconic, unassuming manner of speech favored by local people like Vidal Pinette and Gus Gummersong. Kotzwinkle is continuing his sympathetic examination and presentation of the good natured zany here, a favorite figure of his since his invention of the now almost legendary Horse Badorties from The Fan Man (1974; see separate entry), who appeared in different guises in Queen of Swords (1983) and in The Midnight Examiner (1989; see separate entry), and who has been reimagined as "Ursus americanus" (in Jam's own proud self-description) in this book.

Social Concerns

In 1970, just as he was about to publish the short story collection Elephant Bangs Train which launched his career as a versatile, prolific writer, William Kotzwinkle moved from New York City to rural New Brunswick, Maine, where he and his wife bought an old farm house. Kotzwinkle recalls "we lived for years in a shack without electricity or plumbing . . . when you live like that, you touch something that moves through the forest." Among other signals that Kotzwinkle responded to in this setting, he began to have recurrent dreams in which "animals came to me, night after night, telling me, "We've got something to say!"' His response to this vision was the animal fable Dr. Rat (1976), a powerful indictment of human mistreatment of other species and as Kotzwinkle puts it, "a political book (that) had to do with the dangerous split between us and our animal nature." Aspects of this idea appeared as occasional interludes in other works during the next two decades, particularly in some of Kotzwinkle's children's books and short fiction, but he reserved a full-scale examination of the reciprocal connection between human and animal essence for his novel The Bear Went Over the Mountain.

Contrary to the allegorical conception of Dr. Rat, however, this book does not have an intricate apparatus of equivalents which permit the reader to separate the humanlike behavior of the animals from the familiar details of the modern world.

Instead, Kotzwinkle has placed his protagonist, a bear from the Maine woods, into the swirling center of the world of the New York publishing industry and constructed the novel as a wide-ranging satire on many of the subjects that Kotzwinkle has covered in previous books. As the novel begins, Arthur Bramhall, an American literature professor at the University of Maine, has completed a novel Destiny and Desire that is finally a piece of writing that moves from his actual experience rather than the models he has imitated in earlier efforts.

Satisfied with his manuscript, he leaves it in a briefcase which a wandering bear finds and opens, knowing that human artifacts often contain something to eat.

The bear, who has learned how to read, looks at the pages and decides it is worth keeping, a different kind of nourishment but of a type that the bear recognizes as important: . . . a line on the first page caught his eye and he read a little ways. His reading habits had been confined to the labels on jam jars and cans of colored sprinkles, but something in the manuscript compelled him to read further. "Why," he said to himself, "this isn't bad at all."

Replacing Bramhall's name on the tide page with his nom de plume Hal Jam (from a container in a diner holding "Half-andHalf Jam" which the bear alters to suit his sense of an evolving human identity), the bear takes the manuscript to an agent who sees the literary merit of the work, but perhaps more crucially, notices the oddly appealing persona of the "author"—"Anybody ever tell you how much you resemble Hemingway?" the agent inquires. From this not exactly plausible but well-presented premise, Kotzwinkle develops a vehicle for satirizing many of the follies and foibles of life in the

United States in the last decade of the twentieth century, using his characteristic "lunatic humor" to skewer, as Robert Moyer puts it, "the silver-tongued predators, drug-addicted neurotics and cretinous philistines of a world he knows all too well—the world of publishing."

Kotzwinkle's approach is more like gende mockery or bemused fascination than the scathing destruction practiced by his distinguished predecessors of the age of classic satire like Alexander Pope, John Wilmot (The Earl of Rochester) or the great master of the genre, Jonathan Swift, but his targets are similar to theirs and his effect is comparable.

By placing Hal Jam at the center of the narrative, Kotzwinkle is able to contrast Jam's distinctive separation from the institutions and social expectations under attack with the individuals who represent their most conspicuous excesses. The publishing industry is at the focal point of the satire, and Kotzwinkle presents it as a gathering of people who are only incidentally interested in literary achievement.

