

Julie's Unicorn Short Guide

Julie's Unicorn by Peter S. Beagle

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Overview

Julie and Farrell are, by themselves, odd enough. They are aging, old, once-close acquaintances, who manage to pick up their relationship where they dropped it several years earlier. A bizarre marriage for Julie and even more bizarre wanderings for Farrell have intervened. Julie is an artist who earns money by doing word processing for clients, and she can work magic spells that she learned from her grandmother; she can be impulsive that way, for example, casting a spell at a tapestry because she feels sorry for a unicorn depicted in it. Farrell is a chef in a ritzy restaurant, adored by his cooks. However, odder than they is a kitten-sized unicorn that thuds out of a tapestry and is taken to Julie's apartment. Throw in a mother cat and her kittens and a mysterious quest that motivates the unicorn, and "Julie's Unicorn" becomes a delightful tale of comedy and wonder as Julie and Farrell rescue a unicorn from centuries of torment and discover what the unicorn requires for happiness.

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 of 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 married Indian author and photographer Padma Hajmadi, and they are well-known habitués of the environs of Davis, California.

Beagle once declared that he did not write sequels, and he resisted writing another novel about unicorns for many years after the publication of *The Last Unicorn* (1968), the novel that made him famous, even though his publisher urged him to write another. According to Beagle, his publisher pointedly noted that Beagle had a balloon payment on his home mortgage coming up, and a unicorn book might sell well enough to cover it. Thus, Beagle acquiesced to his publisher and fans' requests and wrote *The Unicorn Sonata*, but he insisted that it not be a continuation of *The Last Unicorn* but a tale set in a new world with unicorns unlike those in his earlier novel. Beagle has responded to reader's requests for more unicorn tales by others, by co-editing *Immortal Unicorn: Volume One* (1995) and *Immortal Unicorn: Volume Two* (1995) and writing the novelettes "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" and "Julie's Unicorn" (1997) in *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche*.

Setting

"Julie's Unicorn" has five principal settings. The first is a restaurant, where Farrell, the chef, spots Julie dining with another man. The restaurant scene serves three purposes. The first is to introduce the characters, the second is to show that they have a long history with one another, and the third, not as important, is to show that Farrell is admired by the cooks who work for him, nearly idolized in one case. Showing their long history through some bickering between Julie and Farrell, Beagle establishes the core relationship between the two during the restaurant scene, which helps his audience understand how well Farrell accepts Julie's magical powers and how easily Julie takes Farrell's advice during the main part of the novelette.

The second scene, to be revisited at the novelette's end, is the Bigby Museum: "It would have been a beautiful building, Julie thought, in another town. It was three stories high, cream white, with a flat tile roof the color of red wine." The town is Avicenna, located near San Francisco, California. In the museum, Julie does what many artists do; she sits and draws copies of paintings that interest her. Then Farrell leads her to a tapestry in a back room, near the stairs, where few people visit and fewer linger.

The tapestry is the third important setting. In it a unicorn is prodded toward a simpering maiden. A castle and woodland are in the background. Julie's reaction is that the unicorn has been frozen in the tapestry for five centuries, enduring pain and humiliation all that time. Perhaps it is her grandmother's influence, but she knows the unicorn, a little creature because the tapestry is small, is real. She may be forgiven for focusing on the unicorn itself and missing the woodland's significance, something Farrell will eventually point out. The tapestry itself turns out to have supernatural powers; when Julie tries to place the unicorn with the hermit behind the woods, something grabs her wrist: "Whatever had [Julie's] wrist tightened its clamp, feeling nothing at all like a human hand, but rather as though the air itself were turning to stone—as though one part of her were being buried while the rest stood helplessly by." With his effective description, Beagle manages in this scene to conjure up a strange sensation that seems real and is alarming.

Even so, the tapestry offers some hope for a happy ending with "the pale shadow peering back at them from its sanctuary in the wood, and the opaline glimmer of a horn under the hermit's hand."

The fourth setting is Julie's apartment. It sounds like many apartments in the San Francisco Bay Area, old, a bit cramped, populated by a stray cat and its kittens.

NMC (meaning Not My Cat) had come to Julie's door, scratched it, and marched in as if it owned the place when Julie opened the door. It provides the most delicious scare of "Julie's Unicorn" when Julie sees it with the unicorn in its mouth. Part of what makes the scare delicious is that the cat, being a predator, may have hurt the unicorn, yet it could be simply carrying it like a kitten. It turns out that NMC adopts the unicorn, which nestles in with the kittens in their box. It is in her apartment that Julie learns about the nature of

the unicorn, and it is there that her relationship with Farrell deepens—he will eventually move in.

The fifth setting is the streets of the town of Avicenna. In these passages, Beagle does an excellent job of capturing the street life of an urban part of the San Francisco Bay Area, with its yogurt stands, busy people bustling, and old people sauntering. This setting is used primarily to develop the mystery of what the unicorn wants; the unicorn wants to be near old, disheveled people like the Frozen-Yogurt Man, who "was almost an albino, with coral eyes and pebbly skin literally the color of yogurt."

