Every Living Thing Short Guide

Every Living Thing by James Herriot

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

There is really just one major character in Every Living Thing, and that is Herriot himself. Gone are the lazy and amusing Tristan and his somewhat despotic brother Siegfried, whose conflict with each other, and with the new young vet, added complexity to the earlier books. Siegfried is still Herriot's partner, but he does not figure in the episodes. Instead, there are a succession of young assistants who are well qualified and good doctors and whose lives seem to be much easier than young Dr. Herriot's was when he started out. The most fully developed character is the unconventional Calum, a young Scottish assistant who opens Herriot's eyes to the natural world around him. Being a passionate animal lover, he surrounds himself with exotic pets, and is known as the "vet with the badger." He also introduces new methods and an emphasis on small animal treatment to the practice.

Harriet's Helen and his two children play minor parts and are more background characters than they were in the earlier stories. Helen is now just the hard-working wife and mother and is no longer surrounded by the glamor of young love. Instead, she is now a treasured companion, reliable and steady.

The more important characters are the doctor's clients, and they have not changed much from the earlier books.

Essentially, they are stereotypes, but interesting, lovable, and frequently quixotic ones. They are still characterized by their native Dales, both in speech and action. They are practical and down to earth, and the narrator is unabashedly sentimental about them.

He relishes their quirky sense of humor and their strong feeling of independence: the tailor who treats his customers with contempt and never finishes promised work on time, but who is so good that they grudgingly put up with the inconvenience of waiting a long time for their clothes; the drunk who loses his balance and heart after his faithful dog gets sick; and the candy store owner who goes into a decline when his feline friend almost dies. Herriot reveals them through the eyes of an amused observer who has spent enough time to really get to know them. The animal characters are equally important but more sketchy — the faithful dog, the kind basset, the patient cows. The best realized animals are two feral cats that attach themselves to the Herriot household but refuse to compromise and become domesticated. In a way, they are symbolic of the Dale farmers and their fierce independence and self reliance.

Social Concerns

Again, Herriot returns to the setting and characters of his earlier books, but there is a distinct difference in this last Yorkshire novel. Time has passed, and the little farming community is no longer quite as isolated from the modern way of life. The old pub where the farmers used to congregate has made room for an inn where the locals are uneasily rubbing shoulders with urban tourists, some of the farms are now mechanized with milking machines and other modem equipment, and television has created a link with the outside world. This has not only affected the lesser characters in the novel, the narrator himself seems to be somewhat reluctant to accept the inroads of modern life. Although new techniques and advances in veterinary medicine have made life easier for the veterinary practitioner, he, like many contemporaries, looks somewhat nostalgically back towards a somewhat idealized past. The wonderfully simple and satisfying life so close to nature that has also attracted his large readership is in danger of disappearing. More than in his earlier works, Herriot looks back to something lost to the modern world.

Techniques

As in the earlier novels, Herriot utilizes an episodic structure. There are few continuous narrative lines, one of them being the narrator's search for a perfect house. Most chapters are more or less self contained, each with a climax of its own. A few seem to lack this climax, and are basically descriptive of an aspect of the country life. Once in a while, an episode has an overly strong moral, but fortunately those are few.

The story that seems to be the most overpoweringly moralistic concerns a hermit living in a simple canvas shelter with his little cat. In spite of his poverty, he is happy and content while his brother, a rich and powerful industrialist, is dissatisfied and loves no one.

Usually, however, Herriot does not get up on a pulpit but lets the reader see, appreciate, and experience the atmosphere and the people without being judgmental about them.

Along with creating a feeling for the landscape and people of Yorkshire, Herriot mixes veterinary terms and science in an interesting, easy-to-read, and nontechnical manner. There is no doubt that his books have done much to attract a whole generation of young people to his profession. One interesting aspect of Every Living Thing is the dramatic change that veterinary medicine has undergone during Herriot's thirty years of practice. The young Herriot often had to content with the inability of veterinary science to come up with remedies and cures. Pink placebo pills and pure muscle power were some of the early tools — now they are being replaced by miracle drugs and new techniques. C-sections become common both for cows and small dogs and cats; in fact the emphasis of the practice shifts away from large animals, due to an increase in pets, something that has happened to veterinary practices all over the country. In one episode the author discusses the interest his children take in his work and looking back, deplores that he only encouraged his son to follow him but not his daughter since he believed that veterinary work would be too tough for women. Now he realizes that this is no longer true, and he regrets discouraging her, although his daughter is happy as a medical doctor.