There is a publicity director who resorts to designer drugs to overcome various compulsions which are constricting his life and who operates from the principle that "books were just books, but buzz you could trust;" a calculating author who has maneuvered an Angel gimmick into mega-sales; and a number of promotion, management, and image specialists whose techniques are little more than guesses and hunches but who are concerned with the marketing of the product they are hired to push regardless of its merit or even its most prominent features. Since none of these people have ever dealt with anyone or anything like Jam, they tend to interpret everything he says or does in terms of their own agendas. Their efforts to make Jam's (that is, Bramhall's) book a super-success are the subject of the most extensive satire in the novel, but Kotzwinkle covers many other elements of the late twentieth-century world as well. Bramhall's colleagues in the English department are depicted as pompous schemers, completely disconnected from the qualities which have made literature enduring in their devotion to irrelevant minutiae, while professors in New York who Jam meets at a party are consumed with self-importance, always anxious to use any author as support for the pet theories with which they try to claim status in the academic world. Both back in Maine and in New York, Jam and Bramhall are accosted by practitioners of various New Age philosophies which disguise the emptiness of their content with ingenious semantic arrangements, and by other operators who preach methods of self-actualization to confused devotees desperate for some guidance in a society with no solid foundations. Jam meets a famous TV preacher (recalling charlatans like Jim Bakker and others) who is all surface and deceptive congeniality, overcomes a conspiracy theory fanatic attempting to blow up the vice president, buys a title from a corrupt British company purveying status for cash, receives the benefits of the cynical, quasi-sophisticated system in place to serve the wealthy and camouflage their more disreputable activities, and triumphs in a court challenge to his authorship in spite of the fact that Bramhall wrote the book.

As Jam manages to emerge from each encounter with a degree of dignity the others lack, Kotzwinkle sets out a field of foolishness that highlights the inequities and

injustices of postmodern American life as he sees them. Something is missing from the human environment, some vital attribute that might restore or renew the cultural community. The entire concept of value—aside from monetary value— seems to be nonexistent. In the course of the narrative, Kotzwinkle is suggesting that this void at the core of contemporary society has as one of its causes the complete separation of human behavior from its nonhuman or animal antecedents. The story of Hal Jam's "success" as an author, and of his "progress" toward humanhood, is paralleled by Arthur Bramhall's journey back toward origins.

The duality of the acknowledged and the real author of Destiny and Desire indicates that a remedy of some sort for the severe dysfunction Kotzwinkle describes would be the joining of the "dangerous split" which he mentioned as one reason for writing the book.

Techniques

In order to develop the relationship between Bramhall, the man assuming bearlike aspects, and Jam, the bear attaining human qualities, Kotzwinkle has structured the narrative course of the novel as a two-track progression, with the linear paths converging in the beginning and near the conclusion, and then diverging through the book. This plan enables him to maintain the motif of a psychic sharing between the characters, and establishes a degree of dramatic energy through the shifts (like the cross-cutting of a film) from one track to the other, often in alternating chapters. Within this framework, Kotzwinkle can concentrate on the mood of the twined protagonists separately which is necessary since he is working from within the mind of the characters much of the time and to make their thought-processes plausible, a particular verbal matrix has to be formed.

Bramhall is no problem since the transformation of a human to some sort of animal is not that unusual a theme in books and films (as in Jack Nicholson's portrayal in the motion picture Wolf [1994], among many others), plus the growing awareness of the Native American concept of a totemic animal has worked to dissolve the barrier between humans and animals (as in, for instance, Gary Snyder's retelling of a Haida myth in "Hunting: Number 6 -this poem is for bear" from Myths & Texts (1960). On the other hand, Jam presents a real challenge.

As Ludwig Wittginstein once remarked, "If the lion could speak, we would not understand him." What would be the appropriate form for Bear Speak?

As a means of approach, Kotzwinkle has taken the most fundamental of human/animal attributes—appetite—and used it as a conceptual basis for illuminating Jam's personality. As a creature of the wilderness, Jam is all appetite, guided by an instinct which is crucial for survival.

The essential struggle he faces in his entrance to the world of humans is how and when to restrain instinct. Total restraint is tantamount to psychic death.

Total expression is a guarantee of rejection or imprisonment. As the naturalist Bill McKibben observes (in an essay "The Problem with Wildlife Photography"): But in our blind defense of these things that seem "right," we may be short-circuiting the process of thinking things through as a culture, leaving ourselves no way to entertain the possibility of restraint. And yet selfrestraint is a uniquely human capacity, belonging exclusively to us as flight belongs to birds. It's the one gift no other creature possesses — even as a possibility.

Although The Bear Went Over the Mountain was written prior to McKibben's essay, it is precisely McKibben's point that is at the crux of Kotzwinkle's technique for rendering Jam's mind-set. The tension between Jam's instinctual response to things and his emerging understanding of the necessity for restraining this response forms the syntactical structure of his thought patterns. His sense of self-restraint is a function of

his frustration with his inability to handle speech fluently (". . . the words that were supposed to accompany it failed to come out. They were swirling around inside him like sparkling fish in a stream but when he tried to pull one from the stream it wriggled through his grasp and slipped away"), and an indication of his evolving consciousness of what is appropriate behavior in a particular situation ("All these females could be mine, he said to himself. All I need to do is tear the place apart and hammer the piss out of the other males. Might that be the wrong kind of exercise? Possibly. Best to withdraw before I go wrong"). Progress in this area is not easy for Jam, and throughout the book he is haunted by the feeling that he is not acting properly. In the midst of a television appearance, Jam muses: . . . human understanding was something like a net, with loops being added to it constantly, and he could imagine a human being nimbly casting this net; but when he imagined this net of understanding in his own paws he saw himself getting tangled in it, and finally being brought to his knees pitifully thrashing about inside the shimmering mesh as shadowy figures approached with clubs.

