

De Natura Unicorni Short Guide

De Natura Unicorni by Jane Yolen

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Overview

"The unicorn," Brother Bartholomaeus said, "is a right cruel beast." Brother Bartholomaeus was a real person who wrote about unicorns in the thirteenth century.

Although Yolen regards Brother Bartholomaeus' disquisition on unicorns as "boring," she takes his opening phrase and uses it as her story's opening phrase. Her version of Brother Bartholomaeus turns out to be an extraordinary blowhard who never stops talking, lecturing endlessly about his research into unicorns and their behavior; even so, he establishes a few important points about unicorns, particularly that they are more than one species of animal with each type having unique characteristics.

For the story as a whole, the notion that "An unicorn is a right cruel beast" (as Brother Bartholomaeus originally phrased it) is foreshadowing that creates suspense.

The exact form of the cruelty of a unicorn is debatable throughout. Gregory seems to catch on to the tricky nature of the animal when he remarks, "The unicorn is a right cruel beast indeed. Cruel enough to keep out of sight." The unicorn of "De Natura Unicorni" is a trickster, a kind of figure traditional in folklore, and like the traditional figure, its true nature is ambiguous.

Is it a moral being or a sinister one? Or does it exist somewhere outside of the moral universe, something the hunters can barely glimpse but cannot capture, even in their dreams? Even the notion of cruelty gets turned on its head, for it becomes unclear as to who is truly cruel, and it becomes unclear as to who is truly the victim.

About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a Master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Setting

The events of "De Natura Unicorni" take place in a medieval society in which magical creatures may actually exist. Duke William is the center of the story's society, and the tale begins in his castle, which seems large, warm, and comfortable. Beyond the castle's land is a forest in which a unicorn has been reportedly seen. The forest is at first a great oaken bower, with horsemen riding under great overarching branches.

As paths fade and brambles become abundant, the character of the forest changes into one of foreboding and frustration, as if its density would prevent the hunters from tracking their quarry. Significant to the story's themes, even as everyone else begins to be melancholy about the Hunt, Duke Williams' son James remains high spirited and confident.



Social Sensitivity

The issue of hunting an animal to extinction is a difficult one, and it adds tension to the events of the story. It may be hard not to root for the unicorn to get away if it is the last of its kind. The hunters are provided by Yolen with strong, credible motivations.

Duke William hopes that the animal's horn will, as Brother Bartholomaeus claims, provide him with immunity against poisons.

He points out that even if the horn provides no such protection, the mere fact that people think it does—and that he has it—should discomfit his enemies. James wants to prove himself worthy of joining his father on a hunt, and he hopes to prove himself while hunting the unicorn. Other hunters join for the glory of the kill, because they must accompany the Duke because they are retainers, and because it is their job to track game for the duke. The matter of the unicorn's rarity is of concern for the characters, but they have other overriding concerns.

The religious motifs of "De Natura Unicorni" are significant to its resolution.

They are typical of the beliefs of the Middle Ages, especially the mark of the cross appearing on someone in a magical way meaning that the person was marked by God.

That this automatically leads to a person joining a monastery is perhaps too much of a stretch, especially for a nobleman's firstborn son, but the miraculous event at the climax of the story's action, although an invention of Yolen's, is in keeping with the era's profound belief in miracles and the belief that God could heal even the most destructive of wounds. That all who witnessed the event should believe that God had marked James as special is thoroughly in keeping with the times.

One may note that the Hunt is comprised of males; the story's women are vague figures, hardly mentioned, who remain behind. That Yolen, who has made forthright efforts to place women and girls in nontraditional roles in her fantasies, should not do so in "De Natura Unicorni" may excite some comment, but she is being true to her sources in the story, and the ideas she explores in it are not feminist ones. In other of her stories (for example "The Healing Horn" and "An Infestation of Unicorns" in *Here There Be Unicorns*), females take leading roles, sometimes turning patriarchal practices on their heads.

