The Hole Man Short Guide

The Hole Man by Larry Niven

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Niven declares, "Out of five Hugo Awards, this is the only one that surprised me." Yet "The Hole Man" is one of his most celebrated short stories and has enduring appeal to young readers. The center of its appeal, and the reason it won the Hugo, is probably its central conflict between two men. One is a bully and a teaser, while the other is intelligent but uncertain of how to behave himself in company, uncomfortable in a crowd. This subject matter echoes a common feeling among young adults and is easily recognized by them (the pain of ridicule, the fear of appearing foolish to others). Lear takes a psychological pounding that can be as severe in its pain as a physical beating; it is a pounding that continues everyday and from which there is no escape. It sounds a little bit like having to go to school to endure teasing that cannot be answered or to work to endure the company of people who do not have a clue as to who you are or why your work is important. In this, Niven achieves his declared objective in writing his stories, to say something universal about human nature, because Lear's misery is the misery of all decent, live-and-let-live people confronted by bullying that ignores their yearning for 164 The Hole Man respect and for a place to retreat to be free, if only for a day, from torment. The nerve the story touches is raw, and the manner in which the story presents the pain makes looking at the dreadful tolerable, even, for a moment, satisfying.

About the Author

Laurence Van Cott Niven (Larry Niven) was born in Los Angeles on April 30, 1938 to a lawyer, Waldemar Van Cott Niven, and Lucy Estelle (nee Doheny) Niven. He was educated near Beverly Hills and went to Cal Tech, from 1956 to 1958. He says that after he discovered a bookstore full of used science fiction magazines, he flunked out of college. He later finished his degree in mathematics at Washburn University in Topeka in 1962. After attending graduate school from 1962 to 1963 at UCLA, he lived off of a trust fund set up by his greatgrandfather while he worked at becoming a professional writer, selling his first story "The Coldest Place" to Worlds of If, then one of the leading science fiction magazines. He later redid a science fiction story into his first novel, World of Ptaws, published in 1966.

Niven married Marilyn Joyce Wisowaty on September 6, 1969. By this time, his work was already the subject of much discussion.

In an era in which soft science fiction (speculations of social changes or outright fantasies imitating The Lord of the Rings but set on alien planets) seemed to be subsuming hard science fiction (speculations emphasizing technological developments and their effects on people), Niven was writing popular, much admired works in which technology was a powerful, beneficial force for humanity. He is sometimes credited with keeping hard science fiction respectable during the 1970s and with laying the foundations for new writers about technology such as Tom Clancy and Greg Bear, who emerged in the late 1970s and in the 1980s.

Niven is aware of the appeal much of his work has for young people. In N-Space, he suggests that in stories such as "All the Myriad Ways," and in works by such writers as Keith Laumer, Poul Anderson, and Fritz Leiber, it is "the dance of ideas that hooks us before our teens." As with many other writers of science fiction, the phrase "What if?" sparks his imagination, and the ideas stirred up form the basis of tales that appeal mightily to young adults and captivate grownups, as well.

Niven has won several awards for his fiction. "The Hole Man" received the 1975 Hugo Award for best short story. The Hugo Award is chosen annually by a vote of the attendees of the World Science Fiction Convention. Many, probably most, of the attendees are young adults, and thus the awards frequently reflect their favorite works.

Setting

Writers have long used Mars as a locale for encounters with alien beings. It is one of the planets nearest earth, and it has dimensions and geography that resemble earth to a great degree. In "The Hole Man," Niven presents the time-honored expedition to Mars, going there not to find alien beings, but to survey and record the planet's surface. Careful about his science, Niven makes sure that a scientific instrument intended for researching the planet's geology is plausibly able to detect the abnormality that turns out to be an artificial structure: "The base was an inverted pie plate two stories high, and windowless. The air inside was breathable, like Earth's air three miles up, but with a bit more oxygen. Mars' air is far thinner, and poisonous. Clearly they were not of Mars." In the space of a short story, Niven conjures up a fascinating place that yields interesting clues as to its makers and its purpose. He slowly works out such details as the size of the makers and some of their social customs, as well as showing that the former inhabitants were researching earth during its first ice age.

Social Sensitivity

It would be nice, viewing the story from the perspective of the turn of the century, if the expedition to Mars would have included some women. The dynamics of the research group would probably change if it were a mixture of genders, although Childrey's foolish bullying might still manifest itself. The narrator touches on the problem with the mix of men when he asserts that "individually, each of us was the best possible man. It was a damn shame." He notes that each man was chosen for his skills and temperament, but he implies that the group as a whole did not function well.

He is positive that "Lear and Childrey did not belong on the same planet." Niven makes the point that creating a good team involves more than selecting each person for skills and temperament. It requires finding good people whose skills and personalities complement each other. This aspect of "The Hole Man" would make it a good read for a civics class or a sociology class on group dynamics and leadership. For instance, the story would make a fine springboard for discussing how a group should respond when the primary source of the group's dysfunction is a group leader.

