

Beast Short Guide

Beast by Peter Benchley

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Characters

In *Jaws*, many critics found the white shark to be the most believable character.

Benchley does seem to have the type of imagination which enables him to understand the instincts of creatures far removed from human sensibility. Humans, sharks, and giant squid have little in common other than predatory inclinations.

Architeuthis dux is a force even more difficult to conceive of than the white shark.

Its presence gives the novel its most interesting moments.

Whip Darling is the novel's hero. His way of life has been destroyed by the greed of other fishermen, and his struggle to retain at least some dignity and independence arouses the readers's sympathy.

The sea has provided him and his family their living, and he loves it because his life has been tied to its rhythms since childhood. He has built a collection of books on the ocean and its inhabitants, so without much formal education he is in his fashion an educated man.

Liam St. John, in contrast, holds a Ph.D., although he never divulges just what he had majored in. He has wangled his way into political power as the Minister of Cultural Heritage for Bermuda.

Anyone who wishes to explore the ocean off the island in search of treasure on the many ships lying on the bottom of the sea has to go through him, and he promptly confiscates anything of value.

Whip sees through the man who obviously has little real knowledge of the sea.

His only real interests are in gaining wealth and prestige for himself, so he takes over the hunting of the squid after others, Darling and his friend Lieutenant Marcus Sharp, have done most of the preliminary work of finding it.

Dr. Herbert Tally, an expert on cephalopods or squid, unlike Dr. Liam St. John, is a serious scholar. He has written a book entitled *The Last Dragons on Architeuthis dux*. Dissatisfied with the courses he is teaching and feeling his area of expertise is neglected, he contacts Osborn Manning after reading in *The Boston Globe* how the businessman's children have died. This wealthy man might enable him to do the research which could further enhance his career. His alliance with Manning puts him in a very equivocal position.

Osborn Manning is an American media magnate whose two children, Scott and Susie, diving to the site of a wreck, become victims of the beast. He is obsessed with taking his revenge on the squid.



After learning that Darling is the most knowledgeable man on the island about the waters surrounding it, he tries to hire Whip to lead him within shooting range of the squid. Any man has his price, according to Manning, and after his offer is refused he probes into Whip's life to find what might make him change his mind. He learns that Charlotte Darling, unbeknownst to her husband, has been borrowing money on their house. Manning buys the mortgage and threatens to dispossess the Darlings unless Whip accepts his offer.

Lieutenant Marcus Sharp is a U.S.

Navy helicopter pilot stationed in Bermuda. He has formed an alliance with Whip Darling, and he spots wrecks for the former fisherman so he can make a little extra cash from salvaging abandoned property. His main problem with his job is boredom. Nothing much happens at his station. He had entered helicopter service after his fiancee was killed by sea wasps, deadly jellyfish. He is attracted to Stephanie Carr, a photographer but is fated to lose her also when St. John's submersible is attacked.

Whip Darling, next to the squid, is the fullest characterization in this book. The other people involved perform their functions in the plot without becoming much more than stock figures. Benchley, even this late in his career, seems to have difficulty creating memorable human characters.

Social Concerns

Peter Benchley's love of the ocean causes him to sound an elegiac note in *Beast*, because the ocean may be irreparably damaged unless the destructive tendencies of the human race are placed under strict control. In the novel, the North Atlantic has been overfished, and the lack of fish threatens the livelihood of many people such as Whip Darling, whose family has been fishing the waters off Bermuda for several generations.

Benchley explains that the use of fish traps by many boatmen is one of the main causes of the depletion of the ocean. Thoughtless greed has led these fishermen to destroy their own way of life. The giant squid that normally finds its food in the ocean depths now must hunt for it closer to the surface.

Techniques

Beast is in many ways a rewrite of *Jaws*, following the formula that made the earlier work a blockbuster best seller.