Literary Qualities

Even for such an accomplished writer of short stories as Jane Yolen, "De Natura Unicorni" is exceptionally fine work. She uses historical fact to ground her tale in reality. The blowhard Brother Bartholomaeus is an historical figure whose depiction of unicorns could have been taken for reality by his contemporaries—as if such animals might be found if one looked in the right place. Yolen further gives her tale a sound foundation by providing an understated version of a medieval court, with Duke William and his family and followers all fulfilling traditional roles like those in medieval English society. Into this mixture of real-life medieval folkloric beliefs and realistic castle life, Yolen adds modern touches that are subtle but likely to ring true to modern readers, adding to the verisimilitude of the setting and events. For instance, she notes that unicorns are virtually extinct—hunted out, perhaps—and that they could be extinct in the forest, for they have long not been seen and other animals in the right light or from the wrong angle could be mistaken for them. Our era is one in which many species, some once common, are going extinct or are in danger of going extinct; it is hard to watch television or attend school and not hear of endangered species. To have mention of an animal about to be extinct is likely to sound normal to a modern ear, part of a truthful background, and, indeed, in the era of Brother Bartholomaeus, large game animals in Europe were hunted to extinction, and to the hunters, the unicorn is such an animal, a prize to be hunted for a trophy and for the medicine its horn is supposed to provide.



Themes and Characters

What is the essence of the unicorn, and how may this essence be captured?"De Natura Unicorni" answers these questions through a cleverly constructed tale filled with misdirections and ambiguous foreshadowings.

The key figure in the events of the tale is James: "Young James, the duke's son, stood up and set his hand against the chart, holding it steady. He was that kind of boy." This seemingly simple statement of fact lays the foundation for the climax of "De Natura Unicorni." It foreshadows how James can react to an event quickly and selflessly—today he helps an old man with his lecture, quietly and swiftly, tomorrow he steps alertly between his father and a charging beast.

"Pearly skies/Herald a surprise /warned Old Langton at the gate as they rode out. But as he always forecast disasters, they ignored him." This passage seems aimed at the hunters, as it tells of their determination to pursue the unicorn, but it is actually aimed at the story's audience, because it foreshadows a surprising climax: Instead of death, there is life; instead of sorrow, there is joy.

James's sacrifice is hinted at as the hunt progresses—only he remains alert and cheerful: "Only young James seemed oblivious to the growing mood of the Hunt." When the unicorn is cornered, and the Hunt turns into a chaos of blood and struggle, everyone except James is distracted at a crucial moment; his constant alertness and determination to prove himself worthy of his father makes his stepping between his father and the unicorn's horn credible.

The battle with the unicorn has seen hunting dogs badly gored, their entrails torn out. Their agonizing deaths set up what happens to James: "The horn plunged into the boy's breast, shredding the tunic"—a sharp observation, with the shredding of the tunic adding a plain touch of verisimilitude. This terrible event has been set up by the foreboding that has gradually overtaken the other hunters.

On the first day, the hunters are cheerful.

When they make camp, they tell stories of hunting unicorns and sing songs, including one with the refrain: The horn, the horn, the spiral horn As thick as a tree, as sharp as a thorn, As long as a life, as bloody as morn, It will pierce the heart of the hunter.

This refrain becomes one of foreshadowing; someone's heart is to be pierced. That it is the heart of James is jarring, but it seems the logical conclusion of the tale, set up by the song and by the dreams of Richard.

Richard is the point-of-view character; it is from his perspective that events are observed. Fourteen years old but even so the friend and sometimes playmate of seven-year-old James, Richard lives in the castle of Duke William because his father, another nobleman, sent him there as a goodwill gesture—a common occurrence in



medieval times. Richard dreams of the words of the song the first night in the forest, "but he could not—in his dream—identify the hunter." The second night he dreams of "the cruel unicorn horn piercing the heart of the hunter. As in the first dream, though he could see the face of the beast quite well, he could not make out the features of the wounded man."

