The Beasties Short Guide

The Beasties by William Sleator

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Environmentalism has been a motif in Sleator's earlier novels (for instance The Night the Heads Came; 1996 see separate entry, Vol 9), but in The Beasties, it becomes important for the motivations of the characters. In The Beasties, a botanist takes his family to spend the summer in a large house in a forest, where he can study fungus. The forest is being chopped down by lumber companies, leaving hillsides denuded of trees and most other kinds of life. However, the trees are not disappearing peacefully: Something in the forest resists the loss of the trees, resulting in destroyed lumber company equipment and, horribly, in maimed people who mysteriously at night lose arms, legs, ears, noses, and other parts of their anatomy, without waking up or sensing anything amiss before morning. Those responsible for the atrocities may be the mysterious beings who may just be folklore creatures called "the beasties."

About the Author

William Warner Sleator III says that he began writing when very young and that even then he was interested in the weird aspects of life.

He was raised among a family of scientists, but he was interested in the arts, becoming a pianist, composer, and writer. Perhaps his combination of interests in art and science led to his interest in science fiction, which he read avidly. He was born to William Warner, Jr., a college professor in physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

By high school, he was composing music that reflected his preoccupation with the macabre, giving his works titles such as "Guillotines in Springtime." He entered Harvard as a music major; he says that he was miserable at Harvard, with his unhappiness reflected in unhappy compositions. He seems to have been very productive while at Harvard, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multivolume journal.

While at Harvard, his artistic interests seem to have taken a significant turn, because he changed his major to English, graduating in 1967.

He moved to England for a time to study musical composition while working for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist. He had a fortuitous event while in England: He stayed in a cottage in the woods that had been used as a pest house for people with smallpox. The cottage's walls even had graffiti on them from the 1700s. His stay at the cottage was the inspiration for his first published young adult book Blackbriar.

When he moved back to the United States, he took a job as a pianist with the Boston Ballet, traveling with the company for nine years. He says he has voluminous notes in his journal about bizarre happenings with the company such as Giselle's house tipping over and knocking out a dancer and that he hopes to turn his experiences with the ballet company into a book someday. During the nine years with the company writing took up increasing amounts of his time, and he finally quick his job so that he could concentrate on writing books.

His first two novels for young adults Blackbriar and Run were based on his real-life experiences, and he continues to be inspired by his personal experiences. For instance, he lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, and he uses what he knows about Thailand in The Spirit House and Dangerous Wishes. He also says that he bases his characters on real people, which may account for his asking his family for forgiveness at the start of Oddballs.

Setting

"'The western wilderness area,' he said in a quiet voice, almost to himself. 'That's where the beasties live.'"

This remark is made by Doug's weird friend Al, who warns Doug about the beasties. His uncle had worked in the western forest and lost a leg. Al asserts, "Uncle Jim was lucky. They like children better." Thus, Doug begins his adventure with warnings from a friend, who may be unreliable, about creatures that prey on people, especially children, in the forest. Doug will find out that the danger to himself and his family is horrifyingly real.

As he travels to the house in the woods where the family will stay, he admires the beauty of the forest and also notes the bare hillsides that were once covered by trees. The house—"the old Beardsley place"—itself is in disrepair; it once belonged to the owner of a logging company, but he had abandoned the house without explanation.

It is a big place with many rooms and plenty of space for exploration or, for Doug's sister Colette, for sitting away from the rest of the family while reading a book. The house is far from any neighbors; help cannot come quickly during emergencies. The setting is a classic one: an old, large house with a mysterious past, isolated from civilization. Even so, the house is only a small part of the danger that awaits Doug and his family; the house is surrounded by the forest, and in that forest something strange is lurking, something that tries to lure Doug and Colette deep into the woods by leaving gifts behind the house. "Just stay away from old houses and the places in back of them," Al warns, but the gifts, "a baseball and bat and a book" are tempting, and the forest does not seem dangerous.