He and others are unhappy to see the unicorn, deepening the mystery. The street setting also serves as a transition from Julie's home to the tapestry. Events in the setting establish that the unicorn is searching for something, that it may even have a goal.

This sets Farrell's mind to work, which leads back to the Bigby Museum.

Social Sensitivity

The semi-lost people of the streets of Avicenna, people such as the Frozen-Yogurt Man, are likely to be familiar to people accustomed to city life, but they may be mysteries to others. Beagle has set "Julie's Unicorn" in the San Francisco Bay Area, which means that street people and other urban types are included. The question of how to help such lost people frequently arises in American political discussions, with few concrete results. The struggle has been between the American tradition of individualism, which suggests that they should be left alone, and the desire to remove people such as those Julie encounters from the streets, either to care for them in a managed facility or just to be rid of them.

"Julie's Unicorn" offers no answers for the problem, instead using the Frozen-Yogurt Man as part of the mystery of the unicorn's yearnings.

Julie's life as an artist is realistic: she offers a glimpse into the life of an artist who is not famous or rich. She takes on odd jobs to earn her living, which is good enough to pay for an apartment in the Bay Area. Still, she probably would be happy to have Farrell's income as a chef helping her with rent and other expenses. An artist in his own way, Farrell probably earns much more money than does Julie, who works primarily at word processing documents for her clients, fitting in time for her art when she can.

Literary Qualities

A novelette is a challenging form of fiction to write. It is too long and complex to be a short story, but too short and with too few characters and subplots to be a novella or a novel. "Julie's Unicorn" is an excellent example of the genre, almost perfect in structure and balance of characterization. It is structured around its basic settings: restaurant (introduction to the characters), apartment (where the relationship between Julie and Farrell will deepen and where the unicorn becomes a character, too), museum (filled with failed art and failing artists), city streets (which develop the quest and serve as a transition from Julie's apartment back to the museum), and the tapestry (where the unicorn is tormented yet will find its happiness).

Without looking for it, the structure is almost invisible under the deft characterizations and the enchanting comedy. Beagle creates both terror and joy in one scene, in which Julie looks for the unicorn she has brought home and then "NMC—theatrical as all cats—chose that moment to saunter grandly between them [Julie and Farrell], purring in throaty hiccups, with the unicorn limp between her jaws." This looks as though "Julie's Unicorn" has taken a grim turn. Beagle is full of surprises, so one cannot be sure of what he is up to. Even so, "Julie's gasp of horror, about to become a scream, was choked off by her realization that the creature was completely unharmed."

One moment, the cat seems to be proudly marching off with its kill, but the next "NMC had it [the unicorn] by the back of the neck, exactly as she would have carried one of her kittens, and the purple eyes were open and curiously tranquil." Wonder of wonders, the unicorn likes cats! And Beagle has worked magic with words, drawing attention to tragedy, then directing attention to joyous surprise.



Themes and Characters

"Julie's Unicorn" is in large part about how a work of art, even a poor one, can interact with the lives of those who see it. In Julie's case, the work of art hops out of a tapestry and lives with her for a short time.

She has been deeply moved by the tapestry that depicts a unicorn being abused by people, and she has reacted by wishing to free the unicorn. "At last she [Julie] gave up any notion of work, and simply stood still before the tapestry, waiting patiently to grow numb to the unicorn's endless woven pain." Unlike most people, she has the power to act on what she feels, a gift from her grandmother, who taught Julie her magic enchantments. Thus, "She lifted her right hand and moved it slowly across the tapestry, barely brushing the protective glass. As she did so, she spoke several words in a language that might have been Japanese, and was not. With the last syllable came a curious muffled jolt, like an underwater explosion, that thudded distantly through her body, making her step back and stagger against Farrell."

Joe Farrell and Julie Tanikawa are old friends—something more than friends judging by how comfortable it is for both of them to have Farrell move into Julie's apartment and bed, and hinted at by Farrell calling Julie an affectionate name, "Jewel."

In their conversation come hints of a past involving anger, remorse, passion, love, and more than a little magic. Thus, Farrell has some understanding of what has happened when he observes, "The unicorn was gone.

The knight and his squire remained in their places, silver cord hauling nothing forward, lance jabbing cruelly into helpless nothing," where there had been a unicorn that "was small and blush-white, with the cloven hooves, long neck and slender quarters of a deer."

The novelette begins in a restaurant, where Julie receives a note from the chef, Farrell, whom she has not seen for years.

This opening scene for "Julie's Unicorn" is important because it sets up the relationship of Julie and Farrell, showing through their almost instant bickering and allusions to past encounters that they already know each other well. Julie's behavior at the Bigby Museum could be unfathomable for other men, but Farrell has little trouble adjusting to Julie's actions: "She [Julie] said vaguely, 'I didn't think it would work, it was just to be doing something,' and sprang for the stairway." He himself begins searching the building for a unicorn that could be large or small.

