# Break of Dark Short Guide

## Break of Dark by Robert Westall

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# Contents

# Overview

Break of Dark is a collection of five short stories recounting eery or supernatural occurrences which involve apparently average, everyday people in circumstances far beyond their normal experience. In fact, this idea is in part the meaning of the title: Mysterious, unknown, and sometimes wholly irrational aspects of the world—what we commonly refer to as the dark side of life—burst into or unexpectedly infiltrate the realm of the familiar and mundane.

Three of the stories, "Hitch-Hiker," "St. Austin Friars," and "Sergeant Nice," deal with supernatural beings who subtly influence and use human beings for their own dark purposes.

Two others, "Blackham's Wimpey" and "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou," are tales of ghosts and hauntings which hinge on the importance of human compassion—and the terrifying consequences of its absence. Although Westall's writing contains its own fair share of various inhumanities—violence, murder, war, and predatory sex, to name but a few—the central message of his work is nonetheless humanitarian; that is, he upholds the essential necessity of treating others with dignity and respect and as feeling, thinking human beings.

# About the Author

Robert Westall was born on October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, Northumberland, England. He received a bachelor's degree in fine art from Durham University in 1953, after which time he served briefly (until 1955) as a Lance Corporal in the Royal Signals, a branch of the British Army. In 1957 he received a Doctor of Fine Arts (D.F.A.)

from the Slade School, University of London, and married Jean Underhill one year later. After serving as an art teacher and guidance counselor at Sir John Deane's College in Northwich, Cheshire, for twenty-five years (19601985), Westall dedicated himself to the occupation of antiques dealer (albeit only briefly) and writer. Besides penning numerous works for young adults, he has also contributed articles of art criticism to the London Guardian and the Chester Chronicle.

Westall's first book, The MachineGunners, a realistic novel set in England during World War II, was awarded the British Library Association's prestigious Carnegie Medal in 1976.

Like much of his work, the story reflects Westall's own fascination with, and devotion to, the past as a significant, "living" part of the present. As he reflects in the essay, "How Real Do You Want Your Realism?" written in 1979: "Perhaps all the best books start . . . when the child-within-the-author turns to the real child and says, 'Come away with me and I will show you a place you otherwise will never see, because it is buried under thirty, or three hundred or three thousand years of time.'" Many of his books, whether fashioned from fact (like his war stories) or fantasy (such as The Wind Eye, The Watch House, or The Devil on the Road), reflect this preoccupation with the power of the past and its continuance, often ambiguous but always lifechanging, in the present. As Westall himself admits, however, it is the fantastic or supernatural dimension of human experience, even when it is based in objective, factual occurrences, which has most concerned him in the last decade or so. A comment he made in 1983 helps to explain this shift in his own creative perspective: "I have been moving deeper and deeper into the world of the supernatural . . . . Perhaps I use the supernatural as a viewpoint to comment on the inner world of psychology. Is the supernatural psychology without psychologists?" One of Westall's most enigmatic and disturbing novels, The Scarecrows, which won a Carnegie Medal in 1982, is an outstanding illustration of the idea Westall expresses here.

An exceptional stylist and spellbinding storyteller who has the gift of selecting subjects with popular appeal, Westall is a major force in contemporary British literature; with more and more of his works being introduced to American readers, his writing has been rising in importance in the United States as well. As a matter of fact, three of his works —The Machine-Gunners, The Scarecrows, and Break of Dark—received Boston Globe Horn Book Honor Books citations, and the American Library Association (ALA) named The Devil on the Road and Futuretrack 5 as ALA Best Books for Young Adults.

Westall died April 15, 1993 in Cheshire, England, of respiratory failure brought on by pnenmonia.

# Setting

All five of the stories are set in various regions of Great Britain, such as the Isle of Skye ("Hitch-hiker"), Cornwall ("Blackham's Wimpey"), and the seaside resort of Graymouth ("Sergeant Nice"). Four of them take place in indeterminate contemporary times, while "Blackham's Wimpey," is set in one of Westall's favorite subjects, the years of World War II. The author's youth was profoundly marked by the events and experiences of the war years, and his writing shows it. Indeed, some critics have declared "Blackham's Wimpey" to be the collection's masterpiece because of its realistic communication of the psychological stress war creates.

