

The Goats Short Guide

The Goats by Brock Cole

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Overview

A thirteen-year-old girl and a slightly younger boy are stripped and marooned on an island by the other campers at Camp Tall Pine and labeled as "goats." These campers hope to initiate a sexual incident between the girl and boy, who are selected to be the goats because they are misfits. This cruel act is an annual tradition at Camp Tall Pines that seems to have covert approval of some of the camp counselors and administrators. The author frequently refers to Laura and Howie, the victims of the prank, as "the boy and girl" to reinforce their isolation. Laura and Howie decide to elude their tormentors by swimming to the mainland and becoming runaways before their tormentors return to the island. By running away, they are rebelling against society— the peers who have ostracized them and the adults who have allowed the abuse. The novel becomes a survival narrative, because Laura and Howie must provide food, clothing, and shelter for themselves in a hostile environment. They break into an unoccupied summer cottage, swipe clothing at a municipal beach, and perpetrate other criminal acts such as staying at a motel under assumed identities and driving off with a truck.

Laura and Howie are aware that their stealing is possibly injurious to others, so they make a list of the items that they need to pay for once they are safe. Adult supervisors at the summer camp and local authorities join the search for Laura and Howie, but they manage to escape, with help from a separate group of inner-city summer campers who are aware Laura and Howie are fleeing from the authorities. One of these kids calls them "Bonnie and Clyde," because Laura and Howie are reluctant to tell the kids their real names. The novel ends with Laura and Howie being reunited with Laura's mom, Maddy Golden, after a harrowing adventure involving hitchhiking and commandeering a truck.

About the Author

Brock Cole was born in Charlotte, Michigan, in 1938. His family moved frequently throughout the Midwest, and he remembers going to the public library in each new community as a pleasurable focus in his young life. After graduate school he taught at the university level in Minnesota and Wisconsin before becoming a fulltime writer in 1975. His wife, whose academic career is in classical studies, and their two sons (now grown) continue to be the initial readers of his manuscripts. In an autobiographical sketch Cole wrote that his primary goal as a writer is to provide his youthful audience with an "honest view...

you want your books to be influential, so they can enlarge a person's experience."

Cole is a talented writer and illustrator of children's picture books as well as an awardwinning writer for young adults. His water sketches for his picture books radiate a lively wit reminiscent of traditional folk tales populated by kings, beggars, talking pigs, and giants. He has illustrated a book for older children, Lynne Reid Banks's *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980), as well as his own young adult title *The Goats*. His book jacket credits include the Newbery honor title by Carolyn Comen *What Jamie Saw* (1985), and his own young adult titles *Celine* and *the facts speak for themselves*. The latter title was a 1997 National Book Award Finalist.

Both *The Goats* and *Celine* were named ALA Best Book for Young Adults, Booklist Editor's Choice, and School Library Journal Best Book of the Year. In addition *The Goats* was a New York Times Book Review Notable Book. His compassion for troubled young adults shines above all else in his young adult novels; he pays tribute to their resilient spirit.

Setting

There are no chapter numbers for the eleven titled sections in *The Goats*. Each section is identified as the current location where Laura and Howie find themselves.

Since this survival novel is about the odyssey of two runaways who are constantly on the move in the Wisconsin countryside, their location changes frequently. For example they move from "The Island" to "The Cottage" to "The Municipal Beach" in their early search for shelter, clothing, and food. A sense of isolation seems present in these locations as suggested in "The Cottage." "It was small and empty. A summer cottage. Large board shutters had been fastened over the windows. Behind it was a grove of dark trees. He [Howie] could hear the drum of tires as someone drove by on a hidden highway. There was nothing else."

Cole is not preoccupied with lengthy description and detail; instead he sketches with precision, as in the beginning of the section "The Municipal Beach": It was too early for the municipal beach to be crowded. A few mothers with aluminum folding chairs sat on the strip of yellow sand that the township had dumped over the dark clay beach. . . . Above the concession stand with its Pepsi-Cola sign hovered a blue haze from the grill. Behind the stand were two rows of wooden cubicles where people could change their clothes. The public telephones stood in the plastic bubbles next to the path leading to the parking lot.

The haze from the grill stimulates appetites, and the cubicles suggest the potential for decent clothing instead of improvised rags, and finally the telephones offer communication to the outside world. All of these items and objects function within the plot line of this section. No detail is extraneous. (The expanding significance of the woods as an emotional setting of refuge for Howie is developed in the Literary Qualities section.)