Literary Qualities

"The Hole Man" is more than the exploration of a universal theme and more than its characters. It is the conscious creation of an environment that is full of promise of surprises to come. Niven captures young imaginations with a "dance of ideas," and he offers much in "The Hole Man" to take hold of the imagination. For instance, there is a large alien base with.low ceilings and a communal sleeping area. The narrative capitalizes on the attraction that mysterious places have for the imagination. As the base is explored, the researchers discover that "the aliens had been studying Earth during the first Ice Age." They suspect the alien base had been left running for humans to find. One might suspect that the gravity wave device was left so that humans could someday call the aliens. Then, "the backblast never touched the skeletons"; the remains of the aliens themselves are found, adding to the mystery of their base. In addition to the bits of ideas offered up about the aliens and their base is the story's big idea: "Sooner or later, yes, it'll absorb Mars," says Lear about the quantum black hole. That idea alone can fire the imagination with its possibilities.

Typically, Niven has fun playing with words. The central wordplay is that of the title, "The Hole Man." At first, Lear is dubbed "the hole man" because of his interest in the black hole he thinks is in the communications device. Later, it is Childrey who is "the hole man" when the black hole plunges through him, making a hole in him. There is also the pun on "the whole man," meaning a complete man. Neither Lear nor Childrey seems whole; each seems to be overcompensating for an inability to empathize. The other crew members also seem to be hollow, lacking the strength of character to take action that might resolve the conflict between Childrey and Lear.

Themes and Characters

"The Hole Man" is told in the first person by a member of an expedition from earth to Mars. The narrator is important because he, and only he other than Lear, knows what Childrey and Lear said to one another before the accident (or was it?) that killed Childrey and doomed Mars: "One day Mars will be gone." The narrator knows how to spin out a yarn and how to wait until the last possible moment before explaining his mysterious assertion that Mars will disappear: "We study the alien base for what it can tell us, while the center of the world we stand on is slowly eaten away.

It's enough to give a man nightmares." His opening statements make the narrator's story seem to focus on why Mars is doomed, but in fact the process by which the planet is to be destroyed turns out to be bait to lure the reader into a story that is actually about fundamental human relationships and their consequences. As spectacular as the events involving a black hole and the eating away of Mars are, the story revolves around two men of very different temperaments.

One of these men is Andrew Lear, a visionary scientist whose job is to map Mars for concentrations of mass that could affect the orbits of his expedition's ships. As far as his work goes, he is an admirable choice because he is able to recognize the significance of the unusual "sine waves" that indicate something very unusual on the surface of Mars. Childrey already does not like Lear, but Lear manages to persuade him that landing at the anomaly would be a good idea—even if his notion of using gravity waves to communicate seems crazy to the captain.

This personality conflict makes Childrey a very problematical figure. When the expedition finds an alien base full of interesting equipment, Lear's presence on the expedition would seem to be fully justified. It is as if Childrey were a football team's captain and star who discovers that the team's flaky kicker is winning all the team's games for them. Instead of giving Lear his due, or at least giving him the comfort zone he needs so he can concentrate on his work, Childrey hassles him. The narrator insists that Childrey was a good captain, but Childrey's behavior is irrational, destrucThe Hole Man 165 tive of not only Lear's peace of mind but that of the crew as a whole. Note how the other members of the expedition are afraid to ask what is going on and how the narrator only goes to Lear to ask about his latest queer statement only after the others insist he do so. What should be a cooperative group—they have only themselves to depend on, far away from earth—is instead a bunch of people who do not want to be involved. They should be talking with Lear, sharing his knowledge and adding it to their own research. Because of the antagonism engendered by Childrey, the expedition fragments into people who keep to themselves.

The narrator's assertions set up one of the puzzles of "The Hole Man." Which man is truly flaky, the hostile captain or the visionary? "He [Lear] was a wide-eyed dreamer," who is at a loss when it comes to coping with social pressure. They both must cope with the same environment, one that "put all of our tempers on hair triggers."

Yet, the narrator asserts, "Two of us couldn't take it," implying that the other expedition members could and did "take it." Is Childrey a stick figure, a straw man meant to be the villain simply so the story may have a stunning climax? Or is he a leader in an intolerable situation, one in which his leadership has already failed when he first ridiculed the one man on the expedition who actually knew what was going on? The second choice is likelier: Lear's work is becoming the focus of the expedition's work.

Other crewmen are more interested in what he is doing than in the mission's objectives —goals Childrey is supposed to reach.

This aspect of Childrey's dilemma brings up other problematical people, the other members of the expedition and the narrator. When it becomes plain that "Lear and Childrey did not belong on the same planet," why does none of them take the initiative? If each is the best possible choice for his assignment, why is none a leader, or at least someone who can talk to the captain and help him to ease the tension he is creating? The narrator seems fully aware of what the problem is; he notes that "Lear was trying. He didn't like being kidded, but he didn't know how to stop it." Having recognized Lear's inability to deal with a bully, why does he not act to ease the problem, either by deflecting Childrey's ridicule elsewhere or by aiding Lear in dealing with the captain's hostility? Given their inaction when they knew there was a major personnel problem, it is hard to visualize any of them being suited to lead in Childrey's absence. This passivity in the face of a severe dysfunction in their group may account for the narrator's not revealing what he overheard.