Although American readers may experience some initial difficulty in understanding Westall's references to local places, customs, people, and objects, the unfamiliar "backwater town" settings and curious Briticisms of his language should not stand in the way of their enjoyment. By using plots and themes familiar to readers of different ages and cultures, and by presenting his eery, suspenseful stories with a masterful hand, Westall effectively leads the reader to their frightening endings with a minimum of trouble.

# Social Sensitivity

Although Westall may be considered a very humanistic author, his fiction sometimes demonstrates a glaring lack of sensitivity. Not one of his stories depicts a credible, positive, fully-rendered female character, and, when women are to any extent present, they are quickly dispatched either because they are threatening (as in "Hitchhiker") or they are culpable or silly (as in "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou"). In addition to its noticeably misogynistic slant, Westall's work has also been criticized for its questionable references to the lower and working classes (noticeable in "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou"), and for its explicit or implicit denigration of other races or cultural groups (notice the narrator's comments about the Scots in "Hitch-hiker," Gary's attitude towards Blackham the Yorkshireman in "Blackham's Wimpey," and the exotic, non-English last names of the vampires in "St. Austin Friars").

Another issue of concern regarding Westall's fiction is the amount of overt or covert violence it contains. Indeed, "Hitch-hiker" describes no fewer than seven murders (which are conveniently "sanitized" through their abstract and stylized presentation), "Blackham's Wimpey" relates incidences of civilian slaughter, "Sergeant Nice" presents images of vivisection, and the remaining two stories describe in some detail the cruelties of psychological warfare, with its own threat of violence and death.

As for Westall's language, the potential difficulties posed by his Briticisms are especially obtrusive in the beginning of "Sergeant Nice," and his explicit references to bodily functions, especially regurgitation, may be markedly unappealing to some readers.

# Literary Qualities

Westall employs a variety of popular fiction subgenres—science fiction, realism, horror—in all five of his stories, with his preference clearly being for the horrific mode, which he expresses above all as a psychological state. To make this state and the situation all the more realistic, Westall focuses attention on the sensory or visceral aspects of experience; that is, he tends to emphasize one sense or another in each story. For example, in "Hitch-hiker," it is the visual which predominates: note especially his careful description of Joan's appearance. On the other hand, it is the sense of sound— the "white noise" of flight, the roar of weapons, the screams of death—which comes to the fore in "Blackham's Wimpey," just as it is the olfactory sense which becomes prevalent towards the end of "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou".

Just as he is very much aware of the physical world surrounding us, Westall is also very sensitive to its psychological dimensions as well. Archetypes—those powerful symbols of primal experience, fears, and desires which are shared by the whole of humanity—emerge constantly in his writing. Again and again he returns to images of woman as lover and destroyer, to the idea of the dead as somehow alive and threatening to the living, and to the notion that whatever is strange or alien is necessarily the enemy.

# Themes and Characters

All of the stories in Break of Dark present plots and characters already familiar from a variety of popular sources, such as comic books, science fiction and horror anthologies, television, and film; it is therefore not terribly original. The first story in the collection, "Hitch-hiker," treats the chance encounter of a man and an apparently alien being. The anonymous narrator, reminiscing about the strange events which occurred ten years ago, relates how he left school and family behind one summer to recklessly pit himself against nature and its elements after being jilted by his college fiance. Although hitch-hiking and cliff climbing were all he had in mind, fate has other plans: He unexpectedly meets a fearless, naked stranger named "Joan Smith," a gorgeous girl for whom he feels both attraction and loathing. His description of their meeting as "every adolescent's wish-fulfillment" illustrates Westall's perception of the unusual or inexplicable as a psychological phenomenon, and in fact one begins to wonder if the narrator is not just fantasizing the whole incident, especially since he has so recently been wounded in love. Whether the incredible events described by the narrator are being reliably reported or merely fabricated is something the author leaves to the reader to decide, just as he leaves unresolved the question whether Joan acts rightly or wrongly when she kills the Break of Dark 2869 three men who were about to rape, rob, and murder her. However one may interpret Joan and this curious story, several of its themes—the archetypal image of woman as lover/mother/destroyer, the idea of women as "alien" or "other," and the promptness of people to either revere or destroy that which is different—will remain to haunt the imagination.

