The Last Song of Sirit Byar Short Guide

The Last Song of Sirit Byar by Peter S. Beagle

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Contents

Overview

A time-worn woman, about forty-seven years old, big, strong, and, by her own account, ugly, sets herself down at a scribe's table and asks him to write down for her the true account of the death of Sirit Byar, a legendary minstrel who had died thirty years before. The story is told in her own dialect, her earthy commentary creating a distinctive tone that captures the sounds and customs of lands and people who are already being lost in the passage of time.

The Last Song of Sirit Byar provides a journey into a rich, full world in the company of a woman who, in spite of her quarrelsome asides, is an engaging guide.

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 events take place in a rural region of the world first presented in The Innkeeper's Song, a tale of magic and betrayal that takes place primarily at a country inn. The culture is reminiscent of medieval Europe: depictions of ordinary farm and town life are replete with horses, crops, huts, and houses, as well as class divisions among farm owners, farm workers, tavern owners, mercenaries, landed gentry, and royalty.

Also inhabiting this ordinariness are exotic animals with shapes and habits that have no parallel on earth. The customs of this culture seem to suit most people in The Last Song of Sirit Byar but may seem strange and extraordinary to readers. Beagle uses his imaginative setting to weave stories that not only are exotic and enchanting but manage to speak robustly of the human condition.

Social Sensitivity

Beagle tends to write his fantasies for grown-ups, not young adults, but like Out of the Silent Planet (1938) by C. S. Lewis and The Time Machine (1895) by H. G. Wells, his works appeal to many young readers. Part of the appeal of The Last Song of Sirit Byar lies in its rich portrait of a society whose customs echo those of real societies both past and present but do not necessarily exemplify ideal ways of living. For instance, Mircha Del mentions that some farm men near where she lives have children by their own daughters; she also mentions that she is ugly and unappealing but has a sexually active life on the boats where she works, the boatmen not being picky about how a woman looks. Some grown-ups do not like the idea of youngsters reading books in which these topics are discussed, but such earthiness is one reason young adults read Beagle's books and continue to love them years later. Beagle's fantasies, and The Last Song of Sirit Byar in particular, do not depict idealized places where evil is always spectacularly evil and good always stalwartly true.

He shows the evil in people's ordinary lives, in daily cruelties and abuses; for instance, a girl may seem to be doomed to a lifetime of being treated as a beast of burden because she is large and unattractive.

Good may manifest itself in simple kindnesses, in caring about another's feelings and taking action to ease pain, as when a lonely minstrel befriends a girl in a rundown tavern in an insignificant hamlet. It is probably this honesty in Beagle's fiction, his forthright portrayal of characters coping with petty challenges as well as great ones, that charms young adults. Furthermore, his treatment of the ugly aspects of life contributes to the depth of theme and setting in The Last Song of Sirit Byar and makes the novella speak truly about people and how they love.

Literary Qualities

The Last Song of Sirit Byar has a "framed" narrative, that is, a narrative in which the main story is told in an outer narrative, or frame. The frame is created by the voice of Mircha Del, whose motivation is to leave for posterity an account of her life with Sirit Byar. She is a lively storyteller, and her wry comments often intrude on the main narrative, reminding the reader that the story is told from an unabashedly biased point of view. Moreover, Mircha Del is an interest ing character whose comments reveal much about her cynical, rough-hewn personality.

The frame of The Last Song of Sirit Byar allows for comparisons between the teenage Mircha Del in the main narrative and the mature woman in the frame. One can see in the young woman's experiences, from having sex to carrying a heavy musical instrument, the elements that have shaped the grown woman's outlook on life and attitude toward people. This helps to humanize the story, making the storyteller a person whose faults are understandable and whose strengths are credible. Mircha Del's unique voice is that of a fully rounded character who could not be mistaken for any other literary figure.

Themes and Characters

The narrator of The Last Song of Sirit Byar is Mircha Del, who is about forty-seven years old. She is a rough-talking, cynical woman given to remarks such as, "Never bet on anything except human stupidity."

Her descriptions of herself are harsh: "Just big and ugly, the same as always," and, "I have the face I want, a dirty, mean wild animal's face that makes people leave me alone." In spite of her blunt speech, the story makes plain that she has led an active, robust life, and that even thirty years after his death she can appreciate the exceptional talent of Sirit Byar. "And all he was really, was a shaggy, rough-voiced old man—fifty anyway, surely—who sang dirty songs and called me 'big girl.' In a way, that's all he was," Mircha Del asserts. She describes the man she first saw in a tavern: Close to, he had a wild smell—furry, but like live fur, while it's still on the shukri or the jarilao. He was built straight up and down: wide shoulders, thick waist, thick short legs and neck. A heavy face, but not soft, not sagging—cheekbones you could have built a fence, a house with. Big eyes, set wide apart, half-hidden in the shadows of those cheekbones. Very quiet eyes, almost black, looking black because of the white hair. He never smiled much, but he usually looked about to.

This is a very sharp description for the self-described ignorant teenager—"Tell you how ignorant a lump I was back then, I thought snoring was just something my father did, nobody else"—but it reflects part of Sirit Byar's gift to her, the gift of discovery of her talent for appreciation, for recognizing the art in what she hears and sees. With Sirit Byar's push and a lifetime of experiences, Mircha Del becomes a storyteller with a keen sense of which details are important.