This image epitomizes Jam's efforts to handle human language, and it is also a fitting metaphor for the writer who experiences some of the same things in the course of composition. Jam's solution is to work with the most fundamental building blocks of linguistic understand ing, often speaking in monosyllabic bursts which are frequently misconstrued by listeners with their own agendas as gnomic wisdom, and then with a base established, tentatively adding additional observations and even some development of ideas, although this is quite limited. In a fitting conclusion, Jam addresses the jury determining the authorship of Destiny and Desire, and after being unsettled by Bramhall's capable lawyer, resorts to his own primitive but poignant grasp of the vocabulary of naturalist expression, and convinces the jurors that "he's the voice of Maine—the bears, the moose, the birds, the flowers, the trees, and the forest in spring." The fusion of feeling, thought and speech in this scene is a convincing demonstration of Kotzwinkle's adroit use of an unconventional but appropriate narrative technique.

Themes

Although Kotzwinkle is working in a comic mode, with a positive outcome almost guaranteed for the more appealing characters and no permanent harm occurring to even the most ridiculous ones, The Bear Went Over the Mountain is a serious book, similar to the work of the classical satirists whose strategies Kotzwinkle is echoing. His concern for the "dangerous split between us and our animal nature" is his central theme, and it is set up by making Hal Jam and Arthur Bramhall the secret sharers of each other's psychic realm. Along a continuum stretching from what might be called the fully human to the entirely animal, Jam and Bramhall move in opposite directions, but as significant as their apparent contrary motion is their amalgam of attributes. Each creature, part man and part beast, is always a mixture of elements, with a particular facet of the psyche emerging or dominating in response to a complex of occasions—the social, personal, environmental factors which are at play in their lives. Jam is determined to fit into a world he barely knows; Bramhall is so disgusted by that world that he willingly retreats from it, but his regression is fueled by a dawning awareness of sensory powers long dormant and unused. Jam is motivated by the temptations of the wicked, sybaritic city; Bramhall is responding to the call of the wild. Neither character is essentially wrong since both drives are a part of the living creatures that Kotzwinkle is exploring.

This is the key to Kotzwinkle's most persistent query, a daunting philosophical problem throughout the history of civilization on Earth: What does it mean to be human? Without offering any definitive answers, the narrative poses some of the questions that are crucial in an exploration of this issue. Who decides? Who fits their definition? Does humanity depend on the skin (sensory apparatus), on style, on the mind, on the soul? How does a particular culture direct behavior, and what is considered appropriate? Who are the arbiters? Kotzwinkle has been interested in deviations from the main stream from the start of his writing life (most notably in The Fan Man [1974; see separate entry] which practically codified counterculture behavior circa the legendary 1960s) and The Bear Went Over the Mountain continues his presentation of alternative life-patterns, not only in terms of Jam's life in the city but in the description of life in rural Maine where an appealingly idiosyncratic local population seems light years away from the mores of the metropolitan centers on the continent's edges. A thought emerges in the course of the narrative about what happened to the sons and daughters of the sixties toward the end of the century, and whether a retreat from urban corruption resulted in any kind of improvement in people's lives.

Kotzwinkle's examination of what is often called human nature (including the human nature of animals) dominates the novel, but he is also interested in other eternal questions. The relationship of art to commerce is dealt with in detail in terms of the publicity campaigns designed to promote a book, a person, and most prominently, a deal. The idealism which an artist initially brings to a creative activity is inevitably compromised during the process of creation, and then in the need to get the work ready for presentation. In a poignant moment at the beginning of the novel, Bramhall asserts, "I've written the truth," and then echoing Ezra Pound's plaintive semi-prayer, "Go dumb

born book . . . ," he exclaims at the peak of optimism, "Tomorrow you go out into the world." This is his highest point of satisfaction; the remainder of the narrative follows him moving further and further from away from the manuscript, culminating in society telling him at a jury trial that he is not the author of Destiny and Desire. As a kind of corollary, Jam, the acknowledged author, struggles throughout the novel with the rudiments of the English language. He is almost overwhelmed with adulation for "his" book, but cannot shape language into the form his thoughts and emotions require without great difficulty and generally with very little success. The continuing irony implicit in this situation is an apt commentary on the quirkiness of the relationship between artistic achievement and public celebrity, and on the even stranger relationship between the character and personality of an artist and their ability to produce something of genuine artistic excellence.

