Footprints in the Snow; Digger's Good-bye Short Guide

Footprints in the Snow; Digger's Good-bye by Jim Murphy

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

In Murphy's story collection Night Terrors, a grimly humorous figure who calls himself "Digger" is a guide to the stories, most of which feature young adults in frightful trouble. Digger himself does not seem to be in trouble; he follows a gloomy profession and takes a great deal of pleasure in digging graves, but he points out that he has never seen any of the weird stuff he has heard about, and he has doubts about the veracity of the stories, but he likes them.

"Served him right," he says about a boy supposedly buried alive. "It's hard enough keeping a cemetery neat without a bunch of kids digging it up," he adds.

This misanthropic figure intersperses stories with tales of his own hard life, wandering America looking for paradise—a good cemetery with knolls and trees where he can dig graves with a shovel and be left alone by outsiders. His accounts of himself form a plot independent of the other stories in Night Terrors, culminating in "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye," which form two parts of the same story— Digger's transformation into a werewolf.

About the Author

Jim Murphy was born in Newark, New Jersey, on September 25, 1947, to James K. Murphy and Helen (nee Grosso) Murphy.

His father was a certified public accountant and his mother was an artist who worked as a bookkeeper. Murphy was not particularly interested in reading as a youngster, although he remembers enjoying horror stories, but he was athletically precocious and adventurous. As a teenager, he held a number of physically demanding jobs, and remembers construction work as his favorite job. He was also a nationally ranked high school sprinter who participated on two national champion relay teams. He became interested in literature in high school only after he discovered that there were books adults did not want him to read; this motivated him to find and read those books.

Murphy attended Rutgers University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970. He attended graduate school briefly at Radcliffe College in 1970, and he married Elaine A. Kelso, who is a successful business executive, on December 12, 1970.

He landed a job as a secretary in the juvenile department for Seabury Press (now Clarion Books), a publisher highly regarded for the quality of its publications for children, and he eventually became managing editor. It was while working for Seabury Press that Murphy realized that his childhood adventures and the various jobs he held as a teenager provided him with experiences that he could write about for young readers. In 1977, he left Seabury Press and became a freelance writer and editor, and it was in 1978 that his book Weird and Wacky Inventions appeared. The book received very good reviews and Murphy's literary career was off and running. In recent years, Murphy has been especially noted for his books on historical subjects, but he is also becoming noted for his fiction for young adults such as "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye."

Setting

At the start of "Footprints in the Snow," Digger seems to be a happy man. He likes his work, and he likes the odd people he works with. Miriam, who owns the cemetery called "The Yard," is an eccentric woman who shares Digger's interest in bizarre stories. On the other hand, they disagree about his nighttime patrols. Digger regards his work as a craft, and he takes pride in doing his craft well. To him, this includes a walk through the cemetery at night to check for vandals or other interlopers. That the pack of dogs that seems to follow him wherever he goes shows up at night does not bother him. To Miriam, the dogs represent a danger; she tells Digger that he should avoid The Yard at night, not only because of the mysterious pack of dogs, but because of the nearby part of the swamp called The Slough. There are dark forces at work in there, she warns, and they may come into The Yard at night.

Although Digger shrugs off her warnings, Miriam herself is bitten, and tells Digger that she will die. He has been bitten and is fine, but she says, "Some don't die. A few. The rest do, and I'm one of them." She dies as she predicts she will, but it seems as though she is still around. She has had built a crypt she calls "The Box": "The Box was huge and gaudy, and it was almost finished, so Miriam could move right in. Thing had spires at every corner, carved gargoyles above the entrance way and wrought iron gates for doors. To liven it up, her son had red, white, and blue bunting wrapped around it. It even had solar panels on the roof so Miriam's favorite music could play twenty-four hours a day." At first this is pleasant for Digger, but The Box becomes a tourist attraction and the press of people compels him to move on.

He travels to Mississippi to Arkansas to Missouri and on and on, trying to escape the hated backhoes and trying to find a place where he can work in peace. By the time he is "back in Garrison, New York," the tone of "Footprints in the Snow" changes from the daffy humor of The Yard and its music-playing crypt to one of serious anger and resentment. Digger now enters a world that is outside ordinary experience. Garrison is where Digger started life, and it is a place he fled because of his father's abuse— an abuse fueled by his family's poverty and his father's humiliation at not being able to earn as much money as his teenaged son. It is a town where Digger's anger becomes focused; where he cannot help but ponder his unhappy past. When he gives in to his anger and unhappiness, he transforms, and the place of his victimization becomes the place of his power, and in "Digger's Goodbye," he becomes more wolf than man.

