The Last Guru Short Guide

The Last Guru by Daniel Pinkwater

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Overview

The Last Guru is a wish-fulfillment fantasy in which Harold Blatz, an otherwise ordinary boy who likes to build model boats and who generally keeps to himself, has the ability to quickly earn huge amounts money. It takes money to make money, and at first he must work very hard to earn his initial stash of cash, though it does not take him long to realize that he has the dual gifts for knowing where best to invest and for choosing the best people to help him make these investments. He soon acquires great power as he becomes the third richest human being on Earth. Despite this vast fortune, he remains the same modest, compassionate, and good-hearted person whose favorite hobby is building models and who wants to help people when he can.

Not only does The Last Guru invite readers to fantasize that that are Harold Blatz, ordinary person, who can do miraculous things with money, it is also a pointed social satire. How money is earned and how it is spent is just part of what is satirized; the title of the novel conjures up the themes of gurus and pointless fads of spirituality as additional targets for Pinkwater's satirical wit. Harold is, after all, the reincarnated spirit of Dimdap Kram'ba, "the founder of the Silly Hat sect thousands of years ago." Using his money and the wisdom of the Silly Hat Order, Harold sets not only America but the world on the right course toward spiritual fulfillment.

About the Author

Daniel Pinkwater looks like many of the main characters of his novels—not particularly tall, chubby, bespectacled, and somewhat odd— and he has made it his career to write about eccentric children and young adults, people who, as in his own case, do not quite fit into school or the ordinary activities of daily life. These offcenter young people usually gravitate to others like themselves to form tiny groups within the larger communities of schools and neighborhoods.

These creative oddballs, regardless of their circumstances, always author their own adventures, seeing the action through to the end as the key actors in their personal dramas. Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century author of some terrific thrillers, once asserted that an author's job was to find the romance in everyday life. This means finding the-amazing-in-the-ordinary by those who have eyes to see; it is also a key aspect of Pinkwater's fiction. His protagonists may be ordinary kids, but they uncover amazing places and people, usually right where they Photo of Daniel Pinkwater by Jill Pinkwater.

live, and they sometimes discover themselves to be also amazing.

Daniel Manus Pinkwater, was born on November 15, 1941 in Memphis, Tennessee, to Philip and Fay (nee Hoffman) Pinkwater, a rag collector and a chorus girl. He grew up in Chicago, and his love for that city is evident in fiction such as The Education of Robert Nifkin. He seems to know where all the really interesting parts of Chicago are, as well as the best places to hang out. An avid reader as a youngster, particularly of adventure stories, Pinkwater contemplated becoming a writer, eventually rejecting the idea because "Writer's lives are disgusting, and writing is a horrible unhealthy activity". He attended Bard College in New York, decided to become a sculptor, and only turned to writing after four years of art study, graduating in 1964.

Pinkwater began his career as a professional writer almost by accident. He had made some drawings for a book envisioned for children, and he decided that dealing with someone else writing the text would be more annoying than writing the text himself. Even after the publication of this book, The Terrible Roar (1970), he still saw himself as a sculptor and illustrator. Nevertheless, he continued to write texts for his illustrations until he reached the point of being pulled so deeply into the creation of stories that he became a full-time writer. To this day he continues to illustrate most of his books.

Pinkwater married Jill Miriam Schultz on October 12, 1969, and they live in Hyde Park, New York. Pinkwater has been a commentator since 1987 for All Things Considered on National Public Radio; his often hilarious observations have won him a large audience. Although he has occasionally had small exhibitions of his art works, it is his fiction that has won him the most notice. Lizard Music (1976) was named an American Library Association notable book; Fat Men from Space (1977) was a Junior Literary Guild

selection; The Last Guru (1978) was named an Outstanding Book by the New York Times; and The Wuggie Norple Story (1980, illustrated by Tomie de Paola) received a Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association.

Setting

The Last Guru shows that many Americans have lost their spiritual way and will follow any idiot who pretends to be a spiritual leader, as is the case with the clown Hodie MacBodhi, who represents a fast-food chain. Harold, without realizing it at first, undertakes a spiritual journey that will enable him to answer the need of many people for spiritual guidance. Typical of Pinkwater's novels, The Last Guru begins in an ordinary setting, a suburb where Harold lives with his parents and Uncle Roy.