Social Sensitivity

The adventure in The Beasties really gets rolling when Colette and Doug enter a vertical mine shaft and fall. It may be worth reminding people that falling down mine shafts does not as a general rule lead to an exciting adventure, more often it leads to injury and even death. Those who live in areas with many abandoned mines know that every years a few young people die because they thought they would have fun exploring a mine shaft that they had discovered. In real life a child who jumps into a shaft is a dead child.

When they enter the forest, at first Colette and Doug believe that they are safe because they are far from other people, including bad ones. It is an unfortunate fact of life that America's forests are not safe far young people and they should practice the same common sense that they would use on a city street; bad people do sometimes prowl woodlands, even in remote wildernesses.

Very worrisome are the ethics of The Beasties. It invites readers not only to sympathize with but to root for creatures that systematically mutilate human beings, taking the good people, such as the kindly lumberman, as well as the bad. Although the "family," as they prefer to be called, talks of waging a war to save their environment, their victims are unaware that there is a war going on. Further, the "family" makes no effort to disguise their preference for children; they believe that children may be more sympathetic to their cause. This may fool a young reader, but most adults are likely to recognize the pattern of child abuse—the children are favored because they are more easily manipulated than adults; they are more readily duped. It may be worthwhile to discuss how the "family" uses children in its war of destruction and mutilation with those young readers who are likely to believe whatever they read; The Beasties needs to be read with a critical, questioning mind.

The issue of logging America's forests permeates the narrative, although its pros and cons are only shallowly mentioned. The denuded tracts of land that Doug sees indicates that the loggers in the novel are practicing the kind of logging that most environmentalists regard as the most damaging: clearcutting. The loggers chop down everything in their way, leaving landscapes that appear blasted and dead.

In The Beasties, Sleator personifies the deadly effects of clearcutting, which kills wild animals by killing their homes, in the form of the beasties, intelligent creatures of the forest who can give voice to the misery of the forest's wildlife. Through the beasties, Sleator portrays the logging as a genocidal war upon wildlife; the beasties respond by waging a guerrilla war against the people responsible for cutting down their trees. The matter is life-and-death for the beasties, not merely a matter of wishing to remain undiscovered. The trees create the conditions necessary for the growth of the fungus Aceropala, which is an essential part of the beasties' diet, preventing birth defects. Alternatives to logging are not discussed, and the novel's outlook on the matter is a gloomy one: What is going to happen to the beasties? Their situation is pretty hopeless.

The humans have all the advantages. And when they can get the logging companies back in operation again, they will probably continue to destroy the forest.

Readers may object to the novel's coverage of the issue of logging American forests as being too simplistic. After all, loggers do not cut down trees just for fun, they do it to earn money; there is a vast market for lumber in America and around the world that is the engine that drives logging companies.

Appended to the issue of logging is another social issue, tossed into the narrative in such a manner as to suggest that narrator Doug thinks it too obvious to require much explanation: "He [the boss] had money and power, and that's what made you win in court." Readers should be encouraged to spot such remarks and not accept them at face value. Doug's observation is flip and hip, it sounds properly cynical and politically correct, but it may not be true or not entirely true.

After all, Doug has repeatedly shown himself to be unwise, and he thinks so little of his own views that he, as a fifteen-year-old, believes his ten-yearold sister to be smarter than he is. It is possible that Doug's remark about wealth and power and their effect on justice has truth in it; the importance of the passage is not its truth or falseness, but that it is glib and thus readers should not let it stand as something obvious.

Literary Qualities

It is often hard to tell what were the sources of inspiration for a novel, but Sleator provides a clue before the novel begins by noting, "The author would like to thank his brother Tycho B. Sleator for telling him about mole rats." Mix this inspiration with Sleator's recurring interest in environmental concerns, and we readers are afforded a brief glimpse into how a novel may have been inspired.

Sleator's skills for description are featured prominently in The Beasties.

For example:

Already it was hard to see, it took a while for my eyes to adjust, and it kept getting darker fast. There were a lot of different birdcalls and insect noises; the endless trees made a sound like creatures whispering to each other. We seemed to be in a valley; trees sloped upward on all sides of us.