Are the dreams prophecy? "The dreams of the last two nights wrapped him [Richard] like a shroud; he could not shrug off the feeling of impending disaster." When Richard sees the unicorn, he has "a sudden taste of something both sharp and sour in his mouth, like death." Yet, his premonitions are not to be trusted, because the unicorn does not look like what he had envisaged: "The afternoon sun shining down caught the gleam of its horn—not ivory, as Richard had expected, but a pure beaten gold."

When the unicorn, fighting its hunters, charges Duke William but slams its horn into James, instead, the foreshadowing seems to become clear. That hunting a mystical animal should result in disaster is a traditional element of folklore, and Richard had noticed that "its eyes were the color of amber and seemed to have in them a light of understanding that was neither a beast's nor a man's." It seems to have taken from Duke William something more valuable than itself, as a magical creature might do.

Even so, the "light of understanding that was neither a beast's nor a man's" offers another possibility.

When the unicorn has been hacked to death, and Richard has suppressed the urge to vomit, he turns to look at the duke and James: "Richard was not sure what he expected—what terror and what pain. But he was not prepared for the look of ecstasy on the faces of both father and son." Instead of a torn body, James has a whole chest, but "over his heart, the skin was incised with the sign of the cross, like an illumination in a Book of Hours." Remember, the look Richard saw in the unicorn's eyes was "neither a beast's nor a man's," and what has transpired seems to be an act of God. When Richard looks back at the dead unicorn, he does not see the magnificent unicorn, but "a great black beast, more like an ox or an Irish elk." It is a monoceros, as described by Brother Bartholomaeus. Further, Richard "thought he glimpsed something white and gleaming leaping into the trees."

A story that has been building toward death and revenge is transformed, perhaps like the unicorn is transformed, into a spiritual tale of miracles and mysteries. Cruelty, the theme that has unified the story from beginning to the climax has been turned on its head. The hunters have certainly been cruel; their siccing of their dogs on a magnificent animal seemed almost a desecration, and the animal's ripping apart of its antagonists seemed to live up to its description as "a right cruel beast." But the unicorn has repaid cruelty with redemption; out of death it has given life. In this is the fundamental complexity underlying a deceptively told tale. From the start, Yolen has been working to turn cruelty on its head, to shift from magic to miracles, from folklore to religion. James has died and yet lived; he is marked with the cross, a symbol of the spiritual defiance of death. It is no wonder that Richard sees God at work in the beautiful, elusive unicorn that seemed to choose to be found: And certainly anyone touched by God's own horn



was marked forever. Richard knew this with certainty. For when he dreamed, as he did every night thereafter, he dreamed of the unicorn, white and golden and swift, running through the dappled trees of Paradise, with Richard running, frantically, after. And always he was too slow, too unsure, too unsteady to capture it for his own.

Capturing is another theme of "De Natura Unicorni." The hunters have been out to capture something, not just kill a unicorn.

Duke William hopes to capture a horn that will cure ills and protect him from poisoning, or at least make others think that he is protected. James hopes to win for himself the admiration of his father and the privilege of continuing to join him on hunts.

Richard, Gregory, and other hunters seem to hope to win for themselves admiration and a measure of glory. The death and resurrection of James shows that they were chasing the wrong dreams; their pursuit was after an idea more than the reality of the unicorn, and like Richard, every hunter but James is likely to be forever chasing but never capturing the unicorn, the animal that runs through Paradise. Only James captures the mark of God, and he does so not by capturing the unicorn but by surrendering his life. In this is the logic of the anticlimax. The notion that James should go to the monastery because the duke's new wife might want a son of her own—yet unborn, which means he may never manifest himself—to be heir instead of James does not ring true. It should be well nigh impossible to dislodge the son who gave his life to save his father. Yet, in terms of the theme of capturing, which is tied to the ideas of sacrifice and redemption, sending James off to be a monk is a logical extension of events and the religious beliefs of the characters: James already belongs to God.

His destiny is to run through Paradise with the unicorn because he has captured the miraculous that is the unicorn.



