The Innkeeper's Song Short Guide

The Innkeeper's Song by Peter S. Beagle

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

The Innkeeper's Song is an amazing novel, lyrical, vivid, suspenseful, with deep, rich characters. To read it is to take a wonderful adventure in a strange land populated by people at once like and unlike ourselves, with each character recalled as real, as having lived sometime, as someone we perhaps have met someplace. Thus, The Innkeeper's Song is more than a fantasy adventure, offering excellent opportunities to escape for a time from everyday life into a world of marvels; through a fat innkeeper and his clientele, it also offers insights into people, into real life, into what is held in common among human beings. It is a delight to be treasured as a work of literature that speaks from the heart to the heart.

About the Author

Peter Soyer Beagle was born on April 29, 1939, in the Bronx, New York. He attended the University of Pittsburgh, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1959 at a somewhat earlier age than most. He then attended graduate school at Stanford University from 1960 to 1961. On May 8, 1964, he married Enid Elaine Nordeen, and they had three children. They divorced in July 1980. He has lived much of his life in California, and from 1968 to 1969 he was vice-chairman of the Santa Cruz chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. He is now married to the Indian author and photographer Padma Hajmadi, and they are well-known habitues of the environs of Davis, California.

Beagle declares that "I don't write sequels," even though the novella The Last Song of Sirit Byar 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 explains that he made 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 still unnamed world of The Innkeeper's Song. (Beagle says that he may never call it anything other than "the world of The Innkeeper's Song.") The novella The Last Song of Sirit Byar is one of those stories: although its narrative is fixed in the world outlined in The Innkeeper's Song, it is not a sequel to any other work.

Setting

The world of The Innkeeper's Song is unnamed, and Beagle says that it may remain unnamed in the tales he sets in it. In some ways, it resembles our own world. It has different ethnic groups, including blacks, whites, and Asiatics, and the concerns of its characters are familiar to us—buying and selling, earning a living, surviving hard times, hoping for something better.

The events of the novel take place primarily in and around an inn that is outside an unremarkable town. The inn seems to be a magnet for odd people, attracting, for instance, a mysterious company of women: a dead woman, a sailor woman with a wicked rapier, and a solemn, retiring woman who is not a woman. They are followed by an eighteen-year-old boy who is determined to retrieve his dead fiancee, a halfdead old wizard, and an annoying serving boy who does not know who he is. Amid this group is the cranky, officious, graceful innkeeper who wishes that folks would stop throwing his life out of kilter.

Beyond the inn is a land where magic is a fact of life, where familiar beasts such as horses mingle with bizarre beasts with claws and bad smells. The inn itself has a room for dining, drinking, and socializing on the first floor and guest rooms on the second floor. On its grounds are a catchall chapel, mandated by law to serve travelers of varying faiths, a steam bath, and a barn. The inn is the perfect, out-of-the-way place for titanic magic forces to wage an epic battle that carries the novel's characters across vast landscapes, into the heart of death itself, and back again.

Social Sensitivity

The Innkeeper's Song is a grownup book, with decidedly grownup themes, but the brilliance of its style and the engrossing nature of the adventure tale make it very attractive to young adults as well as their elders. The magic in the novel, while very lively, reflects no particular religious point of view, and the catchall chapel on the inn's grounds reflects a religious tolerance that is to be found throughout. The only passage that might give readers pause is the sexual encounter in the room of the three women; it is a confusing scene, presented in a circumspect way, during which Nyateneri turns out to be a man, Soukyan. This turn of events is upsetting to the other participants in the encounter, all of whom are heterosexual and uncertain of what to make of Nyateneri/Soukyan's behavior. It is particularly humiliating to Rosseth, who had been pining for Nyateneri and helped her defeat two assassins. Extremely adult passions are involved, and even teenagers may have to work to understand the mixture of affection, lust, and ennui in the scene, but the physical aspects of the encounter are barely touched on and are detailed less explicitly than in similar scenes found in many modern books intended for young adults. The real weakness of the scene is that it is jarring: the plot has built up considerable momentum, only to abruptly halt in order for the characters to think about and absorb the implications of discovering Nyateneri/Soukyan's secret. Understandably, the other characters feel betrayal and anger toward the woman/man they had trusted.