It is small, but Joe finds it. His quick thinking will help again, and he seems to be a cooler head than Julie, who says to him, "Joe, I don't know if this has sunk in yet, but a unicorn, a real unicorn, has been trapped in the miserable medieval scene for five centuries, and it is now hiding under a damn water cooler in the Bigby Museum in Avicenna, California." This funny line is typical of the light tone of "Julie's Unicorn," but it



also shows that Julie is not comfortable with what she can do; she seems nearly (just nearly) frantic. Joe is a good balance for her personality; he gives himself over to thought and planning rather than to the emotional implications of his situation.

The unicorn itself is quite a character.

Julie observes: "There was a soft, curling tuft under its chin, less like hair than like feathers, matched by a larger one at the end of its tail. Its hooves and horn had a faint pearl shine, even in the dim light." It is Farrell who notes that the unicorn has "got something on its mind." Indeed, the unicorn is an appropriate mixture of the knowable and unknowable. The unicorn's pleasure in sleeping with the cats is knowable; the purring it likes—perhaps even imitates— has a similarly soothing effect on humans.

On the other hand, it seems to want something so much that it risks its life to have it, at one moment plunging horn first into a window. "The unicorn's blood was as red as her [Julie's] own, but there was a strange golden shadow about it: a dark sparkling just under or beyond her eyes' understanding." Bleeding is understandable, but Beagle reminds his audience that the unicorn is also the stuff of the supernatural—the golden shadow seems to be just beyond the knowable, a link with a magical realm.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why would the unicorn like the purring of the cats?
2. Will the unicorn be happy where he is at the end of "Julie's Unicorn"? What evidence do you see in the story to support your answer?
3. If Julie is an artist, why does she do word processing for people?
4. Were you frightened for the unicorn when Julie sees it in the cat's mouth?

Did you guess what was really happening before the novelette told you? What did the passage tell you about the characters involved?

5. Is the unicorn in "Julie's Unicorn" an animal like a cat, or is it intelligent like human beings? Support your answer with cues given in the story.
6. Do you wish there were young adults in "Julie's Unicorn?" Why or why not?
7. Why would the unicorn prefer to be in a tapestry rather than free in the world?
8. It seems like such a bad idea to begin with, so why does Julie suggest setting the unicorn free in a wilderness? How well does this passage manage to anticipate the one with the unicorn in NMC's mouth?
9. What does the unicorn's use of its horn reveal about its temperament?
10. Will Julie and Farrell's new relationship last? What evidence suggests that they will or will not be committed to each other this time?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What would happen if Julie's unicorn returned to Avicenna from the tapestry?
2. Read the stories in *Immortal Unicorn: Volume Two*. How varied are they? What do they have in common? How do they measure up to "Julie's Unicorn"?
3. Draw or paint a picture of the tapestry with the unicorn in it, as when Julie first saw it and one of the tapestry after the unicorn has left it.
4. Draw or paint a picture of NMC carrying the unicorn to its box.
5. Beagle says in his introduction to *Immortal Unicorn: Volume Two* that "Strangers will ask me whether I believe in unicorns, really. I don't, not at all, not in the way they usually mean. But I do believe—still, knowing so much better— in everything the unicorn has always represented to human beings: the vision of deep strength allied to deep wisdom, of pride dwelling side by side with patience and humility, of unspeakable beauty inseparable from the 'pity beyond all telling' that Yeats said was hidden at the heart of love." In what ways does "Julie's Unicorn" exemplify these ideas?
6. Beagle says that he does not like to repeat himself. How does "Julie's Unicorn" differ from his other fiction about unicorns? Are there any ways in which his unicorn stories are alike or are there ways in which he does repeat himself?
7. What does Beagle say about older people and their relationships with the relationship of Julie and Farrell? What significance do the older people in the story have?
8. Write a story about why the unicorn wants to be with the old man in the tapestry.
9. What are tapestries? Who makes them? How are they made?
10. Beagle mentions that the tapestry is worked in the "terrifyingly detailed millefleurs style" of tapestry. Describe this style. What are some examples of it? Where did it come from? See if you can find a picture book of tapestries and select one that you suspect may match this style.

For Further Reference

"Beagle, Peter S." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*, vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1981, pp. 49-54. This entry lists Beagle's publications and includes an interview with Beagle.

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.

"Peter S. Beagle." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography: 1980 Yearbook*. Detroit: Gale, 1981, pp. 134-142. This article summarizes Beagle's life and the role writing has played in it.

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/Adaptations

"Julie's Unicorn" is not directly linked to any of Beagle's other works, and Beagle has made it very different from *The Last Unicorn*, *The Unicorn Sonata*, and "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" (please see separate entry). On the other hand, it is part of a remarkable maturation of his art, part of a period in which he has written works of transcendent beauty such as *The Innkeeper's Song* and *Giant Bones*. Like *The Last Unicorn* and "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros," "Julie's Unicorn" is a comedy, although not as sentimental as the other titles; like *The Unicorn Sonata* and "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros," it places its story in modern times, telling of a wonderful, mysterious experience with the supernatural.



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