This echoes D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner" (1936), a short story in which an uncle helps his young nephew bet on horse races, and the boy turns out to have a knack for picking winners. The money won does not fill the spiritual vacuum at the heart of their lives—though many devoutly wish it, money cannot do so—and the boy dies a miserable death trying to pick another winner. In The Last Guru, Harold does not mistakenly try to use money as a substitute for love or a spiritual life, and he ends up in happy circumstances; although his uncle and parents worry that he may not learn the true value of money; his spending it all to help people suggests that he does.

When Harold becomes famous for being one of the richest people in the world, he and his parents are beset by news reporters, and they flee first to MacTavish's mountain retreat in Germany and then to a Himalayan village.

It is while the family lives in DorjeZetz that The Last Guru shifts into its second movement with the coming of the monks of the Silly Hat Order.

Dorje-Zetz is a good place to live: ". . .

nobody in Dorje-Zetz ever seemed to get sick. The village had a good enough school for the few kids who were of school age. Everybody had a good enough house to live in." The Blatzes feel perfectly at home in the village, and one wonders why they do not return once Harold's adventure is over. But Harold departs for the monastery of the Golden Alligator, his parents move back to their suburban American home, and eventually Harold rejoins them, first becoming the last guru and then focusing on his model ships.

Social Sensitivity

From the era of the Puritans settling their first American colony until the present, many Americans have been on a spiritual quest, a seeking out of truth about themselves and God. Although the term New Age is now often used to describe a certain kind of mysticism involving reincarnation, conversing with the dead, magical crystals, and some Eastern religious views, gurus and Eastern mysticism have long appealed to Americans, and traces of them in American society can be found from the mid-1800s when seances and tales of Atlantis became popular.

The Last Guru focuses on spiritual fads, especially those involving gurus of one sort or another. Some readers may feel that these fads are too easy targets, some of which seem self-satirical. Furthermore, Pinkwater risks angering those whose particular spiritual passions of the moment are ridiculed in The Last Guru—and the author does not leave many mystical vogues ungored—but then satire often annoys those whose beliefs are satirized.

In the world of The Last Guru, Americans eat bad food and drink bad drinks because it is supposed to be good for them, and they disregard their native common sense to follow an assortment of exploitive gurus.

Harold harnesses his huge wealth to the wisdom of the Silly Hat Order to put America back on a sane spiritual course. He explains: This is what the Silly Hats believe: People are just about standard— more or less the same.

Everything worthwhile about people comes from one place, and everything worthless about people comes from not paying attention to what that place is. If somebody wants to worship God, or the Great Life Force by meditating, or ringing bells, or crashing gongs, or burning incense, or chanting—that is O.K. with the Silly Hats. The Silly Hats themselves practice in a spiritual way by wearing the silliest hats possible. The more spiritually advanced a person is, the sillier the hat he wears. This prevents other people from getting the idea that he is anyone to take seriously.

The Last Guru is a message novel that says we all have within ourselves the spiritual resources we need to lead balanced, compassionate, and fulfilled lives. It also rebukes us for taking ourselves too seriously and for allowing personal vanities and pretensions to block, distort, or obliterate our deepest natural yearnings for spiritual order. Harold drives these points home by mailing to every man, woman, and child on earth an official parchment certificate signed by me, and by Rabdab Blooblah, the leader of the Silly Hat Order. This certificate will state that the bearer is a fully enlightened person, and Grand Exalted High Lama of the Silly Hat Order, than which there is no higher spiritual designation on Earth.

This means that everyone "will actually become a totally, completely, utterly perfect spiritual master—the real thing." People will no longer have to pay other people to tell them how to behave, and everyone will be a master guru, eliminating the many faddish

gurus who suck people dry. Everyone will rely on their common sense. This is what makes Harold the last guru.

Literary Qualities

The Last Guru is told in two parts, called movements because they have different narrative patterns and different subjects. The first part tells how Harold gains his great wealth and how he and his parents flee to a remote Himalayan village for privacy, and the next part begins with the arrival of the monks of the Silly Hat order who start Harold on his spiritual mission. These two very different narratives give the novel a broken-in-the-middle feel that can be somewhat disconcerting, although issues like health food fads that arise in the second movement are initiated in the first movement. It is as if Pinkwater tells us the first story in order to be able to recount the story he is really interested in.

