Giant Bones Short Guide

Giant Bones by Peter S. Beagle

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Overview

Giant Bones, like most of Beagle's fiction, features very strong and memorable characters. The simple plot tells of how a tinker sells all he owns and Photo of Peter Beagle by Greg Preston begins a long journey to faraway mountains that he intends to cross.

Through misadventure, he falls in with a tribe of giants who live in the forest of the mountains. They call themselves the "Qu'alo," which means "The Proper People"—the giants do not think themselves enormous rather they think humans tiny. The tale is told by a father to his son both as a bedtime story and as an explanation of how a noble race lives on in the descendants of its human friend.

About the Author

Peter Soyer Beagle was born in the Bronx, New York on April 29, 1939. He attended the University of Pittsburgh, receiving his Bachelor's degree at the age of nineteen in 1959, and from 1960 to 1961 he attended graduate school at Stanford University. He has lived much of his life since then in California. In 1964 he married Enid Elaine Nordeen; the couple had three children, divorcing in 1980. He is now married to Indian author and photographer Padma Hajmadi, and they are well-known habitues of the environs of Davis, California. Beagle was vice-chairman from 1968 to 1969 of the Santa Cruz chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Beagle declares that "I don't write sequels," even though the novella Giant Bones and the other stories in the 1997 Giant Bones collection take place in the imaginary world of The Innkeeper's Song, and the novella Lal and Soukyan features characters from The Innkeeper's Song. He says that "I made it [the world of The Innkeeper's Song] as substantial as I could, because that's my job; but it was never supposed to be more than a backdrop, a stage set. It wasn't intended to last." Even so, he became "curiously lonely for it. And that had never happened to me before." Thus he began writing stories that take place in the world of The Innkeeper's Song, a world that, according to Beagle, may never be known by any other name. The novella Giant Bones is one of these stories, not a sequel to any other work, but one whose narrative is fixed in the world outlined in The Innkeeper's Song. Beagle says that "the entire plot of Giant Bones itself showed up one morning in the shower. I'm good in the shower."

Setting

Beagle chooses to leave unnamed the realm in which the events of Giant Bones take place; he only refers to it as the world of The Innkeeper's Song. It is a rough-and-tumble world, with people living in conditions similar to those of medieval Europe. The main character of the novella is Selsim, a tinker beset by wanderlust, who sells his way from village to village until he reaches mountains far to the south of where he started, though called the "northern" mountains by the narrator, who lives south of them.

These thickly forested mountains are inhabited by mysterious creatures who live above the snow line called the rock-targs, beasts that are humanlike but not human. The rock-targs are fearsome creatures; when they attack, people say "their faces slide right up and back, straight back, showing the whole skull beneath." Selsim's adventures among the giants begin when he is saved by a giant from a nearly fatal encounter with a rock-targ.

Most of the rest of the story takes place in the society of the giants or Qu' alo. They live among the tall trees of the mountain forest and move so stealthily that they can disappear among the trees in an eye's blink.

Though the Qu'alo rarely assemble together, choosing instead to keep great distances among themselves, they are easily able to know where other giants are because their keen senses of smell pluck from the air the powerful body odors of their distant fellows. Selsim gradually blends into the Qu'alo society, eating the foods they eat and learning to view the world as they see it—as something worthy of deep thought and long contemplation.

Social Sensitivity

Except, perhaps, for the cannibalism, there is little of a socially sensitive nature in Giant Bones. The society of the father and son seems to feature a sexual division of labor, with the father complaining about his wife being away and his having to care for their son while also having to care for livestock, especially a mysterious jejebhai that is close to giving birth, probably to twins. The father often jumps out of his story to worry about the animal's latest noises. Otherwise, the father and son live on a farm that seems like many small family farms would be like in the medieval-like society of Giant Bones, and the fatherson relationship does not seem unusual, with a loving, somewhat impatient father and a little boy who worries about monsters under his bed.

The cannibalism of Giant Bones will likely give some readers pause, because cannibalism is usually a repulsive practice—in fact, Selsim himself is initially put off by it. In Giant Bones, the giants do it for two reasons: One is to prevent the deceased giant's remains from being eaten by other creatures, who would dig up the dead giants if they were buried. The other is to absorb the life of the deceased giants. As the descendants of Selsim discover, the giants had the ability to pass on their traits to those who ate them; Selsim's posterity becomes taller than average, and the giants themselves gain some of the spirituality of their predecessors.