Social Sensitivity

Digger is very angry at rich people. When in "Footprints in the Snow" he closes in on a strolling couple, what catches his eye are "the man's gold watch and his four hundred dollar Italian shoes." For most of his life, he has sought solitude in jobs supervising cemeteries, and he has been repeatedly chased off by wealthy people; in one case, developers bought the cemetery where he worked, and in others they made demands on him that he found unacceptable such as insisting he use a backhoe to dig graves.

From the time he first began digging graves until the time he finds himself back in Garrison, New York, he has treated his work as a skilled craft, almost an art form, in which both cemetery, grave, coffin, and corpse were to be treated with a special respect that only using one's own two hands could deliver. He seems to have a manual laborer's resentment of wealthy people's failure to respect his line of work.

Returning to Garrison has its special bitterness for Digger. It was there that he discovered his love of grave digging and of maintaining cemetery grounds; it was also there where an embarrassed father mocked him, calling him humiliating names, and then took his son's money, spent it getting drunk and then becoming violently abusive. Digger fled the abuse, but after a lifetime of hard, physical labor, as an old man he finds himself back in the city that means humiliation to him. This adds to his bitterness and to the anger he feels about how badly his life has turned out.

"Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" do not offer an in-depth psychological study. Instead, they paint Digger's grief and grievances in plain strokes: abused youngster, misunderstood grownup, left behind by a society that has changed in ways he dislikes, and a lifetime of being at the mercy of anonymous rich people.

There is just a bare patch of social commentary in all this, more recognizable if one has read Murphy's histories such as Across America on an Emigrant Train and The Great Fire, books that emphasize the travails and contributions to society of working-class people, with sympathy for their abuse at the hands of rich and the powerful people.

With these books in mind, Digger seems to be a figure from Murphy's historical research, with the advantage of being able to vent his rage in a powerful, supernatural manner. The "werewolves" of the Middle Ages in Europe were not supernatural beings but psychotic people who imagined themselves wolves, perhaps because the wolf was a frightening and powerful animal. Digger seems like a modern equivalent of these ancient people; a lifetime of helplessness is transformed when he becomes a werewolf. Instead of Digger being their victim, the rich become his prey.

Literary Qualities

Even though Digger moves about America during "Footprints in the Snow," the focus is not on the physical movements, but on progress of his mind. Throughout the Digger stories, he has a sardonic sense of humor: "Thinking takes time. At least it does for me," he says in "The Worst Day of My Life." In "Footprints in the Snow," he at first displays this sense of humor, noting that he had only been nicked by a few bites during his night walks in The Yard: "Well, if these were the dark and dangerous forces that were going to get me, they were doing a pretty feeble job of it," he notes. During the story, his tone changes. There has been bitterness in his narration throughout Night Terrors, but in "Footprints in the Snow," the bitterness gradually overwhelms the humor. His descriptions become sharp and poetic: "I could taste the anger in my mouth, metallic and bitter." In "Digger's Goodbye," he surrenders to his anger; the tone becomes one of a man whose anger has finally overwhelmed his good sense and his ability to tell right from wrong.

Themes and Characters

"Thinking takes time. At least it does for me," Digger asserts in "The Worst Day of My Life," and he does seem to take an extra long time to figure out what those dogs who follow him everywhere are up to. In general, Digger likes a peaceful life in which he can take his time to do his work well. He prefers digging graves with a shovel rather than using machinery because he thinks doing the work carefully and immersing himself in it is the respectful way to prepare a spot for someone's eternal rest.

Digger's slowness to realize what the dogs are, and what he himself is, is unlikely to be shared by his audience. Remarks such as: "There was something comforting about having these dogs around ...; almost thirty years? How can any dog be that old?"; and "He [the lead wolf] only had three legs" (similar to Alan Allan missing one leg) are likely to be noted by veteran readers of horror fiction. They all imply that, whether he knows it or not, Digger is more than he appears to be, and that no matter how much he may try to whack the animals with a shovel, they will not leave him alone.

When Miriam remarks that "Some don't die" from the bites of the dogs, she reveals that she knows what the animals really are, and Digger's failure to react to his own occasional wounds makes plain to werewolf fans what he is to become.

These hints would seem to take away some of the suspense of "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye," but instead the suspense is heightened by the tension created by hints of what Digger is becoming and the uncertainty of when and how it will manifest itself. The walk in the snow is a classic scene for horror fiction, the snow revealing the transformation of the man into the werewolf. As a wolf, Digger is all appetite and rage; when his footprints change from shoes to paws, his personality shifts, as well. The passive, beaten man who spent his life running away from his problems becomes an aggressive beast; the inhibitions that made him a civilized man are suppressed.