Topics for Discussion

1. Who is the main character of "De Natura Unicorni"?
2. Why does James have to go to live in a monastery after his encounter with the unicorn?
3. Were you surprised that James was alive after being gored by the unicorn?
4. What does "And certainly anyone touched by God's own horn was marked forever" mean?
5. Short stories do not provide much space for establishing mood and place. What techniques does Yolen use in "De Natura Unicorni" to quickly establish the mood and place for her story?
6. Was the unicorn in "De Natura Unicorni" "a right cruel beast"?
7. Why, in his dreams, is Richard "always . . . too slow, too unsure, too unsteady to capture" the unicorn "for his own"?
8. Would you have preferred a different ending to "De Natura Unicorni"? What is satisfying about the ending? What would you change, if anything?
9. How does Yolen tie the unicorn of "De Natura Unicorni" to God?
10. Why make Richard the point-of-view character if it is to be James who experiences the miraculous event?
11. Why does Yolen pointedly use ancient writings on unicorns as sources for "De Natura Unicorni"?
12. Why do the hunters (except for James) become quickly melancholy? What does this say about their personalities? What does it say about James's character?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What were some of the large game animals that were hunted to extinction in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance? Yolen mentions one; what others can you find? Why were they killed off? Why were the forests belonging to nobility like Duke William not better managed?

2. How was a thirteenth-century English hunt for noblemen like Duke William organized and conducted? What were the most important tasks in the hunt?

Who performed these tasks? How were they chosen?

3. Yolen has written extensively about unicorns and in fact has a book devoted to them, *Here There Be Unicorns*, which has poems and stories. How does Yolen present unicorns in her other writings?

Are they always miraculous? What similarities do you find? How do you account for the differences among unicorns in the different poems and stories?

4. Yolen draws on historical precedents for "De Natura Unicorni." What are the precedents she cites? How are unicorns portrayed in these works? What parts of the works did Yolen use, and what parts did she discard?

5. In medieval Europe, what did the miraculous appearance of a cross on the skin signify? What is the history behind signs of the cross such as that which appears on James?

6. In "De Natura Unicorni," sending James to a monastery seems to be a good deed. In the thirteenth century, why were boys of his age sent to monasteries? Was it considered an honor? What part did boys of nobility, like James, play in monastic life?

7. Yolen seems to pack a great deal into the short story "De Natura Unicorni."

How does she do it? Does she use similar techniques in other stories?

8. More than one kind of unicorn is described in "De Natura Unicorni." What are they? Draw pictures of each, sticking close to the descriptions in the story, but inventing details where the story does not provide any.

9. Write a sequel to "De Natura Unicorni" that shows how Richard can capture the unicorn of his dreams or shows how he can never capture it.

10. How were heirs to nobility chosen in the thirteenth century? Why would James not still be the heir to Duke William, monastery or no monastery? After all, he remains the firstborn son.

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———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

———. *The Writer* (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style and discusses why she enjoys writing.

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Related Titles

"De Natura Unicorni" is one of many stories Yolen has written about unicorns.

The nature of the unicorns varies greatly from one story to the next, with their sometimes being solitary creatures, sometimes herding creatures, and sometimes a mixture of solitary males and herding females.

In a story such as "The Healing Horn," the idea of unicorns is more important than their actual existence. In "The Healing Horn" two brothers and a sister (loosely based on her own children, Yolen says) discover a horn that has been made into a walking stick, along with an advertisement that says the horn will cure many diseases. As in "De Natura Unicorni," there is a foundation in reality: The walking stick and the advertisement are drawn from swindlers of the nineteenth century, and the notion of the horn having healing properties is echoed in medieval folklore and "De Natura Unicorni."

In a story such as "An Infestation of Unicorns" (please see separate entry), unicorns are treated as common animals, abundant and well known to people. In fact, in "An Infestation of Unicorns," the animals are not only well known, they are pests; instead of people intruding on their world, as in "De Natura Unicorni," the unicorns intrude on the lives of people.



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