Again the ocean is the source of a threat which seems indestructible to mere humans. Benchley, as usual, has done his research. Ordinarily *Architeuthis dux* poses no threat to human life, but human predators have eliminated its customary sources of food, and they have also greatly reduced the numbers of its only natural enemy in the ocean, the sperm whale.

Like the great white shark in *Jaws*, the creature becomes a source of evil for some of the novel's characters, notably Manning. He, like Quint in *Jaws*, becomes a sort of latter day Captain Ahab. Like Ahab, his vindictiveness costs him his life.

Benchley sacrifices a number of innocent people to the beast, strategically maintaining the suspense and excitement of his plot by carefully placing its appearances. Even the latest scientific equipment proves inadequate for those hunting it. The squid attacks Liam St. John's submersible, a small observation submarine, finds its weakest spot and destroys it. This is a fitting reward for his grandstanding. In the final phase of the hunt, Whip Darling's boat is also wrecked, but sperm whales were seen earlier in the area. One of them kills the squid, which—while wounded by Darling and his other human enemies—is still formidable. The sperm whale becomes a convenient *deus ex machina* for this drama.

Themes

Beast echoes Benchley's *Jaws* (1974; see separate entry). Benchley replaces the white shark in this novel with a near mythical creature, *Architeuthis dux*, the giant squid. Homer refers to it in *The Odyssey*, and seafaring Norsemen made it part of their mythology. Shore dwellers have long known of its existence because dead specimens have occasionally washed up on beaches. Few have seen live giant squid and marine biologists still have not learned much about their life processes.

Accordingly they retain their mystery, and their size and power make these usually peaceful creatures a source of possible menace.

It is this potential on which Benchley capitalizes. As Darling says of the terror experienced by his assistant: "The thing has opened a dark door inside this young man. It's weird how things we don't understand can arouse demons we don't even know we have." This capacity for terror is what Benchley exploits. How they respond to their fear defines the characters of the novel. Some of the characters deny their fear; they insist on ignoring the danger, and like Liam St.

John they perish because of their foolishness. Others panic, putting others in danger. And still others such as Whip Darling respond cautiously and with intelligence to their fears.

Although humanity versus nature is an important theme in most of Benchley's fiction, it is perhaps best worked out in *Beast*. The menace created by the giant squid is a natural response to what humans have done to the ocean. Overfishing and pollution have ravaged the giant squids' feeding grounds; its move into human territory may be likened to that of mountain lions moving into suburbia in California or the movement of other predatory species such as coyotes and owls into urban areas through much of the western United States. They need to eat, and what remains of their natural hunting grounds has too little food to support them. Underlying much of the action is the idea that the human deaths could be prevented if people would treat nature with respect; the ocean's resources should be better managed and its creatures should be respected as both valuable resources and as dangerous animals.

Adaptations

NBC aired a two-part series in April 1996, also called "The Beast." The giant squid took more than a year to construct; its anatomy was slightly changed to position the eyes in front of the head rather than on the sides so the creature could lift both eyes out of the water at once, in order to generate even more frightening scenes.



Key Questions

Why do most of us require the tonic effect of mystery and terror? This question is not new, but it retains its interest.

Our security is always threatened in our every day lives. The Cold War may be a thing of the past, but the weapons that made it so frightening still exist. They may be in the hands of terrorist organizations, people much less given to logical reason than our former rival, the Soviet Union. Many diseases such as tuberculosis, once thought under control, are making comebacks, and new diseases are appearing. Why do we need artificial thrills when our lives in the real world are constantly threatened? Benchley in *Beast* comments on the panic *Jaws* created in the 1970s. His characters in *Beast* wish to avoid this, but writers such as Benchley have made huge profits by scaring people.

1. Has Benchley accurately depicted *Architeuthis dux*? An article in *Scientific American* (April 1982) maintains that the animal is still something of a mystery and makes no mention of attacks on humans.

2. Is the giant squid as effectively terrifying as the great white shark in *Jaws*?

Why did *Beast* not cause a panic among tourists at the beaches in 1991 the way *Jaws* had once done?