Key Questions

From the beginning of his extremely productive career as a writer, Kotzwinkle has combined considerable success as a writer for young readers with a very wide variety of highly acclaimed novels and short stories for the traditional adult audience. Although he has generally kept these categories separate, he has been adamant about what he feels is an artificial distinction. "Only in recent times have we had a classification called 'children's books' and it isn't a particularly good thing to have," he claims. "Treasure Island, Alice in Wonderland, Tom Sawyer didn't come in that way, and people of all ages were free to read them and find a new piece of their soul." The idea of a bear, one of the most basic of children's toys (e.g. Winnie-the-Pooh and teddy bears), as a fully realized adult who feels as out of place and alienated in adult society as a child sometimes feels, is a possible point of departure for discussing The Bear Went Over the Mountain, as is the entire question of divisions between fantasy and versions of "reality." Classical satire usually involves a version of admirable behavior as a standard for comparison with the subject of the satirical attack.

Does Hal Jam's way of being provide an adequate measure, or does Kotzwinkle use other characters such as the old Maine lumberjack Vidal Pinette for this purpose? And along these lines, is it possible to include all of the characters in the satirical aura, with an implied or otherwise indirectly stated standard as the model?

1. Consider the ways in which Kotzwinkle induces sympathy for Hal Jam.

Identify incidents in which Jam is a sympathetic character and others in which his behavior might call for a more critical response.

2. In what ways does Jam resemble other outsiders in American literature?

3. Jam is compared to Ernest Hemingway by various editors, publicists, and professors. What are the points of comparison that these people mention and are they valid in terms of Hemingway's writing or various accounts of his life?

4. How does Kotzwinkle feel about the rural community in Maine where Vidal Pinette and other local characters are placed in contrast with the inhabitants of New York City?

5. In other books Kotzwinkle has used music as a kind of universal expression of fundamental human qualities he admires.

What does the bear's musical aptitude accomplish in The Bear Went Over the Mountain?

6. How successful is Kotzwinkle in conveying the spirit of the AfricanAmerican community in The Bear Went Over the Mountain? What purposes are served by placing Jam in Harlem?

7. Describe some of the comic techniques Kotzwinkle employs. Which are the most successful; why do they work better than others?

8. As an obvious point of reference, the jacket cover of The Bear Went Over the Mountain compares Kotzwinkle's novel with Kosinski's Being There (1971) and Groom's Forrest Gump (1988). How accurate is this parallel? Does the film success of Peter Sellers as Chance and Tom Hanks as Gump make a film of Kotzwinkle's book a viable possibility? Who might be cast as Hal Jam (Nick Nolte, perhaps)?

9. Do any of the women in The Bear Went Over the Mountain appear as more than minor characters or versions of familiar types? How effective is Kotzwinkle in conveying some aspect of feminine reality?

Literary Precedents

The idea of an animal with human attributes is one of the oldest conventions of parallel forms in literary history.

Tales predating written literature abound, and the medieval beast fable, as well as allegorical narratives from the Middle Ages, are familiar examples of this genre.

More recently, the concept of Magical Realism, which is generally associated with Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel, is applicable as well, although Kotzwinkle's methods are quite different from theirs, as befits a writer from another cultural position. Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726) presented a kind of animal/person amalgam in Part IV, where his horse/human combination "the Houyhnhnms" functioned as a model of deportment and admirable behavior, and Lemuel Gulliver's voyage to their land was also the culmination of a work of satirical invention that has remained as an exemplar of the genre.

Related Titles

Hal Jam is a positive version of the natural instincts that ran amok in Dr. Rat, where the eponymous Dr. Rat exploited the worst aspects of what might be called animalistic inclinations in human beings.

In that novel as well, in contrast to the hideous experiment Dr. Rat performed, a kingdom of spiritual value comprised entirely of animals was part of Kotzwinkle's first extended exploration of a linkage between aspects of humans and animals.

E.T. in both E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial and E.T.: The Book of the Green Planet (1985) is, among many other things, an examination of the outer boundaries of human behavior, while in many of his books for younger readers (but not exclusively younger readers) Kotzwinkle has probed the otherness of creatures not generally thought of as resembling human beings.

And as one of the central themes of his work, Kotzwinkle has always been very interested in the person who does not quite fit into social and cultural norms, an outsider like the fabled Horse Badorties of The Fan Man who seems to march to the beat of a different drummer and whose unconventional activities are a more significant sign of essential human qualities than is generally acknowledged by the official voices of society.

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