Pinkwater's ability to make his descriptions both informative and funny is impressive, as is his deft touch in melding vivid images with absurd ideas so that they seem natural parts of each other. These qualities are displayed in the following passages, from the brief "bottles with little bumps on them like a crocodile's skin" (for Croco-Cola) to longer passages such as "The bowling alley came prefabricated with its own building, a juice bar, and a supply of balls and shoes and score sheets. It was an instant success with the villagers. They turned out to have some very good bowlers among them, once they got the hang of it." His mastery of descriptive prose ranges well beyond comedy to evoking mood and suspense through description, as in the next selection where he conveys menace and mystery in the appearance of strange visitors: One day a bunch of strangers appeared in the village. Except for the caravans which brought mail and supplies from the outside, no stranger ever appeared in DorjeZetz. These strangers were tall, dirty, rough-looking men. They all looked a little like Anthony Quinn. They needed shaves. They were dressed in coarsely woven red woolen blankets. Their feet were wrapped in rags. Some of them were carrying burlap bags.

They came out of nowhere. Nobody saw them coming. They were just there—all of a sudden—like that.

This manner of description is ideal for a fantasy like The Last Guru. It conveys a sense that anything can happen, that a fantastic or wondrous event could occur at any moment.

Themes and Characters

The Last Guru does not abound with subtle characterization; most of the novel's figures are stereotypes who speak and act predictably. "How's my son going to grow up properly, and pay attention in school, and make something of himself, when he's got umpteen million dollars on his mind?"

says Harold's father. The line is funny because it plays with the stereotype of the suburban American father with his middle-class concerns. It also shows that he lacks the vision Harold has for how money should most fitly be used.

Pinkwater's use of stereotypes here paradoxically gives heft and bite to his satire: his characters have made themselves stereotypes by witlessly acting out the roles society has fitted on them. One major reason people desperately seek out spiritual gurus and hunger after "designer" or faddish religions is that they have allowed themselves to become mere hollow stereotypes; they have abdicated what their true selves might have been.

The young man who tries to give people back their true selves is the best developed figure in the book, although he, too, is not depicted with remarkable detail. Harold Blatz is a quiet boy who lives like many quiet boys. The most remarkable thing about him is how he accepts his ability to make billions of dollars quickly as nothing exceptionable. His matter-offact behavior hides his acute mind, compassion for others, and penetrative perceptions to see through mystical shams.

The Last Guru initially seems to be about how Harold makes money, and his Uncle Roy looks as though he will be a major character. He is developed in more detail than most of the novel's other characters: Uncle Roy bet on horse races. He also bet on ball games, and spent a lot of time in a place called Mike's Bar and Grill. Uncle Roy liked to wear his hat in the house, and he used to hold a toothpick and a cigarette in his mouth at the same time. He was Harold's best friend.

Uncle Roy sells mail-order shoes for a living and seems like an ideal eccentric adult to share in Harold's adventures, but The Last Guru is not really about making money, gambling, horse racing, or mail-order shoes. Uncle Roy turns out to be a crucial link between Harold and the adult world of investing money, but he is not an influence on Harold, who always knows his own mind about what he wants to do.

Hamish MacTavish is also given some individualizing traits, but, like Uncle Roy, he is mostly a figure that moves the plot along who is not of significant importance to Harold's development. He is determined to persuade people to eat healthy foods, so he creates a chain of fast-food restaurants that serve pickleburgers, celery milkshakes, and other awful stuff that people eat because they think it is good for them. Once Harold declares all people to be exalted gurus, people stop eating MacTavish's foul foods. It is he who

whisks the Blatzes away from the hordes of newspeople and finds a safe haven for them in the village of Dorje-Zetz. He also serves as a symbol of the various kinds of selfhelp gurus Americans submit themselves to in pursuit of fad diets, and he enables the clown Hodie MacBohdi, by putting him in commercials for Zenburgers, to become emblematic of the spiritual gurus Americans allow themselves to become enthralled with. He invites people to spend money on worthless food in the belief that it is good for them.

Most other characters serve primarily to advance the story, and they are given their comic moments. For instance, the monk Dupdup Drng'pa says, "The leader of our order is Rabdab Blooblah. He is about one hundred and fifty years old. In spite of his comparative youth, he is a very wise man, and we are very attached to him." It turns out that people in Dupdup Drng'pa's part of Tibet often live to be four hundred fifty years old.

Dupdup Drng'pa's remarks are funny and entertaining, and he tells a little about what is in store for Harold, but he reveals little about himself, typical of most of the novel's characters.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do people eat pickleburgers and other food that tastes bad? What is the point Pinkwater makes by having people stop eating these bad-tasting foods at the novel's end?