But I could also see swaths on the hillside where large areas of trees had been mowed down; the land there was empty and dead. There were no lights in the distance. I felt a million miles away from everywhere.

With this passage, Sleator establishes both the mood and the situation for his novel. First, he presents the liveliness of the forest, then he uses the reference to the valley to emphasize the isolation into which Doug and his family are moving. He then notes the "swaths on the hillside" where trees had been cut down; this presents an important factor that motivates most of the narrative—the beasties are reacting to the loss of the trees. Sleator then draws our attention to the most important factor in what Doug sees, that the land without trees is "empty and dead," a marked contrast to the lively woodlands Doug first noticed. Then he and his family's vulnerability is noted by pointing out their isolation; they are not only in a valley apart from other people, they seem to be "a million miles away from everywhere."

Thus, with a short description Sleator lays out the situation and foreshadows later events. If the passage has any weakness, it is that Doug, who dislikes reading and is somewhat dull witted, is supposed to have written it.

Themes and Characters

The Beasties has three principal characters: Doug, the narrator and the main character; Charlotte, Doug's sister; and Fingers, a member of the "family," that is, a beastie. Doug usually plays baseball and hangs out with his decidedly weird friend, Al. As his character evolves, it turns out that he has a strong family loyalty and feels responsible for his sister's welfare; it also turns out that he is none-toobright and perhaps not well read enough ("I didn't read much," he says) to write the narrative with which he is credited. Furthermore, he screams too much, punctuating many scenes with his shrieks.

According to Doug, "Colette spent a lot of time alone reading, and she was pretty gullible." He is fifteen years old, and she is ten years old, and typical of many such older brothers he not only feels protective of his younger sister, he assumes that she is far less worldly than he is. In fact, she is an intelligent girl, although without common sense. Her impetuous dropping into a vertical shaft not only puts her life at risk, it begins the events that like those of a Greek tragedy inevitably follow one upon another until Doug sacrifices his eye.

She does not grow as much as Doug does during the novel. He begins as a grumpy lug, focused mostly on his own inconvenience, to someone who has a large world view and the capacity to empathize with others who may be very different from himself. These are admirable qualities, even if he is still basically a big lug. Colette's growth is primarily in her regard for her brother. A bookworm, she assumes that Doug—a man of action and not a reader—is incapable of thinking.

She quickly becomes the infuriating Sherlock Holmes, who never tells all, and Doug becomes Dr. Watson, faithfully recording events while yearning for an explanation of what is going on.

If Doug underestimates Colette's capacity for action, then she misjudges entirely his capacity for thoughtfulness. Had she enquired and he honestly replied, she would have found in the outwardly stolid boy an artistic sensibility; we are clued into this aspect of Doug's character when, after his complaining about spending a summer in the middle of nowhere, he remarks about the forest that "It was very beautiful." This further shows that he has the potential for growth, because he has the ability to recognize when he might have been wrong. By the novel's end, Colette is little changed except for her regard for her brother. Had she grown as he has grown, perhaps she would have sacrificed one of her own eyes; instead, she only marvels at his extraordinary spiritual growth. She apparently does not realize that the sacrifice Doug makes is such that she may be indebted to him forever, never able to compensate him for what he has done as much on he behalf as on the behalf of Fingers.

It would seem to require an extraordinary amount of stupidity to get Colette and Doug stuck in the hole in the woods behind the house, and for most of the narrative, Doug believes himself to be incredibly inept, even though he discovers that he has valuable talents, such as one for cartography; Colette gives him good reason to think that she is

both foolish and gullible. Eager to take advantage of the gullibility of children are the beasties, who prefer to be called the "family."

Among the "family" is the novel's third important character Fingers. Her name apparently derives from her blindness; she feels about with incessantly probing fingers. She and the other of her kind are humanlike mole rats; they walk on their hind limbs, are about as tall as humans, and communicate with both spoken and written language. Their medical science is apparently well developed, although the primitive conditions of the operating room and the references to aged medical texts would suggest otherwise. They are plainly not human beings because their skin is translucent and they have large protruding gnawing teeth, typical of rodents: Their skin was so slimy and absolutely colorless that looking at them made you think of worms and corpses at the same time.