A sense of nostalgia is probably stronger in this book than in the earlier ones, and the episodic structure is somewhat weak. Lacking a strong continuous theme or characters, the book is vague and seems to drift. But Herriot's conviction that the life of a country vet is the best there is still rings strong and true and constitutes the attraction of the novel. His personal experience and praise of the satisfaction that hard work and the simple life bring have a strong appeal for the twentieth-century urban dweller whose contacts with nature are few and far between, and whose job and daily life rarely deals with such basic issues as life and death.

Themes

As in the earlier books, Herriot celebrates the simple life. His farmers are still struggling with their harsh but beautiful environment, and his work deals with the universal issues of life and death. A calf is born, an old dog dies, a no-nonsense farmer reveals a soft heart for a "useless" pet. Compared to the earlier works, this book is perhaps less unified and more episodic, but the author's love for the bare landscape of the fells, the stark beauty of the Dales, is as strong as ever, and he takes time to describe the natural scene in considerable detail. More leisurely, and less harried now, he takes time out just to stop by the roadside and to admire the tenacity of the people who wrest a hard living from an unforgiving land. He is also increasingly aware of the nondomestic animals of his world, a concern not only for man's livestock and pets, but for the birds, deer, and other wildlife that surrounds him. This becomes especially notable when a young assistant who is a passionate conservationist opens Herriot's eyes to nature and conservation.

The author still believes strongly in the goodness of people, and with the exception of one stereotyped "villain," they are portrayed as compassionate and decent. In fact, with more maturity and the accompanying respect Herriot now receives, there are fewer attempts by his clients to "get the vet" and play tricks on him. This takes away some of the slapstick comedy of his earlier books and sometimes creates a lack of conflict. Also, some of the nonscientific cures of folk medicine are no longer a challenge, and Herriot himself has become something of a miracle worker, using modern medical advances such as antibiotics and other "wonder drugs" very successfully. There is less tragedy in this book, the animals almost always recover, and Herriot shows a somewhat childlike faith and admiration in the possibilities of science. If anything is missing, it is probably the lack of a darker side. Almost all the episodes have happy endings.

Key Questions

A whole generation of young people has been attracted to the veterinary profession because of Herriot's novels, which depict a way of life that is at the same time foreign and yet intensely attractive to the modern urban reader.

The appeal of the simple life has always been greatest at times when life was not simple at all, but overly civilized such as in eighteenth-century France. Yet Herriot's characters live a harsh existence, and survival is not taken for granted. There is death, detailed description of hardships, cold, physical suffering. Why then, does the modern reader see his books depicting an ideal way of life? A discussion could easily start with the question whether Herriot's books are truly "realistic" or idealized in spite of the harsh environment. In what way is he romanticizing his world, and the world of the Dales? What is his relationship with the environment and the natural world? It might be noted that most of his cases have a happy ending.

Another surprising aspect of Herriot's success is his appeal to American readers. His novels depict a thoroughly British world of rural villages and a community life that is different from this country, and peopled by characters that are distinctly British in their thoughts and attitudes, and even speak a strong dialect. Yet his books have universal appeal, more so than, for instance, Thomas Hardy's country novels. What is the reason for this? Is it the style, the character observations, or the narrator?

1. In Every Living Thing, Herriot is no longer the "young vet". How does this fact change the tone and style of his latest book? What elements are played down, what are missing? Do they add or detract?

2. Many of his episodes do not lead up to a climax or even make a specific point. There is much understatement.

What effect does this create for the reader?

3. In many ways, Calum is the opposite of the narrator. What is Herriot's attitude towards him? What does Calum really represent? Siegfried is usually shocked by the attitudes of this new assistant. Does Herriot feel the same? Is he attracted to the new ideas or frightened by them?

Literary Precedents

Ever since writers such as the French philosopher Rousseau and the American writer Thoreau called for a return to nature, pastoral accounts of living with a sometimes idealized nature have held quite a bit of attraction for the urban, civilized reader. Yet Herriot is also a realist, who never loses sight of the hardships and backbreaking efforts such a life can demand. This keeps his books from becoming overly sentimental. His humor which does not shy away from slapstick, follows the tradition of such writers as James Thurber, but it is never bitter or sarcastic.

Related Titles

After his full-length adult novels, Herriot successfully turned some of his episodes into children's books. Colorfully and appealingly illustrated, the story of Moses the kitten who is raised by a pig, or the adventures of a small, lost lamb make wonderful picture books for preschool and elementary readers. The episodic structure becomes a strength because it holds the attention of the younger reader. In these books, the animals play the main role, and human characters are secondary and only supporting.

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