2. Are people ever hounded by newspeople? Do they ever run away from newspeople or try to hide the way the Blatzes do?

3. Does Harold spend his money the way a typical person his age might?

What would most people his age spend money on?

4. Why do Harold's parents let him go live at the Golden Alligator monastery for two years?

5. Why do the Blatzes dislike being famous? Don't most people want to be famous?

6. Do you ever feel lectured in The Last Guru, or does it make its points gracefully?

7. What are some awful-tasting manufactured foods (as opposed to natural foods like liver and Brussels sprouts) that many people eat because they are supposed to be healthful?

8. What is the purpose of the big shows Harold puts on at the end of the novel?

9. What point does the Silly Hat Order wish to make with its silly hats?

10. Why do Harold's parents never seem to actually understand what is going on?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Harold Blatz is very lucky in matters of money. In what way might he earn money again, and what might he do with it this time?

2. The story about how a child is found to replace the leader of the Silly Hat Order has its basis in a real Tibetan tradition. What is that tradition?

Who does it involve? How is the boy chosen? What is his life like after he is chosen?

3. What is the history of gurus in the United States?

The Last Guru 4761 4. What is health food and how much of it is actually healthy to eat?

5. Research somebody who suddenly became famous and explain how that person was treated and how he or she dealt with the fame. Was it fun to be famous or not?

6. What kinds of mysticism does Pinkwater touch on in The Last Guru?

What are some of their modern analogues? Is Pinkwater's satire fair to these kinds of mysticism? Is it accurate?

7. Harold invests money in stocks.

How does one go about investing money in stocks? What is the process?

What should an investor hope to get out of his or her investment?

8. What aspects of modern spirituality does Pinkwater identify as unhealthy? Is the solution he offers to the unhealthy aspects of spirituality adequate? Cite real-life examples.

For Further Reference

Card, Orson Scott. The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction 76, 1 (January 1989): 39. Highly recommends Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

"D(aniel) M(anus) Pinkwater." In Contemporary Literary Criticism. Volume 35. Edited by Daniel G. Marowski, Roger Matuz, and Jane E. Neidhardt. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, pp. 317-321. A gathering of snippets from reviews of Pinkwater's novels.

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About Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, she says, "The writing is adequate, no more, no less. But for imaginative plot and decorative detail, Mr. Pinkwater's scores go off the charts."

Hearne, Betsy. Booklist 75, 19 (June 1, 1979): 1493. Hearne finds both plot and characterization to be poor in Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

Lantz, Fran. Klatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide 15, 6 (September 1981): 14. Lantz says, of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, ". . .

well, maybe you'd better just read the book. It's terrific! And then give it to your favorite young adult to enjoy."

Pendergast, Tom. "Pinkwater, Daniel Manus." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Volume 38. Edited by James G. Lesniak and Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, pp. 335-338. A brief summary of Pinkwater's career.

Sutherland, Zena. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 33, 3 (November 1979): 54. "If nothing succeeds like excess, the author has achieved a triumph of improbable folderol," Sutherland says of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars.

Telgen, Diane. "Pinkwater, Daniel Manus." In Something about the Author. Volume 76. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 177-181. An overview of Pinkwater's career with juicy quotations from an interview of Pinkwater.

Related Titles

The Last Guru is a transitional work which marks an end to the thin characterizations and heavy-handed themes of Pinkwater's early fiction while anticipating the careful characterizations and thematic depth of his subsequent work. Harold is a precursor for Leonard Neeble, protagonist of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars (1979; see separate entry, Vol. 9), another character with supernatural powers who governs his actions with common sense, though Leonard is given more depth than Harold and is surrounded by other well-developed figures such as Alan, whereas Harold stands mainly amidst caricatures and sketchy onedimensional figures. Also missing is the sense of wonder that typifies Pinkwater's fiction since the publication of The Last Guru. The blunt messages of The Last Guru tend to be replaced by subtler depictions of the virtues of being human, and the value of common sense and trusting oneself tend to be acted out rather than explained in such novels as The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death (1982; see separate entry, Vol. 9) and The Education of Robert Nifkin (1998; see separate entry, Vol. 9). This is not to say that Pinkwater's later protagonists are serious figures. The principal figures in Young Adults (1985) are sometimes very silly.

Even so, Harold stands out as an expression of faith in young adults to be able to think rationally, independent of the herd around them, while maintaining empathy for and responsiveness to others, qualities that are repeated in many later protagonists.

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