And the skin was also so thin that you could just barely see through it. On the smaller ones, who wore only cloths around their waists, I could see the vague shapes of bones and organs underneath the skin, hearts pulsing. Their eyes were larger than human eyes, without lashes, and bulged out and swivelled, like the eyes on some reptiles.

"They were just too gross," Doug declares. Their social organization is like that of real-life mole rats, with the smaller ones being workers and the larger ones being guards or warriors.

They live in an underground hive, with a queen that dominates all social life; her function is to give birth to the members of the "family."

Fingers is "second in command" after the queen and might have been queen herself if not for her blindness.

She eventually explains that queens must bustle about, pushing and shoving in order to get work done and that she needs to see who she is pushing in order to be effective. Curiously, the blind Fingers supposedly teaches others to read; how she does this is not explained. She is a determined creature who will do almost anything to rid the forest of the, as she puts it, "toxic human presence." Almost anything includes threatening or coaxing children into helping her hive fight the logging companies; children are especially valued as spies. Fingers is fairly frank about why the "family" prefers human children; she contends that adults are too untrustworthy and have second thoughts. When she demands that Colette and Doug attend a secret meeting at which their fates will be decided the age difference is carefully drawn. Colette goes: "She [Colette] was naive and gullible, but she wasn't stupid; she knew how dangerous it was." For her it is an act of courage.

For the older, teenaged Doug, it is folly; he is old enough to understanding that doing something risky is not necessarily courageous—it can be foolish and put other people unnecessarily at risk. In the case of Colette and Doug, the other people at risk are their parents—the "family" has a secret entrance into their house—and the human community: their supposedly courageous actions, after Doug has been frightened into cooperation, results in the maiming of a kindly lumberjack, among others.

For all her cleverness in manipulating Colette and Doug, Fingers is primarily a faithful servant, with the queen making the important decisions. For instance, Fingers notes, "Queen say human children are of use to us in reconnaissance missions," which means that she will recruit children such as Colette when she can; Doug is almost too old. At first, Fingers seems to care little about the fates of Colette and Doug beyond the "family's" need for security from discovery; this make the pivotal moment of the novel, the moment that influences the sacrifices Doug makes, a suspicious one. Captured by guards, Doug is ordered executed by the queen because he is a security threat—or so Fingers says. Fingers then defies her queen and orders Doug set free.

Would the faithful Fingers defy her queen? Would the faithful guards have followed her orders when they countermanded those of their queen, an absolute monarch whose authority was absolute? The moment is ambiguous: Fingers has either put her own life at risk to help Doug, or she has deceived him in a masterful act of manipulation. "I'm giving you an eye," Doug declares to Fingers when her "family" needs a queen and she is the best candidate available but without the required eyesight. Doug does this out of the best of motives; he believes Fingers risked her life for him and that she risked the entire "family" for him: "What she [Fingers] had done for me took on a lot deeper meaning" as he sees firsthand the danger the loggers pose to the "family." Yet, he may be as gullible as his he thinks his sister is. It is possible that as an adult he may be like Mrs. Sloan, the housekeeper, who gave up her nose; he may have second thoughts and realize that he was duped. Fingers' crowing that she made the right decision in keeping him alive may be read as joy at receiving an eye; it may also be read as gloating over having masterfully exploited him.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Doug (or anyone) give up an eye for the mole people?

2. How complete is Sleator's depic tion of the society of the beasties?

What more would you like to know?

3. What are the differences in character between Colette and Doug that encourage her to attend the meeting with beasties yet discourage him from attending? How does Sleator develop these differing traits? How do they motivate later actions of Colette and Doug?

4. Is it right for the beasties to kidnap people and cut off their arms, legs, or other body parts? Does Doug's realization that they never take all of a person's body parts, leaving the person at least partly functional, at all ameliorate their mutilation of people?

5. Why don't the beasties announce their presence to the world and demand to have their homes respected?

6. "And don't trust them, no matter what they tell you or show you. Especially with Colette," warns Al. How do the beasties win Colette's trust? Do they win Doug's trust?