Literary Qualities

Beagle is a master wordsmith, capable of conveying complex images in a few words: "A sway in the air" says all that needs to be said about a fox changing into a man. There is more than skill involved in his melodic style; there is genius in it: "Lukassa laughed aloud, and the sound was as sweet as the sound that ice-covered twigs make in the spring, chiming and cracking together." His words shift mood in an instant, sway from mundane to mystical, and always offer phrases that are more than the sum of their parts; note how Tikat remembers the fox: "Bones full of darkness, blood thick and cold with ancient mysteries." Beagle also manages to elicit simultaneously almost contradictory responses from his language: The air crumpled again, close behind him [Arshadin]. A ripple appeared in it, exactly like the circles that spread out and out when you toss a stone into quiet water.

This circle darkened, tightened, and became a blue mouth, its lips sparkling wetly with tiny red and blue teeth. Arshadin turned and struck at it, crying out words that sounded like trees snapping in a windstorm, one after another. The round mouth pushed forward, as though for a dreadful kiss. It puckered around him, drew him in, and was gone.

A stone tossed in the water and a kiss are the central images in a frightening passage that is at once beautiful with images from a windstorm and disgusting with wet lips and red and blue teeth. The effect of the contrasting images is one of awe. Beagle's language is measured and sure, sometimes achieving a ground mixture of the ethereal and the mundane, as in the preceding passage, and sometimes achieving a powerful effect through a simple technique, such as varying the verb tenses in order to create a sense of timelessness in the realm of death.

In addition to sheer brilliance of language, The Innkeeper's Song exemplifies Beagle's career-long experimentation with narrative point of view. The effect is like a motion picture's use of montage: viewing an event from several perspectives, from shifting angles, the reader gains a broader perspective, a view enriched by the people whose differing points of view convey the complexity of the event. In The Innkeeper's Song, all of the important characters, and a few of the minor ones, are given their own voices in which to describe their experiences and to offer interpretations of what they have seen or done.

The story begins like a motion picture, using a device that was a favorite of the director Orson Welles and is often imitated by other directors—focusing the camera on a figure who moves through a scene, carrying viewers through a panorama, only to have the camera abandon the figure when it happens upon the real subject of the scene.

Thus, the narrative of The Innkeeper's Song begins with Tikat, an eighteen-year-old boy who tells of his fiancee's drowning and her resurrection, and of how he journeyed through a bitter desert to find her, take her home, and wed her. At first the story seems to be about the redoubtable Tikat, who meets the magical fox and tracks his lady love

and two others to an inn, but once at the inn the story shifts the narrative perspective to that of those who are the true focus of the plot, beginning with Lal.

The different narrative voices have Beagle's own lyrical quality, but rather than make the voices seem the same, that lyricism instead enhances the characterizations.

These are people of a time and place in which language is alive and changing, in which poetry and song are the property of everyone. Thus, Rosseth is an entirely credible serving boy, yearning for a more romantic life while tending beasts of burden and carrying out his other duties in the inn; Tikat speaks like an unworldly boy from a small, insular village; and Lal sounds like the tired, arrogant adventurer who has seen death too many times. Perhaps the most stirring achievement in the novel's varying voices is that of the fox, who can turn himself into a jovial old man. His perception is always that of a fox—focused on the interests of foxes, such as plump pigeons, and always somewhat contemptuous of the concerns of human beings. His is the narrow consciousness of an animal, governed more by instinct than by intelligence or even good sense. Still, he has his loves, he knows evil when he sees it, and he has the capacity to sacrifice himself for those he values.