3. Are novels like *Beast*, which reach a large popular audience, effective means of making their readers conscious of what is happening to the oceans of the world and of the assault on nature generally? Is the situation for the world of nature generally so bad that efforts to stop the destruction are "ten years or more too late" as they were in Bermuda?

4. Dr. Herbert Tally, an authority on teuthology, is very frustrated because he believes his field of interest and he himself are not getting the recognition they deserve. How typical is he of many people in academic circles these days?

5. Analyze Osborn Manning's role. Is he a stereotype, one of the many villainous businessmen appearing in fiction today? Or is he like the cruel bankers in nineteenth-century melodramas who threaten to foreclose mortgages on the family farms? This is the way he forces Whip to work with him.

6. Both Liam St. John and Osborn Manning lose their lives pursuing the giant squid. Is it good strategy on Benchley's part to have the two villains perish this way?

7. Is Dr. Tally right when he says: "Man needs dragons—he always has."

Such creatures provide explanations for the unknown forces with which humans have always contended. Or is Montaigne right when he says: "It is better that common errors prevail in human reasoning or men will be curious to no purpose."



8. What is the purpose of showing the reader (as the novel ends) little squid developing in the ocean's depths? Is this also a too familiar device in adventure or science fiction stories?

9. Part Four of the novel is entitled "Chase." Compare this section of the book with the end of *Jaws*. Do comparisons with *Moby Dick* come to mind, here, too? Has Benchley supplied new thrills?

10. Darling, Sharp, and Dr. Tally have wounded the giant squid, but its strength still seems overwhelming. Another force intervenes. Some critics complained that Benchley telegraphed the appearance of the sperm whale, by implication making it a clumsy device in his plot. Do you agree?

Literary Precedents

The use of a giant squid as a mysterious source of danger has been a standard device for the novelist for over a hundred years. Homer in *The Odyssey* had made the Scylla a mythical monster, and the actual creature is still not well known. Victor Hugo used it in an episode of his *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866; *The Workers of the Sea*), and four years later Jules Verne would put one in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870; see separate entry). In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the giant squid is also a villain, but it seems to be a mindless one, unlike Benchley's beast.



Related Titles

Benchley has enjoyed his greatest popular success with novels that feature beasts as the main antagonists, although he has ventured into other realms. For instance, he has written fanciful sea adventures such as *The Island*, (1979) and *The Girl of the Sea of Cortez* (1982) that feature human antagonists. In *Q Clearance* (1986; see separate entry) and *Rummies* (1989; see separate entry), he ventures into social comedy, focusing on politics in *Q Clearance* and alcoholism in *Rummies*.

Even though these novels have enjoyed modest success, it is for *Jaws*, *Beast*, and *White Shark* (1994; see separate entry), that Benchley is best known.

It was *Jaws* that propelled the former political speech writer to fame. The novel focuses on a great white shark that terrorizes an ocean-front community that caters to tourism. Although heroic characters battle both incredibly stupid civic leaders and the shark, the shark almost takes over the novel and becomes the protagonist. Further, the great white shark takes on preternatural aura as it seems to track down its victims and seems to outwit those who try to fight it.

These elements are to be found in *Beast*.

Not only does the title echo the ominous one-word title of *Jaws*, the giant squid is given a personality of its own and seems more of a protagonist than villain; it seems as though Benchley learned from his success with *Jaws* that the monster is more important to the story than the people who are its antagonists. Further, the giant squid is intelligent, outwitting the humans who seek to kill it, and well motivated by its search for food and its desire to protect its young.

The title *White Shark* could fool people into thinking the novel is a reprise of *Jaws*, but it is not. Instead, it features monsters created by Nazi scientists. The monsters are combinations of shark and human, making them both fearsome and intelligent. Unlike the shark in *Jaws* and the squid in *Beast*, these monsters are not motivated by animal instincts to feed nor loss of environment as in *Beast*. They are villainous through and through.

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