7. Other people besides Doug have given body parts to the beasties, and they seem to eventually regret it, like the housekeeper. Will Doug regret giving up his eye?

8. How much does the plot of The Beasties rely on stupidity or gullibility of its characters?

9. What should Doug have done to protect his sister?

10. Does Fingers really save Doug's life or is she lying about it?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the ethics involved in using children to help fight a war?

What are some modern instances of political groups or governments using children to fight a war? What are the techniques used to manipulate the children? Which of these techniques are used in The Beasties?

2. What are mole rats? Where do they live? What aspects of real-life mole rat society does Sleator apply to the society of the beasties?

3. What is clearcutting of trees?

Where in America does it occur? What effect does it have on the environment? What effect does it have on the animals that live in the forest?

4. To what uses are trees put after they have been cut down by lumber companies? What would happen to American society if the cutting down of trees were halted?

5. How fast are America's forests being cut down? Are they being replenished? Could America ever run out of trees for lumber?

6. What protection would U.S. law offer creatures like the beasties? What rights would the beasties have?

7. How complex is grafting a leg or arm on someone? How much medical sophistication is required? Has it actually been done?

8. What is the Stockholm Syndrome?

How might it apply to The Beasties?

(Hint: "Stockholm Syndrome" is a psychological term.)

4476 The Beasties 9. How do logging companies use courts of law to protect themselves?

How do opponents of logging use the courts against logging companies?

For Further Reference

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193-194. Sleator tells a little about how he became a writer.

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Sutton says of The Beasties, "Sleator handles the ickier aspects of the story with aplomb, and the menacing atmosphere and suspense-serving pace are all they should be."

Williams, Royce D. Web page: http://saturn.math.uaa.alaska .

edu/~ royce/ slea tor. html. Has photos and is a good resource for reviews of Sleator's

books.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Booklist 94, 3 (October 1, 1997): 333. Of The Beasties, Zvirin says, "Although this is neither Sleator's most credible nor his most skillfully plotted novel, it's loaded with suspense, and his knack for description and world building is as much in evidence as ever."

Related Titles

The environmental theme appears in The Night the Heads Came, but it is not as well developed as it is in The Beasties. In The Night the Heads Came, an evil group of being from another world, the Others, thrive on environmental catastrophes. On Earth, they try to push people toward making irrational decisions about their environment so that Earth will become poisoned and polluted beyond redemption. The environmental motif appears only near the end of The Night the Heads Came and is of slight importance to the novel as a whole. It differs significantly from the environmental theme in The Beasties in that in The Beasties the source of environmental destruction is solely human, not inspired by outside forces, and the invaders are the human beings, whereas the other beings, far from being aliens, are natives of the earth.

Much of Sleator's work has focused on remarkable events occurring in mundane places. For instance, in The Spirit House, a Thai spirit invades a suburban American home. Part of the appeal of the book is the premise that strange and mysterious adventures may occur right at home, right in the middle of a familiar world. Sometimes, Sleator takes his characters out of the mundane world and places them in isolation, making them outsiders in a world they do not understand. The bizarre early novel, 1974, House of Stairs (1974; see separate entry, Vol 4) takes this to extremes by placing the characters in a house that would be unfamiliar to anyone. More recently, Sleator has placed his characters in places unfamiliar to them but still realistic; Dangerous Wishes (1995; see separate entry, Vol 9) is an outstanding example of this. In it, a young man from America ventures on a perilous journey into Thailand, a place whose customs are mostly unknown to him. Much of the pleasure reading the novel provides comes from learning about Thai people and their traditions. The Beasties shares with Dangerous Wishes the placing of its main character in a real place that is strange to him. Doug is very much the product of urban America—the forest is another world for him, and he needs to learn some of its ways in order to survive. By placing characters in places strange to them, Sleator creates an underlying tension for his narrative; even though the setting is earthly and knowable, for Sleator's characters—and hence for Sleator's readers—danger may lash out from any direction.

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