Themes and Characters

"[The innkeeper Karsh] moved gracefully, the way a wave swells and rolls from shore to shore, never quite breaking." He is not actually one of the principal figures of the novel, although he narrates some of it and owns the inn where the principal characters gather. Yet the narrative revolves around him; as he blusters and grumps along, he is surrounded by magical events, by great forces tearing at each other, and by people who have momentous work to do.

He feeds them, houses them, even takes care of them, and he proves himself a formidable adversary in defense of his inn and those who work for him. He is an interesting figure, an example of how Beagle fleshes out even minor characters so that they seem vibrant with life. Further, the pugnacious Karsh turns out to have had an adventure or two of his own—during one of which he found Rosseth, the serving boy—and he is an ideal host for the dead people, wizards, apostate monks, and adventurers who choose to stay at his inn. Tikat seems to perceive what makes Karsh special: Close to, he [Karsh] was bigger than I had thought, exactly as his inn seemed smaller. Raw dough, nothing but dough, a gingerbread man who had magically escaped the oven. His face was bread pudding, with moles and blemishes for the occasional raisin or berry; but the eyes stuck into it were round and blue and surprised, a little boy's eyes under the creased, pouchy lids of a grum old man. I do not know if they would have seemed ordinary eyes in a gentler face. What I do know is that I have never again in my life seen eyes like the eyes of fat Karsh the innkeeper.

The novel is Karsh's song because for the duration of the novel the world comes to his door and makes his small piece of it the center, where life and death fight a fearsome battle.

The novel begins with neither Karsh nor even one of the main characters, but with Takit and Lukassa, young lovers soon to be married. Lukassa drowns, is revived, and leaves with a mysterious black woman. The unworldly and grieving Tikat, determined to recover his beloved, follows them doggedly, beyond what most of the novel's other characters would expect a man to do.

As Tikat's adventure is recounted, the fox who figures in the novel's climax is introduced as a friendly old man who saves Tikat's life, and when he reaches the inn the characters of Lal and Nyateneri are introduced. The shift from Tikat to the three women, Lal, Nyateneri, and Lukassa, is elegantly and surprisingly subversive: the picaresque young hero, who is reminiscent of many heroes of fantasy novels, is not the hero at all, but a smitten young man who ends up spending most of his time working in the inn's stables.

Even the mysterious, dead-but-alive Lukassa turns out not to be the central figure of the plot. Her impending death has called out to Lal, who knows that by using her ring to revive the girl she will also be arousing the old wizard, a man she calls throughout "my friend." Thus, the fascinating Lukassa, who sees what others cannot and who knows where death has been when others see nothing, is a device for triggering the major

events to come. She is also an example of the novel's sumptuousness, and of Beagle's authorial generosity: such a figure could have been used to move the plot along and then discarded, but instead Beagle rounds her out, explores the mysteries of her heart, and creates a full-blooded woman who grows out of her status as the walking dead to become ever more human, ever more a woman who can understand and sympathize with poor Tikat, whom she does not remember. She may even have matured to the point that she could love him.

The central figures of The Innkeeper's Song turn out to be Lalkhamsin-khamsolal (Lal) and Nyateneri. Nyateneri is the more enigmatic of the two. Lal describes her: She was brown-skinned, the shade of strong tea, and her narrow eyes, turned slightly down at the corners, were the color of the twilight itself. Taller than I, long-boned, left-handed; a lot of leverage in those shoulders, probably a powerful shot with that bow she carries, but not necessarily accurate—when you have lived as I have, those are the things you notice first.

This description says much about Lal herself: a fighter, she is used to taking the measure of potential opponents. The passage is also foreshadowing: it hints at Nyateneri's true nature by mentioning the leverage and potential power in the shoulders. Nyateneri's eyes are the color of twilight, a poetic image suggesting mysteries beyond the eyes.