The second story, "Blackham's Wimpey," is equally haunting, but not because of its enigmatic and indefinite qualities. In "Hitch-hiker" one has the impression that much is being left unsaid, that there is a darkness which has not yet broken free and risen to the surface of understanding; in "Blackham's Wimpey," on the other hand, the wealth of believable, concrete detail lends the story a clarity and a logic which carry the reader relentlessly forward to the gratifying conclusion. The theme of good versus evil (which was only implicit and highly ambiguous in "Hitch-hiker") is here made an explicit, significant part of the whole. Not only are the characters divided up into two historically opposed camps (the Nazis and the Allies), but the "good guys" are themselves examined and separated into the truly virtuous and the truly reprehensible, a device Westall also uses to evaluate the cruelty and destructiveness of war itself. In fact, the story revolves around two "Wimpey" (a nickname for the Wellington bomber) crews, Blackham's and "Dadda" Townsend's. Gary, a wireless operator and the narrator of the story, first describes the harsh realities of military life during the war; he is, however, part of a closely knit and caring team, and so manages to salvage much of his human feeling—and it is this feeling which saves him and his crew from Blackham's fate. The disastrous incident which drives Blackham to insanity, causes the death of his crew, and prompts his plane to become haunted is a horrifyingly simple one, the kind of occurrence all too common during war: While out on a mission Blackham's Wimpey fires on a German Junkers and sends it bursting into flame.

Gary and Townsend's crew are nearby and witness the horror of the pilot's death, hear the desperate screams "more like a half-slaughtered animal than a man; except nobody would ever do that kind of thing to an animal."

They also hear Blackham's crew cheering the hit, and jeering the German pilot, Dieter Gehlen, as he dies: over the intercom Dadda's men hear Blackham laughing and laughing at Dieter, yelling, "'Burn, you bastard, burn!'"

Once back at base they even hear him boast about having "roasted . . . over a slow fire" the young pilot.

The central theme of this story—that inhumanity and gratuitous malevolence are inexcusable, even in war—is complemented by its corollary, that compassion—for oneself as well as for others—is. essential for survival, especially during periods of turmoil and conflict. Thus Westall shows Gary acknowledging Dieter's integrity, even after he himself has gone through the terror of the German's haunting: "All that guts, all that energy, all that faith in an evil, unworthy cause . . . . I like to think he bailed out before the bitter end . . . and got a halo for mistaken effort." Although Dadda succeeds in releasing Dieter's spirit when he destroys Blackham's Wimpey, he and his men are marked forever by the specter of human cruelty and suffering.

On its surface the next story, "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou," is a welcome change of pace, for it begins as a humorous tale about the immature, petty rivalry of two men who have disliked each other since their schoolboy days.

Peter is a rather frumpy but sensitive and successful writer, while Roger is a health- and image-conscious businessman dedicated to computers and a chic lifestyle. The long-standing animosity between the intuitive, emotional Peter and the rational, intellectual Roger is exacerbated by the fact that their wives are long-time best friends; thus they are constantly thrown together, and constantly play games of one-upmanship with each other. Both the story's structure and its theme thus concern psychological warfare, and the darkness which threatens to wreak havoc on people once the power of hate takes hold.

At first the warring parties seem to involve only Roger and Peter; however, when Peter sends Roger an ugly, gaudy Christmas card signed with the improvised names of "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou," other, more diabolical forces soon come into play. As it turns out, these three are actually characters from Roger's unhappy childhood. Roger's efforts at suppressing memories of these loathsome people have only provided psychic ammunition, first for Peter's hate-filled practical jokes, and second for the resurrection of the three vengeful spirits. Thus Roger is repeatedly and inexplicably threatened with either madness or death throughout the story. Again it is compassion which sets everyone involved free: Just as Dadda was able to exorcise Dieter's ghost in "Blackham's Wimpey" because of his empathy, so Peter is able to finally eradicate his hate and thus sever his psychic ties with the ghosts. Unable to draw energy from Peter's emotions, Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou disappear.