Real-life human cannibalistic societies often killed people in order to absorb their strengths by eating them, but the giants do not kill one another; the death of any of them is an occasion of great sadness and plainly the dead Qu'alo are not victimized. It is another indication of Beagle's exceptional artistry that he manages to make clear that however repugnant the practice of cannibalism may be to his audience, to the Qu'alo the practice is a mournful celebration of the life of a valued member of the community.

Literary Qualities

Beagle's fiction often experiments with a great variety of narrative voices. The first-person narrator in Giant Bones is an exasperated father who is trying to get his son to sleep in the absence of his mother, who is away nursing a sick relative. The father provides what is called a "frame narrative," a story surrounding the main story. In the case of Giant Bones, the frame provides the context for Selsim's adventure, explaining that Selsim is the boy's great-great-great grandfather. Frame narratives very often just provide context for the main story, but the frame narrative in Giant Bones frequently interrupts the main story, persistently reminding readers that the story of Selsim has some direct relevance to the boy who is afraid to go to sleep, and who is especially worried that he is going to be short rather than tall like the rest of his family. Much of the novella's humor and humanity is carried by the frame narrative which lightens dark moments as it provides a backdrop against which to measure the events of the main story.

Themes and Characters

A boy cannot sleep for thinking there are monsters under his bed, so his father with tired impatience tells him a story about Grandfather Selsim ("your great-great-great-grandfather Selsim"), who was the "first of our lot to come into this country." The father begins the tale of how their ancestor Selsim, a coppersmith with a desire for travel, sells most of what he owns and then sets off on a trek south to cross the mountains that are north of the boy and his father.

Little physical description of Selsim is provided other than his being short, but his personality draws itself plainly as the action of the adventure plays out. That Selsim has a stubborn resolve is shown by the continuation of his trek southward even after his money has run out, earning money by tinkering or by begging. "All we know, we mightn't be here tonight, you and I and them [other family members], too, if Grandfather Selsim had been ashamed to beg," says the father to his boy. This trait also is shown when his steed, a churfa, bolts and runs away, and he continues on foot up the mountainside, even when he has to scrabble on hands and knees.

Later, he stubbornly tries for three years to escape the giants before turning his mind to learning their habits, interests, and rituals.

This stubbornness can also be seen in the father and son. The boy insists on hearing the story, even after his father says, "What? I'm scaring you now? Well, there's just no pleasing you, is there? First you're at me and at me to tell you all about giants and rock-targs and how I know you're going to be as tall as the rest of us— next minute, there you are, head under the blanket, just carrying on." The father repeatedly declares that he is about to stop telling the story and the boy repeatedly urges him to continue.

This byplay reveals a shared stubbornness that is tempered by their mutual affection, and the father's occasional impatience is muted by his basic kindliness.

Selsim possesses kindness and intelligence, both essential traits for his life with the giants before and after their deaths. When he is attacked by a rocktarg—"And the rock-targs' faces look more human somehow, and they can almost talk—not really talk, but it makes it worse"—he is saved from death by a giant. Having lost the use of his left arm and left eye in the attack, Selsim is helpless among the giants, although that does not stop him from announcing that he intends to leave them as soon as he can.

"[T]hey'd have been between twelve and maybe fourteen feet tall," says the father. They have "tangly, greasy hair" and smell very bad. The biggest giant is "Dudrilashashek," who saves Selsim from being killed by the other giants by proving that the human is intelligent, not just a creature aping intelligence like the rock-targs. He helps Selsim to heal and explains to him the ways of the giants, their vison of life.

He says that the giants exist "to study, to consider, to turn over logs and stones and ideas equally, to learn what lies underneath. For that, and that alone, we were made."

They see themselves as the "Qu'alo," meaning "The Proper People," which Selsim finds funny when he realizes that "everyone thinks they're the only Proper People in the world."

The giants fear humans more than the rock-targs because, as the father notes, "once humans know about you, you come to harm, that's how it is.

Well, I'm not saying that, that's how those giants felt." The giants have, in fact, some sympathy for the rock-targs; as the female giant Yriadvele explains: "Made at the same time, rock-fargs and we Qu'alo. Looked the same once, lived together, the same people."