That Nyateneri turns out to be Soukyan sends the plot careening in an unexpected direction. Developed as a mysterious woman from a faraway land, Nyateneri/Soukyan turns out to be much more mysterious, a man with a past, a man who can make himself appear womanly, to even have breasts, in order to deceive those who would murder him. His character complicates the plot considerably. Not only do he and Lal need to help myfriend, but they need to fend off a determined assassin who will interfere in their greater task. They need to dispose of the exceptionally deadly third assassin while journeying to the home of Arshadin; Nyateneri's past as a monk who fled his monastery follows him in the form of determined killers. He showcases Beagle's exceptional skill at developing plot out of his characters.

Both Lal and Nyateneri/Soukyan are indebted to my friend, a wizard who has befriended each. Lal, sometimes called Sailor Lal, was sold into slavery, perhaps by her family, when she was a little girl. She escaped into a life of adventure and violence and is famous for her skill as a fighter. Her black skin sets her apart in the land of Karsh's inn; Rosseth is astonished to see her because the only black people who have visited the inn, merchants, were men.

Perhaps less mysterious than Nyateneri/ Soukyan, she is instead someone who prefers to take the initiative, to attack a problem rather than wait for it to come to her.

According to my friend, her "true sword is her stubbornness."

Most of The Innkeeper's Song is about the growing friendships among the characters and the many discoveries they make about themselves while they pursue their various

goals. Even so, the work has a plot, one in which the action intensifies, seems to pause, and then intensifies even more. The center of the action is the conflict between my friend, an old, ailing wizard, and his protege, Arshadin. As my friend puts it, "Arshadin's simple, single ambition was to be the greatest magician who ever walked the earth. He achieved it." In a battle with his mentor, Arshadin has called on dark forces that make a claim on his spirit. He tries to use those forces not just to defeat my friend but to, as my friend explains, "make certain that I die, when I die, such a troubled, peaceless death that I become a griga'ath." Nyateneri explains to the others present that a griga'ath is "a wandering spirit of malice and wickedness, without a home, without a body, without rest or ending." A wizard could control a griga'ath, using its deadly powers to his own ends; by making my friend a griga'ath, Arshadin could become immensely powerful and a very great danger to the world.

Thus, Beagle gives his protagonists a treacherous villain to oppose. In so doing, he enables them to reveal his themes from one event to the next, and The Innkeeper's Song is rife with themes. The complexities of romantic love are explored not only through Tikat's love for Lukassa but through Rosseth's misguided adoration of Nyateneri.

Romantic love seems to lead to much foolishness, but it also leads to self-discovery, as Rosseth learns the depths of his passions and Tikat realizes his ability to endure.

Friendship crosses with romantic love, sometimes becoming confused with it. Lal and Nyateneri/Soukyan sacrifice much for their friendship with my friend, and they and those who help them value friendship profoundly, regarding it as essential to nurture and protect it. Beyond romantic love, beyond friendship, beyond the spectacular magic, there is self-discovery. All the events of The Innkeeper's Song seem to be a means to an end: a growth in self-awareness for its characters, both minor and major. Indeed, at the fatal moment when Arshadin repudiates the warnings of my friend, he refuses the self-discovery that would save him, the self-knowledge that he cannot control every force and he is not as smart as he thinks he is. His lack of self-knowledge dooms him, even as growth in self-understanding helps the other characters to resist the malevolent forces they confront. For instance, Lal knows that she is no match for the third assassin seeking Nyateneri/Soukyan; this very knowledge of her limitations frees her to seek a solution beyond her impulse simply to fight until dead. The assassin, who does acknowledge his own limitations, falls prey to a ruse.

Topics for Discussion

1. How do characters' attitudes toward Nyateneri change when they discover that she is actually Soukyan, a man?

How does this discovery shape later events?

2. Is Soukyan trustworthy? 3. Why is the novel titled The Innkeeper's Song rather than, say, Lal's Song or Tikat's Song or The Wizard's Song?