If the dense interweaving of character, action, subject, and theme in "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou" makes it one of the best stories in the collection, then the summary attachment of the idea of urban blight to traditional vampire lore in "St. Austin Friars" makes it one of the weakest. Although suffering from nondescript characters, unremarkable action, and lack of psychological motivation, this story is remarkable for the dense, multifaceted presentation of its theme: the pervasiveness of corruption.

Westall approaches the idea of decline and deterioration from a variety of perspectives, a quality illustrated by the story's beginning, which consists of a lightning survey of the historical and physical decline of Muncaster, the city in which it is set. This point of view is soon followed by examples of individual ethical and moral decay, which finally culminate in the seduction (at least attempted, if not actually achieved—the outcome is left unclear) of Martin, St. Austin Friars' young new parish priest. Unlike the other stories of the collection, here the world is portrayed as a murky and decadent place in which it is best for the good and virtuous to turn a blind eye: As one character remarks, "What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over."

In this tale the darkness uncharacteristically triumphs: St. Austin Friars' vampires continue to reside in Muncaster in peace and in control, none the worse for their fleeting encounter with Martin's feeble goodness.

Westall's affirmation of the human spirit shines again, however, in the collection's final story, "Sergeant Nice." Over seventy pages long, it illustrates how small, mundane mysteries can lead the caring, observant person to larger riddles which finally reveal secrets of truly cosmic proportions. Like "Hitch-hiker," this is a tale of alien invasion, with the difference that the aliens do not want so much to mix with humankind as to study it and its environment. Unlike that story, however, it is also an acute character study of a normal and truly humane individual, William Bainbridge, the "Sergeant Nice" of the title. Bainbridge's care and concern—evident especially in his attention to detail and his sensitivity to the nuances of his world—make of him the quintessential expression of the humanitarian's "live and let live" philosophy: His goal is to have everyone be happy in his jurisdiction of Graymouth, a seaside resort.

When he inadvertently discovers, through a series of petty "thefts," that he has alien visitors, he attempts to accommodate even them, for he truly wants everyone to be happy. His natural optimism and humane goodness are put to the test, however, no doubt Westall's way of saying that even humanitarians must draw the line somewhere. The theme of "live and let live" is thus transformed into "it's us against them": Even before he knew he was dealing with an alien presence, Bainbridge had intimations of a force, "dark, ageless, [and] beyond the comprehension of man," a force symbolized in the story by strange juxtapositions (like that of a race from the stars that hides out in sewers) and a frightening "contrast of utter power and utter pettiness." When he discovers through a dream that these creatures are taking things to vivisect and study —even, he fears, animals and children —he decides there is no common ground, no possibility of coexistence.

For the sake of his race and of the peace of his town, he finally decides to destroy the alien force. Although he acknowledges they are necessary, the sergeant's final actions seem to kill a part of himself as well, as the poignant closing spectacle of "shooting stars" reveals.

# Topics for Discussion

1. In "Hitch-hiker" the narrator concludes that Joan is an alien. How and when does he come to his judgment?

Does his attitude change towards her enough as the story unfolds to explain his actions at the conclusion?

2. Both "Blackham's Wimpey" and "Sergeant Nice" have been labelled small masterpieces by some critics.

Why do you think they chose these stories to single out? Do you agree with their judgment?

3. "Blackham's Wimpey," "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou," and "Sergeant Nice" all focus on significant relationships between men. What characteristics are common to these relationships, and how do they differ? What influence do the relationships have on the plot, action, and meaning of the stories?

4. Although very few female characters appear in Break of Dark, they are nonetheless presented as distinctive types. What are these types, and what do they lead you to conclude about the writer's perception of women in general?

5. Do you find the endings of the stories: logical? plausible? satisfying?

abrupt? puzzling? Discuss your impressions and what you may have done differently if you had been their author.

6. Certain of Westall's characters—Roger and Peter in "Fred, Alice, and Aunty Lou" and Constable William Bainbridge in "Sergeant Nice," for example, seem to stand out more than others in his stories. Can you identify how this happens, and why?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Two of the stories in Break of Dark are ghost stories. Why do the hauntings seem to occur? How does the way the hauntings are finally terminated relate to how they began? How does Westall's treatment of the phenomenon compare to other stories about hauntings you have heard or read?