This suppression is the source of the conflict in "Digger's Good-bye." Digger notes that "I felt a lot better than usual, full of energy," he seems to have become thirty years younger, and even his wrinkles have faded. Yet, "I'd been a werewolf out hunting for food," he realizes, and this is followed by remorse: "Those people hadn't done anything to me." How is he to act on his experiences? Some of his old sardonically humorous self returns as he imagines what would happen to him if he presented himself to the police and told them that he was a wolf who had helped killed the couple who had been strolling in the park. He says that "I thought about turning myself in, but I decided against doing it that day."

The story becomes a struggle between two natures, one with a social conscience and the other focused on self-interest. This is a traditional conflict in horror stories, echoed in works such as H. G. Wells's The Invisible Man (1897; please see separate entry), which has its own dramatic scene in the snow, where the invisible man is betrayed by his footprints. In Wells's classic, the invisible man's focus on self-interest becomes insanity; he has impossible dreams of great power that his invisibility will give him. Meanwhile,

comical villagers treat him more as a pest than a fearsome monster. In "Digger's Good-bye," the protagonist has a firmer grasp on reality; he realizes what he has become, and he realizes that he must choose between his two selves, the man and the wolf.

"It wasn't long before I was back to my old decrepit self and not very happy," he says. To his anger are added the discomforts of old age. Further, he has no real home. He has wandered all his life, and Garrison is not much more hospitable to him than when he fled it as a teenager. The rationalization begins with simple thoughts, and because Digger takes his time thinking, he struggles to work his way to his choice.

"It's perfectly natural, I told myself. Wolves have to hunt for food like any other animal.

And if that food happens to be humans... "

But what finally makes up his mind turns out not to be his rationalizations of his violent, evil murder of a young couple.

Instead, it is something more in keeping with his character: Digger has not been a bad man, even if he has been antisocial.

When he worked, he did so with a noble sense of the dignity of the people he buried.

He took his work seriously, and did it faithfully. Yet, his work has tired him. He is old, bent, wrinkled, with every year of hard physical labor evident in his worn-out body.

He may look something like Alan Allan did in "Paradise Lost," with the years of laboring in the sun burned into his skin. He gives in because he is tired. He remarks, "Think something positive about wolves and, poof, you're one of them. But I guess that's the same with most other evil things. Once you start to see the slightest thing good about them you're hooked." He has seen the good in his body, which seemed refreshed by his first transformation into a wolf; giving in to anger is easier than remaining old and hopeless.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Digger, who seems to have left school by age fourteen, such a good writer?

2. Does Digger start out evil? Does he become evil? When and where? How does it happen?

3. In "Digger's Good-bye," Digger feels remorse about killing the rich young couple while he was a wolf, pointing out that "Those people hadn't done anything to me." Why does he eventually yield again to temptation and go out hunting with the wolves a second time?

4. Digger does not seem to have ever been much of a joiner, so why does joining the pack of wolves appeal to him?

5. Is Digger a strong personality or a weak one? How can you tell?

6. When did you realize that Digger was probably a werewolf? How does Murphy make this discovery suspenseful?

7. Digger seems to be a rogue even before he transforms into a wolf. Why is he such an appealing storyteller even though he is an unpleasant man?

8. Digger says, "Think something positive about wolves and, poof, you're one of them. But I guess that's the same with most other evil things. Once you start to see the slightest thing good about them you're hooked." Is this true?

9. How well developed is the characterization of Digger? What do you not learn about him that you would like to know? Why would Murphy leave such details out of the Digger stories?

10. How much blame for what happens belongs to Alan Allan?

11. Why does Digger like working in The Yard?

12. Why does Digger persist in walking at night in The Yard even though he has been attacked by dogs there?

13. Is Digger a leader or a follower? How can you tell?

14. Why did Miriam have music play from The Box?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In the stories leading up to "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye," Digger tells about the hard times of the Great Depression, an era in which one third of America's workers did not have jobs. What were the Great Depression's effects on manual laborers such as Digger? Why would it affect Digger's life the way it does?

2. What were werewolves in folklore?

How have historians explained the phenomenon? How have psychologists explained it?

3. Are the werewolves of "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" similar to any others in recent literature? Do they have any qualities that are unique to "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye"?

4. Why do grisly stories of anger and revenge such as "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" appeal to popular audiences?

5. How well does Digger hold all the stories of Night Terrors together? Where are the weak links? Where are the strong ones?

6. Whereabouts in Florida does The Yard seem to be located? What are the characteristics that enable you to identify the area?

7. Murphy wrote "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" partly because he likes reading horror stories.

Take the parts of the background for "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" and write your own horror story set in The Yard or the Slough.

8. How would psychologists explain Digger's preference for the company of dead people over the company of the living?

9. Digger worked as a supervisor of cemeteries for most of the twentieth century.

Look up when he began in "Digger's Promise" and describe the history of how America's cemeteries have been cared for from then until now.