4. Why would Beagle characterize his novel as a"Song?"

5. Why does Karsh tell Rosseth about the young man's origins? Why not keep Rosseth ignorant of the facts?

6. Why does Beagle vary the verb tenses in "Lukassa," the chapter on death?

7. What sacrifice does the fox make? Was it worth it to him?

8. What was Arshadin's most crucial mistake? When did it occur? Was there any hope for saving him after he made it?

9. Which character grows the most during the narrative?

10. What do Karsh's "little boy's eyes" suggest about his character?

11. What is the point of having Lal and Soukyan journey to Arshadin's home?

Was their mission a failure?

12. Will Lukassa ever warm to Tikat?

13. Why begin the novel with Tikat if it is not going to be about Tikat?

14. How much does my friend actually care about the people who help him?

15. What aspects of The Innkeeper's Song would make it especially appealing to young adult readers?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the techniques Beagle uses to create and develop character in The Innkeeper's Song? Which are the most effective? How do they work?

2. We know from the novella that Soukyan survives into old age, ever the wanderer. Write a story about what happened when he returned to his monastery and how he survived the experience.

3. Compare Arshadin to Doctor Faustus in Marlowe's play The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus (1592). Do they have similar desires? Do they make similar mistakes?

Where does each go wrong?

4. What are the most beautiful three (or more) passages in the novel? What makes them beautiful? How do they enhance the narrative?

5. How have Lal and Soukyan changed in the novella Lal and Soukyan? (Find it in the collection Giant Bones.) Are they what you would have expected? Has Beagle been true to their characterization as found in The Innkeeper's Song?

Does the narrative style differ significantly from that of The Innkeeper's Song?

6. The Innkeeper's Song has several different narrators. How does Beagle distinguish one narrator's voice from another? What are the unique characteristics of each?

7. What aspects of The Innkeeper's Song are taken from real life, perhaps the Middle Ages? What has Beagle invented, that is, what is unique to the world of The Innkeeper's Song? What is the effect on the narrative of the mixing of real experience with inventions?

8. Why has Beagle resisted writing sequels? Why has he chosen to write more stories set in the world of The Innkeeper's Song while refusing to do so with his previous novels? What does this tell us about how he views the art of fiction?

9. The Innkeeper's Song has a great deal of metaphorical imagery. Find several good examples and explain how they affect the plot and characterization of the novel.

10. Karsh's inn seems similar to real-life inns. What role have inns played in our culture? How are they run? What purpose do they serve? What aspects of real-life inns are found in Karsh's inn?

Are his worries typical of innkeepers?

For Further Reference

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——. Review. Booklist 93, 21 (July 1997): 1806. "Beagle is the class act of fantasy writing," says Mort in this brief review of The Last Song of Sirit Byar and other titles. Mort gives away more about the ending than the reader may wish to know before starting the novella.

'Peter S. Beagle." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981, pp. 49-54. Lists Beagle's publications and includes an interview with him.

'Peter S. Beagle." In Dictionary of Literary Biography: 1980 Yearbook. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981, pp. 134-42. Summarizes Beagle's life and the role that writing has played in it.

Publishers Weekly 240, 42 (October 18, 1993): 67. Foresees a warm reception for The Innkeeper's Song.

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

Related Titles

Although he asserts that he does not write sequels, Beagle has written a novella, Lal and Soukyan (1997), that features two of the principal characters from The Innkeeper's Song, and he has written several other novellas that take place in the same imaginary world as that found in The Innkeeper's Song. Lal and Soukyan takes place many years after the events in The Innkeeper's Song, when both of the title characters have grown very old. They undertake one last quixotic quest, to apologize for a wrong done during their years of traveling together. They fail in their quest yet succeed in having a last magical adventure and in saving the life of a young man.

Lal and Soukyan is one of six disparate tales, each a gem, in the collection Giant Bones (1997). The Innkeeper's Song sets the tone for the six novellas, emphasizing characterization over plot and playing with traditional folklore, including unicorns. The novellas similarly emphasize characterization, with each rewarding its audience with insights into the human condition.

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