2. How would you describe Westall's attitude toward supernatural occurrences in these stories? Does he make them believable? Do they seem to point to other issues, such as a belief in life after death, or the possible existence of alternate worlds or time slips?

3. Compare the ethical implications of Joan's reasons for killing the three men who wanted to rob her and the narrator with the narrator's own response to that same threat. Whose assessment do you agree with, and why?

How would you relate their different attitudes to the question of capital punishment?

4. Who are the positive figures and who are the negative ones in the stories, and why? Would any of them be good role models? Why or why not?

5. Westall uses much sensory detail—sights, smells, sounds, for example—to make his supernatural stories seem more real. Does a certain sense (or senses) seem to dominate each story? If so, which one(s) are they and how can you tell? How does the dominant sense relate to the events or theme of the story?

# For Further Reference

Crouch, Marcus. "Break of Dark." Junior Bookshelf 46,4 (August 1982): 155-156.

Crouch terms "Sergeant Nice" a small masterpiece, and comments on the subtle, progressive exploration of the fantastic dimension in commonplace reality.

Hadley, Eric. "Robert Westall." In Twentieth Century Children's Writers.

3d ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989.

A brief but useful survey of changes in Westall's fiction during the first decade of his writing career.

Hayes, Sarah. "Glimpses of the Void."

Times Literary Supplement 4138 (July 23, 1982): 789. This reviewer comments not only on the significance of the title, Break of Dark, but also on Westall's narrative technique in the collection.

"Robert Westall." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series. Vol. 18.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1986: 480-482.

This is an important reference entry because it features a short interview with the author, in which he discusses his perception of the past and present, and the special challenges facing writers in contemporary times.

"Robert Westall." In Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 17. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981: 555-560. Although the critical selections here evaluate only Westall's first four novels, this is an important resource because of its inclusion of an excerpt from Westall's 1979 article in the British journal Signal (see below), which otherwise may be inaccessible to most readers.

Townsend, John Rowe. "Power of Violence." Times Educational Supplement 3441 (June 11, 1982): 40. While this perceptive critic finds Westall's Break of Dark to be technically masterful but short on originality, he nonetheless singles out "Blackham's Wimpey" for its emotional and narrative power. Townsend's succinct, balanced assessment of the collection may be fruitfully applied to Westall's work in general.

Westall, Robert. "How Real Do You Want Your Realism?" In Signal 28 (January 1979): 34-46. This article is the author's lucid and intelligent statement about how and why he writes what he writes; it thus serves as a "defense" of his work. An essential reference for anyone interested in Westall's thoughts about the art of writing, especially for young adult readers.

——. In Something About the Author Autobiography Series. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1986: 305-323. An enlightening essay about the author's early experiences as a writer, and the importance of his father to his writing.

# Related Titles

As the story "Blackham's Wimpey" reveals, Westall has a very strong affinity for the period of World War II. His first novel, The Machine-Gunners, about a group of children caught up in the action of the war in England, is still considered by most readers and critics to be his masterpiece. Two other works—a novel, Fathom Five, and a short story collection, The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories—portray the further adventures of characters from his first novel. Yet more recently, Westall has used the World War II as backdrop for not only fictional works— Blitzcat, The Kingdom by the Sea, and Echoes of War, for example—but for an oral history of the period as well: Children of the Blitz: Memories of Wartime Childhood.

As in several of the stories in Break of Dark, Westall is preoccupied with the subject of ghosts (yet another way of perceiving the persistence of the past in the present). Several of his novels—The Scarecrows, The Watch House, The Wind Eye, Ghost Abbey, and Yaxley's Cat—and short story collections— Ghosts and Journeys and Antique Dust —reflect this interest in the world of spirits and the psychological drama its contact with our own mundane world provokes.

One other type of novel—that which investigates "alternate realities," as the story "St. Austin Friars" does—may also be of interest to readers of Break of Dark. In The Devil on the Road, Westall mixes history, time travel, and magic, while in The Cats of Seroster he blends historical fantasy with metaphysics to create an alternate world. On the other hand, Urn Burial and Futuretrack 5, look not to the other worlds of the past, but rather to possible alternatives of our own world's future.

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