10. What are the tasks of a modern cemetery supervisor? Which ones would Digger like? Which ones would he dislike?

For Further Reference

"Murphy, Jim." Something about the Author.

Volume 77. Edited by Kevin Hile and Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale, 1994. Short summary of Murphy's career with some photographs and an interview.

Shook, Bruce Anne. Review of Night Terrors. School Library Journal (September 1993): 252. This is a review of Night Terrors, in which "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye" appear. Shook gives the book high praise.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review of Night Terrors.

Booklist (October 1, 1993): 332. A favorable review.

Related Titles

Murphy's fiction tends to reflect what he likes to read and what he remembers liking to read as a youngster, which in the case of his short stories, means horror fiction. In his collection Night Terrors, the stories vary from straightforward ones such as "Just Say Yes," about a girl's having to choose whether or not to become a vampire, to complex ones such as "The Cat's-Eye" (please see separate entry). Throughout Night Terrors, the Digger stories act to link the other stories by having Digger introduce them as tales he heard while working in graveyards. The book opens with "Digger's Promise," where Digger explains that he began grave digging when fourteen years old, sixty-three years ago, in Garrison, New York. He remarks in the story, "I will say that if you hang around cemeteries long enough you hear about a lot of strange things and some of them are worth repeating," and he asks his audience to "call me Digger."

The Digger stories become more than just links between other stories because they have their own narrative line; taken together they form a novella with its own plot and characters, as well as a grisly conclusion. The second story in the sequence is "Digger in Paradise," in which his antisocial personality is defined; he notes that "I like nice and fuzzy about as much as I like a boil on the tip of my nose." As a grave digger, he earns more money per week than his father did, a matter that preys on his father's pride; eventually, the tension between father and son results in physical abuse, and Digger leaves town to escape it.

The story ends with his finding a beautiful cemetery to work in, but in "Paradise Lost" the cemetery is sold to land developers who want to build houses, not fill graves. It is in this story that Digger meets Alan A. Crinslow, the Alan Allan of "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye": He was short and hunched over, leaning on a crutch because his right leg was missing. He had the whitest hair I'd ever seen, not much, but white, and the darkest, most leathery skin you can imagine. You could tell that he'd spent most of his life outdoors doing hard labor.

It is Alan Allan's missing leg that encourages Digger to imagine that the threelegged wolf is Alan Allan.

"Don't fool yourself, son," he [Alan Allan] said by way of greeting. "You'll be dead and dust long before this old dog is gone."

Of course, I liked him right away.

The remark about the old dog is ironic, and it foreshadows the events of "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Goodbye," but the passage also clarifies Digger's personality and how he relates to other people. By and large antisocial, preferring the company of the dead people because they do not talk too much, Digger becomes more complex in "Paradise Lost." He may dislike the company of people in general, but he does like the company of misanthropes like himself.

As Digger grows older, he becomes even odder than he was as a young man. In "The Worst Day of My Life," he remarks that "Something about standing six feet in a hole that will be somebody's home for all time .. . made me feel good. Like I was making something that would last for eternity." It is for this reason that he detests backhoes and other digging machines; they create a barrier between him and the grave he is digging. By the end of "The Worst Day of My Life," Digger has been made miserable enough to believe that he is having his worst day, and he opens and reads a note that Alan Allan had given him, warning him to read it only on the worst day of his life. It predicts that Digger will someday go to Florida, and says that when he is there, he should ask for Miriam. This prediction becomes the impetus for Digger's eventual entanglement with "dark and dangerous forces."

After wandering for awhile from job to job, Digger gives in to Alan Allan's prediction and heads for Florida. In "Deep into It," he meets Miriam Bunnell, the eccentric owner of thousands of acres of swampland, in which she has the Miriam Bunnell Cemetery: "She was a big woman, over six feet four inches tall, and she loved to talk." She refers to her cemetery as "The Yard." It is not an entirely satisfactory place for Digger to work; he cannot dig into the ground the way he likes. The cemetery is on watery, squishy soil, and water starts to fill even shallow holes when they are dug. At night, a coffin-sized concrete case without its top is set on the grave; by morning, it has sunk out of sight. After memorial services, the corpse is laid on the grave with the concrete top to the case set over it. By the next day, both have sunk from sight. The Yard is perhaps the creepiest of all the cemeteries Digger has worked, but he insists on following the routine he established when a teen-ager, including patrolling the cemetery at night. Miriam warns him that he is in danger at night out in the cemetery; mysterious creatures lurk nearby in The Slough.

The following story, "Something Always Happens," is meant to illustrate the dangers in the Okaloacoochee Slough; it tells of three boys who are captured by cannibals.

With these cheerful events in mind, Digger concludes his adventures with his own personal experience of dark forces in "Footprints in the Snow" and "Digger's Good-bye."

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