Selsim learns—riding on their shoulders, contemplating what they contemplate—the Qu'alo way of life but only after three years of trying to escape those who, while treating him as a friend, are afraid that other humans will find out about the giants from him. One Qu'alo practice that he has trouble at first understanding, though later comes to understand very well, is their practice of eating the dead. All the giants in the tribe know when another giant dies. They gather together, place the deceased on a raised platform, and communally eat the body in a ritual that includes a celebration of the deceased's life. The giants are slow to reproduce, and they die out faster than they can rear new offspring. Finally, Yriadvele is the only giant left. Before she reaches a very difficult end, she asks Selsim the great after-death favor of eating her bones after her flesh has decomposed, since he is too small to eat her intact, and "Your grandfather took Yriadvele's bones, one by one, and he ground them up as fine as he could, stone against flat stone, and he ate them."

Thus the short Selsim's descendants became tall because they all carry within them the substance of the last of the last of the giants—they are the legacy of the giants. As the father says, "they're [the giants] in our bones now." This weighty theme of leaving a legacy is the dominant one in Giant Bones. The father suggests that even when Selsim was begging early on, "maybe he was thinking about us all, that far back, hey?" Selsim is concerned for both his descendants and the legacy of the Qu'alo, who have no descendants that he knows of. This means that his later eating of the bones is charged with symbolism. This sacred act is a physical representation of the abstract idea of continuing to honor after death a people and their culture. The tallness of Selsim's descendants is a testament to his success in honoring the hallowed dead; the people who settle the wilderness south of the mountains carry within their very bones both Selsim and the giants.

This theme of legacy is artfully used to bind the major elements of the narrative together. The interruptions to the main story by the father and son are more than merely humorous interludes. They help carry the burden of the theme because the father is "thinking of us all" as Selsim may have done, and in the service of this thought he is passing through the story part of his family's legacy to his son, to whom he has already physically passed the legacies of Selsim and the giants, and this son will pass these twined legacies on to another generation.

Topics for Discussion

1. If the giants are afraid that Selsim will betray them, why do they not kill him?

2. Why does Selsim stop trying to escape the giants?

3. Why does Selsim agree to eat the bones of Yriadvele?

4. What is Yriadvele's lasting gift to Selsim's descendants? What does it signify?

5. Why do the giants all die? 6. Why are the giants afraid of humans?

7. Why would the father choose the story of Selsim to tell his son? Why is it important for the son to hear it?

8. The giants seem very intelligent, yet they do not form a close society the way humans do, they do not build shelters for themselves, and they perhaps do not even make clothing. If they are intelligent, why do they not do these things? Why live in caves if they do not have to?

9. Were you surprised or put off by the giants eating their dead? Are their reasons for doing so explained well?

10. The father explains that "once humans know about you, you come to harm, that's how it is. Well, I'm not saying that, that's how those giants felt." Are the giants right?

11. What effect does having the father tell the story have on the tone of Giant Bones?

12. Are Selsim's descendants part giants?

13. What makes the giants Qu'alo, their culture or their size?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is a tinker? In the world of Giant Bones, what would a tinker do?

How would a tinker make a living?

2. Giant Bones mentions several unusual creatures. Draw pictures of these following the father's descriptions where you can. In particular, what would the giants and the rocktargs look like?

3. The giants sleep through the winter, arising only on warm days. What real-life animals do this? How do they do it?

4. The giants eat their dead as part of a ritual celebration of the dead.

Have there been any human cultures that did this? Why did they do it?

What were the purposes of the rituals they followed?

5. Selsim lived with the giants for eighteen years. During that time he probably had some adventures. Write a story about an adventure that teaches something about the Qu'alo way of life, keeping all the figures in character.

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Summarizes Beagle's life and the role writing has played in it.

Michalson, Karen. "Peter S. Beagle." In Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction. Vol. 1 (Biography and Resources). Edited by Kirk H. Beetz.

Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 111-113. Michalson summarizes Beagle's life and popular reception and provides an annotated listing of works about him.

Zahorski, Kenneth J. Peter Beagle. Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1988. This is an introduction to Beagle's life and work, including close readings of A Fine and Private Place, The Last Unicorn, and The Folk of the Air.

Related Titles

Giant Bones is one of seven disparate tales set in the same world, but with each tale featuring very different people in very different places of that world. The first of these tales is the novel The Innkeeper's Song, which sets the tone for the six novellas, including Giant Bones, that Beagle subsequently sets in the same world. The Innkeeper's Song emphasizes characterization over plot and plays with traditional folklore, including unicorns; Giant Bones and the other novellas similarly emphasize characterization, with each rewarding its readers with insights, gently sentimental in the case of Giant Bones, into the human condition.

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