Social Sensitivity

The need for all adults, not just parents, to be more aware and understanding of young people is implied through the neglect and indifference of some of the staff at Camp Tall Pine. Max, a camp counselor, ignores and thereby allows certain campers to take Laura and Howie to "Goat Island" and humiliate them. Mr. Wells, the camp administrator, tries glibly to pass off "the goat island ritual" as an annual, harmless tradition. His patronizing manner becomes defensive when threatened with Maddy Golden's lawsuit. Margo Cutter, another camp counselor, and Miss Gallager, the juvenile officer for the county, show concern and effective leadership in finding Laura and Howie, thereby lending a balance to the other ineffective adults who are supposed to have the welfare of young adults as their professional priority.

Other adults are more openly hostile to Howie and Laura, thereby showing their contempt for young adults. The big man with the "pink hands" running the concession stand at the municipal beach hates to wait on them and spits back to another adult who empathizes with Howie and Laura, "Listen, bud. If you knew the grief these kids give me." Hazel Purse, the pink-haired, spying cleaning lady at the Starlight Motel, assumes that Laura and Howie had sex in "their" motel room. "'They spent the afternoon in the same bed,' her tiny mouth puckered with satisfaction and disapproval, 'I don't know what this world is coming to.'" Apparently Pearly Hofstader, the goat farmer and quasi-deputy sheriff, has the same suspicions about Laura and Howie when he interrogates Howie as they hurl down the road in Hofstader's jeepster. "'But what have you [Laura and Howie] been doing?' The man [Hofstader] smiled. He had a big mouth, and when he smiled the boy could see he didn't have any teeth except in front. 'Getting a little nudgy, uh?'"

Both Purse and Hofstader assume Laura and Howie have had sex. To reinforce the overwhelming feeling of being powerless and embarrassed by these tactless and vindictive adults, Cole refers to Laura and Howie as "the boy" and "the girl." Laura feels the same sense of helplessness and violation when she knows that Hazel Purse has snooped through her bag containing her tampons. "The girl felt her knees starting to shake. She didn't think she could stand what was going on in that woman's head. It was dirty and grubby in there, and she didn't want the old woman thinking about her." Hostile peers, hostile adults; little wonder Laura and Howie want to disappear into the woods and to be known only as the boy or the girl.

Some adults may react negatively to sexually suggestive nature of such words as "tits" and "pubic hair" in *The Goats*. Situations where young adults find themselves sharing the same bed in a motel room may make some adults uncomfortable, especially when they become aware that the novel has attracted a significant young adult readership. Some adults may feel self-conscious or guilty when they catch a glimpse of themselves reflected in some of the adult portrayals in the novel. If Laura and Howie's moral awareness and sexuality are assessed objectively, there need be little concern about the novel's thematic integrity. Anita Silvey's review of *The Goats* in *Horn Book* celebrates and reinforces its positive thematic relevance. This novel's publication



"signifies that we are still creating children's books that affirm the human spirit and the ability of the individual to rise above adversity."

Literary Qualities

Cole has the ability to craft a sentence using figurative language that reveals how his character feels. For example, when unidentified people return in darkness to Goat Island, Howie assumes it is the same tormentors who stripped and abandoned them.

His plan of escape calls for swiping their canoe when they are looking for Laura and him so they can escape the island and reverse their tormentors' fortunes. However, Howie discovers there are two canoes guarded by sentries. Howie thinks to himself, "his beautiful plan was coming apart like wet paper." This simple simile using water as part of its component clearly reveals how ineffective Howie feels about himself and his actions. This reinforces the empathy one may feel for Cole's protagonist, in that one wants Howie to succeed not only in escaping, but also in feeling better about himself.

Other descriptive and figurative language reveals how bewildering and repugnant adult sexuality can be for Laura and Howie.

In the empty cottage where they take refuge Howie confronts an explicit layout from an adult magazine. "He looked up at the ceiling. Someone had pinned a centerfold directly overhead. It was a lady with her legs spread. She looked as if she were falling on him from a tremendous distance. It was such a joke. It was such a joke he wanted to laugh." Howie is innocent in referring to the female as a "lady," then embarrassed and self-conscious in referring to this experience as a joke. After all, what mature woman would want a misfit nicknamed Baldy? When Laura notices the ceiling she is confounded by this same image "where some centerfold was floating like some kind of angel gone bad." By using a simile in comparing the lewd female form to that of an angel, Cole reveals how Laura is confused and repulsed by these two, juxtaposed views of adult womanhood.

The use of contrast is especially poignant when Cole compares Laura and Howie to the beautiful young couple at the beach.