The unifying theme of this complicated story is one likely to be familiar to anyone who has been forced into a close relationship with strangers who have their own interests and problems and who are unlikely to be sympathetic to those who are shy.

In other words, the theme applies to people who have gone to school, worked in an office, or served in the military. Ridicule.

Relentless abuse for faults that cannot be helped; relentless abuse for being unusual; relentless abuse when the abuse is undeserved. Lear is abused even when he is right, even when his work is productive and important. "All right, show me! Show it to me or admit it isn't there!" demands Childrey. To have the tormentor destroyed by his own refusal to believe his victim, by the very thing he denies exists, gives the theme a visceral punch that stems from the bully getting what he thematically deserves.

Topics for Discussion

1. Niven says about "The Hole Man," "Out of five Hugo Awards, this is the only one that surprised me." Why would the story be a surprising award winner?

2. What qualities does "The Hole Man" have that would make it a story that people would especially treasure?

3. Childrey relentlessly ridicules Lear, until he learns the hard way that Lear is right about the black hole. Does his grisly end seemed justified? Is it satisfying?

4. The narrator of "The Hole Man" says that "individually, each of us was the best possible man." Is that true? Was Childrey truly the best captain possi ble? What does the narrator mean by adding, "It was a damn shame"?

5. "One day Mars will be gone," begins "The Hole Man." Why begin with this sentence, standing out starkly, all by itself? What would be its intended effect?

6. Is Childrey a good captain, a bad one, or something in between? Why do you think so?

7. Is Lear a murderer? The other expedition members do not think murder can be proven one way or another, except perhaps for the narrator. Are they right?

8. The passage "the aliens had gone. During our first few months we always expected them back any minute. The machinery in the base was running smoothly and perfectly, as if the owners had only just stepped out" is ironic. How is it ironic? How does it use its irony to foreshadow a coming event? (Hint: The aliens did, in a way, step out.)

9. Why would the narrator keep to himself what he heard Childrey and Lear say just before Childrey's death?

10. Is the narrator biased? Is he possibly not telling the whole story?

11. What is it about Lear that Childrey dislikes?

12. Is Lear's absentmindedness a danger to the rest of the crew?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the aspects of "The Hole Man" that make it appealing to young readers? Are there themes acted out in the story that would be close to home for young people? What does this say about its audience?

2. "We study the alien base for what it can tell us, while the center of the world we stand on is slowly eaten away," says the narrator. "It's enough to give a man nightmares." Write a story about how people save Mars, or how they deal with its disappearance. Remember, you need to stay within the framework established in "The Hole Man."

3. Write a legal brief outlining the case for trying Lear for the murder of Captain Childrey.

4. What is a quantum black hole? Where would it come from? How would it be detected?

5. What do sociologists say about groups with leaders who are sources of tension or who are destructive? Does the situation mirror what any of the sociologists have to say? What do they recommend for solving the problem?

6. What are mass concentrations? How are they found? Where do researchers think some are located?

7. Is there a "Sirbonis Palus" on Mars, the place where the expedition lands? What is known of the geography of the area? How would the area appear to the characters in "The Hole Man"?

For Further Reference

Bernardo, Anthony. "Larry Niven." Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography Series. Volume 2. Ed. Kirk H. Beetz. Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 1355-58. Bernardo presents an account of Niven's life and career, as well as primary and secondary bibliographies.

Clute, John. "Niven, Larry." The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993, pp. 873-75. Discusses 168 The Hole Man Niven as an important exponent of hard science fiction.

Easton, Tom. Analog Science Fiction-Science Fact 111, 1-2 (January 1991): 308. Easton finds N-Space, in which "The Hole Man" appears, to be an inconsistent collection.

Hartmann, William K. "A What-If World Comes to Life in Los Angeles."Smithsonian 12 (March 1982): 86-94. Niven, artists, and scientists jointly create an imaginary but scientifically possible world.

Of interest for its insights into Niven's creative methods.

Jonas, Gerald. New York Times Book Review October 26, 1975: 49. After suggesting that "hard science" science fiction is stupid, Jonas places Niven's Tales of Known Space in the middle of it.

Niven, Larry. "The Words in Science Fiction." The Craft of Science Fiction. Ed.

Reginald Bretnor. New York: Harper and Row, 1976, pp. 178-94. Niven often invents slang for his futuristic characters to use; here he explains how he uses invented words. His invented terminology (for example, stasis field) has had a broad influence on literature, making this article especially interesting.

Platt, Charles. "Larry Niven." Dream Makers: Volume II. New York: Berkley Books, 1983, pp. 15-24. Platt provides some biographical background on Niven, and in an interview with Niven discusses his development as a writer and his view of the status of science fiction as literature.

Stein, Kevin. The Guide to Larry Niven's Ringworld. Riverdale, NY: Baen (Paramount), 1994. A dictionary of the elements, such as characters and places, of Niven's Ringworld fiction.

Steinberg, Sybil. Publishers Weekly 237, 30 (July 27, 1990): 226. An enthusiastic recommendation of the collection N-Space, which includes "The Hole Man."

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996