The Folk of the Air Short Guide

The Folk of the Air by Peter S. Beagle

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Characters

in most of his earlier work, AsBeagle draws several of his characters from standard fantasy types. Sia, the good sorceress, is the amorphous earth mother whose magic cures and advice are sound. Aiffe and Nicholas Bonner, the child-witches who spread their elfin mischievousness throughout the novel, are also familiar types. The protagonist, Joe Farrell, however, is drawn from a wholly different tradition. He has some traits in common with the picaro: he is the passive commentator who pursues an episodic quest. Farrell initiates little action in the novel; he reacts rather than acts.

Beagle also pairs his characters to reinforce the thematic balance of the novel. Sia and Aiffe are supernatural opposites, and Farrell and Ben represent different responses to the lost idealism of the 1960s. In addition, each character has a medieval alter ego, invented for League ceremonies, that allows entry into the world of magic.

An unhappy bus driver for Metro Transit, for example, becomes Amanishakhete, Queen of Nubia.

Social Concerns

Like Beagle's earlier novel The Last Unicorn (1968), The Folk of the Air explores the social issues of the counterculture of the 1960s. This time, however, the novel is set in the late 1980s and the idealism of the flower generation has turned sinister and commercial.

Nostalgia for the 1960s is most evident in the sense of loss that the main character, Joe Farrell, feels as he returns to the scene of his college days in an old Volkswagen bus. The novel is set in Avicenna, a thinly disguised version of Berkeley, the hub of the Free Speech Movement and antiwar protests twenty years ago. The old student ghetto where Farrell "had been drunk and in love and floating were now either parking lots and university offices." The grand Victorian rooming houses which remain have been gentrified and the rent has quadrupled. The costumed street hippies, "the Chakas and Murietas and the innumerable starveling Christs, the double-breasted Cagneys and booted McQueens, the zombies and Rasputins, the pirates, the lamas, the Commanches — they were mostly gone now, leaving behind them, as far as he [Farrell] could see, only a lot of shaggy-styled businessmen."

Even the university itself is no longer an instrument of social change. Farrell's longtime friend, Ben, now a full professor of Icelandic literature, spends his time negotiating departmental feuds and serving on committees rather than conducting teach-ins and protesting in the streets. Crude fraternity boys have replaced coffeehouse poetry.

Coupled with the theme of lost idealism is the corollary that innocence can be recovered through music and magic.

Farrell is a musician, a lutist who plays Dowland, and music places him in an untroubled state of harmony with himself. His antiquarian musical interests eventually lead him to the revels and ceremonies of the League for Archaic Pleasures, a medieval costume society which hosts feasts and mock combat.

On the surface, the League is a comic collection of assistant professors hitting each other with sticks and speaking dialogue out of a Walter Scott novel.

For the ordinary members, the "folk of the air" (to whom the title refers), the League is mere fantasy enactment. Yet at the League's heart is genuine magic, personified by the fifteen-year-old witch Aiffe, who is able to summon historical personages into present time.

Beagle implies that the exercise of fantasy and imagination can counter the crassness of the everyday world.

Yet the juncture between magic and the ordinary, in keeping with traditional fantasy fiction, is both good and evil. Aiffe may possess supernatural power, but when she

resurrects medieval mercenaries during a mock war hosted by the League, real people die.

Aiffe's misguided magic is countered by the good sorceress Sia as the novel closes, and Beagle's resolution of the conflict is a significant departure from popular fantasy narratives. Good does not exactly triumph over evil; they just cancel each other. After the confrontation, the magic simply disappears.

Aiffe develops amnesia and becomes a schoolgirl again, Sia vanishes, and Farrell leaves town in his Volkswagen bus, off on another quest. Magical moments are woven into the fabric of a transitory reality.

Techniques

Beagle has said that his primary interest is the "common ground that the Perfectly Serious shares with the Absurd, the matter-of-fact with the terrifying, the costume with the skin, the mask with the face." The dominant narrative technique of The Folk of the Air is the shifting from realism to fantasy without letting the reader know precisely where the boundary is. The embodiment of this merging of the real and the mystical is Sia's house: the number of windows varies daily, linen closets open to courtyards, and ascending stairs empty onto a lower floor.

The structure of the novel is organized around Farrell's quest. He enters the novel searching for his lost past, and all events are witnessed by him and seen through his perceptions. Yet the quest is not the grand adventure of epic fantasy, and Farrell's humor and ironic commentary turn the plot into a parody. At the novel's close, Farrell once again resumes the quest, taking directions from Sia's dog as he drives onto the expressway.

Literary Precedents

Beagle's earlier novels, A Fine and Private Place (1960) and The Last Unicorn (1968), were often compared to the epic fantasy narratives of J. R. R. Tolkien and others, but he seems to be moving consciously away from these influences. In The Folk of the Air, the fantastic elements carry little allegorical burden in and of themselves, and serve instead as a commentary on American life in the 1980s. As Beagle once said, "[America] is certainly as fantastic a country as Middle-Earth or Prydain, and almost as real." The character of Farrell also shares strong similarities with popular novels of the California counterculture in the 1960s, especially Richard Farina's Been Down So Long Looks Like Up to Me (1965).

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