Here are Laura and Howie—hungry, nearly penniless, and literally wearing rags—being compared to a young adult couple who come to the beach for a carefree day in the sun. "They [the young couple] looked like an advertisement for shampoo or sugarless gum." The inadequacy of Howie and Laura compared to "the perfect couple" is etched so empathically that when Laura decides to assist Howie in taking this couple's street clothing, there is anger as well as dire need in their action. They take only out of necessity and later make a list of items to return or pay for, so their moral integrity remains intact.

One of the dominant images repeated throughout this novel is that of the goat.

Laura and Howie are labeled "goats," symbolic for victims. Howie remembers from travels with his parents in Greece that goats were sacrificed to ancient gods, usually in caves: "And they'd cut their bodies [the goats] up and burn them." This reference



echoes an earlier instance when Laura and Howie talk about going to The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago to look at the man and woman who are the sliced-up cadavers as part of the anatomy exhibit.

They speculate that these two bodies "probably didn't have any family," and they feel somewhat the same way since they are very isolated from their own families. They feel as though they are nonentities. The potential for becoming a scapegoat or victim surfaces again near the end of the novel when Laura and Howie find themselves trapped in a truck (no interior door handles) by a hostile man named Hofstader, who owns a goat farm. Howie rebels at the prospect of becoming a victim again and seizes the opportunity to change their fate when Hofstader leaves the truck, with his captives locked inside. Howie's attention is caught by the goathead charm dangling from the key in the truck's ignition. Howie starts the truck and drives away, proving he is no longer a passive victim or scapegoat. The goat allusions infuse this episode with intense dramatic energy.

Another image that becomes important to Howie emerges from the wooded setting and his memories about a special wooded grove. Early in the novel Howie wishes he could disappear by "camping out in the pine woods" with Laura: "They could look for us but couldn't find us. They'd be wondering what happened, but they would never know." Later Howie remembers a special day, one of the few shared with his dad, when they went on a walking excursion in Greece near Delphi. "We didn't walk on the road. We walked straight down the mountains and through a great grove of olive trees. It was a sacred wood. Back in ancient times, if you killed anything there, that offended the gods." To Howie a wooded area is associated with protection from being ridiculed or sacrificed. It becomes a sanctuary protected by an universal force.

When Cole entitles his last section in the novel "The Woods," one senses the importance of this location relative to Howie's decision concerning Laura and himself.

These repeated images and their expanding importance give a sense of balanced unity to Cole's plot line.



Themes and Characters

Laura's assessment of herself as being "socially retarded" is also applicable to Howie. Both bespectacled characters are emotionally and physically immature, making them vulnerable to their peers. Their relationship evolves into a genuine friendship that deepens significantly because of the hardships they share. The thought of being forced together for sex is overwhelming and embarrassing to both of them. Howie notices "the patch of pubic hair" on Laura's lower abdomen and concludes she is more mature since the guys tease him, calling him "Baldy" because he has no pubic hair yet. Confronting each other's unclothed bodies makes them feel vulnerable, and grounds their relationship in a genuine desire to protect each other by fleeing from those who have ridiculed them.

Both Laura and Howie already suffer from rejection before their traumatic hazing at Camp Tall Pine. Howie's parents are older than the norm when he is born, and both are preoccupied with professional careers as archeologists. They seem to be at odds as to what to do with a child. Howie explains this to Laura: "He [Howie] had never told this to anyone before, but he believed it. It would explain why he never seemed to fit into his parents' life. They loved him, and they wanted him to be happy, but they didn't know what to do with him. He had to be careful not to get in the way. It had made him watchful." This sense of familial isolation manifests itself in a lack of self-worth and self-esteem.

Laura's and Howie's physical affection for each other is immature and suggests innocence. They do not kiss, but rather "bump" hips as a sign of playful familiarity and fondness. Strangely enough they do not learn each other's names until well into the narrative, but their mutual care and concern for each other is established long before. An antagonistic character named Pardoe provides author Brock Cole with the opportunity to show how protective Howie becomes of Laura. When Pardoe makes inappropriate sexually suggestive overtures toward Laura, Howie's explosive reaction earns him the accolade "bandit" from the inner-city summer campers. Howie ponders whether it is better to be labeled a "bandit" rather than a "goat," and decides he prefers the former label. "Bandit" also suggests he is no longer willing to be a passive victim. It is beautiful that this change occurs through his concern for someone else, rather than for himself.

Initially Laura's mom, Maddy, seems to neglect her by sending her to summer camp "to give her the opportunity to meet new people." Sending Laura to camp also allows Maddy to avoid some of the difficulties of caring for her daughter; she is a single parent who works full time to financially support both of them, making it difficult for her to pay attention to her child.

Maddy is annoyed with Laura's first phone call and tries to maintain a bright positive voice but thinks to herself: "Why couldn't Laura adjust to camp? Why did her life have to be so tangled, so difficult? The question remained unasked, clenched down in Maddy's throat." When Laura insists that Maddy come get her from camp, because the kids are



"despicable" and "hypocrites," Maddy evaluates the situation to herself. "Maddy sighed. Laura's favorite words. What had she done to raise a child so stiff and unbending? She was a little prude, that was part of the problem. No wonder the other kids gave her a rough time." The frustration of being a parent is portrayed through Maddy's thoughts. After an agreement is reached that Maddy will come to the camp to get Laura in two days, Laura abruptly hangs up on her mom.

"There was another silence and then the receiver buzzed in her ear. Laura hadn't even said goodbye. Didn't she realize how upsetting that was? Maddy had always had this dread of not saying goodbye properly.

Of course Laura knew it. She was very good at picking out little ways of punishing her mother." Penetrating the give and take between parent and child demonstrates how thoroughly Cole understands the subtle dynamics of such a relationship.

At this point Maddy is unaware of what Laura and Howie have been through, because Laura does not tell her in her first phone call. When Maddy later learns the details relating to her daughter's ordeal, her attitude immediately changes with the awakening of intense concern for Laura.

"Lately she [Maddy] had been only willing to let Laura annoy her. There is not much of an investment in annoyance and no great return. But terror is something else. You find out exactly how much you love someone when you're terrified." The emotional shock brings Maddy to an awareness of how much her daughter means to her. This is a rare awakening for an adult in a young adult novel.



Topics for Discussion

1. What if someone said that *The Goats* is about two kids who commit petty theft, break and enter an unoccupied home, steal clothing, perpetrate a scam to get a motel room, and drive away a vehicle without permission. These incidents seem to become more serious as they accumulate. How would you defend the actions of Laura and Howie?
2. Howie wants to "walk away forever from camps, roads, motels, the sound of human voices." Where does Laura fit into this plan? Why is it significant that her real name is Shadow?
3. Read Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" and compare the narrator's reasons for coming to the woods to those of Laura and Howie. How does each character resolve their issues with society?
4. Laura and Howie are called "Bonnie and Clyde." Who were Bonnie and Clyde? How is this reference both appropriate and inappropriate when applied to Laura and Howie?
5. Do Laura and Howie remain goats? Later, Laura is called a "fox" and Howie a "bandit." Are these labels more appropriate? How do you know?
6. Many adults are suspicious of kids and assume the worst of their actions. Find examples of this kind of adult in *The Goats*. Are these adults more destructive to Laura and Howie's emotional well being than the peers who maroon them?
7. Is *The Goats* a dirty book, loaded with sex and inappropriate for teenagers? Are the words "tits" and "pubic hair" reason to refuse to read further and assume the worst? Create a response that defends this novel.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read the German folktale "Hansel and Gretel" by the Brothers Grimm. Especially compare and contrast the adults such as the stepmother and witch in this folk tale to similar characters in *The Goats*. Which couple are more resourceful in determining their outcome or fate, Hansel and Gretel or Laura and Howie?
2. Artemis Slake in Felice Holman's *Slake's Limbo* is pursued by a street gang into the New York Subway System. Compare how Artemis survives for six weeks to Laura and Howie's experience. Artemis finds means of providing for himself other than stealing. How would Laura and Howie feel about this?
3. Overweight Bobby Marks in Robert Lipsyte's *One Fat Summer* experiences a similar fate on an island to that of Laura and Howie. How does he respond to this cruelty in contrast to Laura and Howie? How does he gain self-respect? Especially consider the character of Dr. Kahn when formulating your response.
4. The young adult characters in Will Hobb's *Down River* "borrow" equipment for a survival experience. Compare their motives and outcomes to those of Laura and Howie.
5. Another young adult novel by Brock Cole, *The Facts Speak for Themselves* chronicles Linda Taylor's confrontations with hostile, emotionally warped adults. How she is "at risk" more than either Laura or Howie? What positive qualities can be sensed through her firstperson narrative point of view? This *The Goats* 125 novel is sexually explicit and is for a mature readers.

For Further Reference

Telgen, Diane. "Brock Cole." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 72. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, pp 35-38. Brief summaries of picture books and young adult novels.

"The Goats." <http://www.gwi.net/hamson/goats.html>. June 1999. Darryl Hamson's 1995 commentary describes Laura and Howie's relationship as "an eloquent affirmation of friendship."

Silvey, Anita. *Horn Book*. (January/February 1988): 23. In this book review, Silvey celebrates the positive thematic relevance of *The Goats*.



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