Much of Mircha Del's story is an effort to explain the musician and why he did what he did. Why come to the poor tavern of a remote farming community to sing to drunkards? "'The singing is what matters, big girl,' he said. 'Not for whom.'" Why does he walk rather than ride? "To do what I do, I have to walk the roads. I can't ride. If I ride, the songs don't come. That's the way it is." These remarks should not be taken at face value, because Sirit Byar is a complex man, and a contradictory one. Mircha Del insists that he never had "any need to explain himself, not to me or anyone," yet he plainly does explain himself. And his walking begs the question of why he did not have a horse or other beast of burden to carry his heavy musical instrument, the kiit, and his other belongings. Why did he haul them himself or, when Mircha Del joins his wanderings, have her carry the kiit ?

One answer to the questions raised by Sirit Byar's complex, contradictory personality is found in the theme of love. Although he seems to have big Mircha Del serve him as a beast of burden, he actually does not need her to carry his belongings.

His motivation seems to be affection for her, not often spoken but expressed in his behavior, from bewitching a beautiful young man with his music to ease her anguish to wishing to leave her his kiit.

"All songs are magic, big girl," he declares. As he loves Mircha Del, he also loves his music. To each he offers a part of himself, giving of his time, thought, and commitment. It is in the giving of himself for what he loves that his death is explained. A man so committed to his music that he refuses the comforts and acclaim of the life of a court musician to walk interminable hours on country roads, who chooses as his companion not a pretty girl or someone with musical talent but a big, unattractive girl who can only aspire to admire his gifts, is a man who would give himself up for his beloved.

Jailly Doura "hates you far more than I do, Sirit Byar," says her husband, Aung Jatt. Having once chosen his music over her, Sirit Byar drove Jailly Doura mad, and marriage to a kind, loving man—"a husband who looked at her like sunrise"—did not help her. "She smelled lifelong tired, lifelong dirty, she smelled of clothes sweated in and slept in until they've just died, you understand me?" Mircha Del says of Jailly Doura. With Mircha Del as his impetus, Sirit Byar wants to visit Jailly Doura's town and repair with his music the damage he may have done. He declares that "a last song is always answered" by the gods, and in a scene in which the three loves of his life, music, Mircha Del, and Jailly Doura, are drawn together and each left with a piece of himself, he gives himself up in a song that heals Jailly Doura's mind. His songs live on in the voices of other minstrels, Mircha Del lives a richer, fuller, more independent life than she would have had without his friendship, and Jailly Doura recovers to live the decent life she should have had with a loving, devoted husband.

Topics for Discussion

1. How reliable a narrator is Mircha Del? 2. Mircha Del says, "Never bet on anything except human stupidity." What does this remark tell us about her? What expectations for the story that follows does this remark create?

3. "And all he was really, was a shaggy, rough-voiced old man—fifty anyway, surely—who sang dirty songs and called me 'big girl.' In a way, that's all he was," Mircha Del says about Sirit Byar.

What point is she trying to make?

4. "The singing is what matters, big girl,' he said. 'Not for whom.'" What does this comment reveal about Sirit Byar's personality? What point is he making?

5. That the last song "is always answered" is revealed midway through The Last Song of Sirit Byar. How is this expectation used to create suspense? When do you realize what Sirit Byar's last song will do?

6. "All songs are magic, big girl," says Sirit Byar. Is this true? Why would Sirit Byar think so?

7. What does Mircha Del think of herself?

How does she describe herself? Is she a happy woman?

8. Why would Aung Jatt take care of Jailly Doura for years knowing that she is mad for love of Sirit Byar? What does this reveal about Aung Jatt's personality?

9. Mircha Del has a sexual encounter with a handsome young man. How does this event advance the plot? What does it reveal about Sirit Byar? What does it reveal about Mircha Del?

10. Who is the main character of The Last Song of Sirit Byar? How can you tell?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Last Song of Sirit Byar has a woman telling her story to a scribe, who writes it down for a fee. In which cultures is this a real-life practice? What function do such scribes play in their societies?

How much are they paid? What are their tools? What sort of documents do they usually write for their clients? (Hint: You might start with India.)

2. Beagle describes a French singer named Georges Brassens. Who was he? What characteristics of Brassens's does Sirit Byar reflect? This topic is tough to research because almost all books on Brassens are in French (there is one in German). If you can read French, find these books and then provide some information about Brassens.

3. Many cultures have had traveling minstrels, and some still do. What is the traveling minstrel's life like? What is he or she expected to know? What is such a minstrel's role in society? Is Sirit Byar typical of traveling minstrels?

4. Although The Last Song of Sirit Byar is a fantasy, numerous aspects of real-life cultures appear in it. What are these aspects? How are they used to enhance the narrative?

5. The Last Song of Sirit Byar has some strong sexual content. Is it appropriate for the story? How does it develop the novella's characters? How would removing the sexual content change Mircha Del's personality?

6. The kiit sounds very much like a real musical instrument, the hurley gurley, a mechanical stringed instrument of obscure origin that became popular in Europe during the Middle Ages. Although later versions of the instrument were small, in the Middle Ages it tended to be big and unwieldy. What is the history of this instrument? How was it played? What did it look like? In what ways does the kiit resemble it?

For Further Reference

Easton, Tom. Analog Science Fiction and Fact 117,12 (December 1997): 151-52. Easton finds much to praise in the Giant Bones collection.

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Vol. 1 (Biography and Resources). Edited by Kirk H. Beetz. Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 111-13. Michalson summarizes Beagle's life and popular reception and provides an annotated listing of works about him.

Mort, John. 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. 134â□□42. Summarizes Beagle's life and the role that writing has played in it.

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

The Last Song of Sirit Byar is one of seven disparate tales set in the same world but about very different people in very different places. The first of these tales is the novel The Innkeeper's Song, which sets the tone for the six subsequent novellas set in the same world, including The Last Song of Sirit Byar. The Innkeeper's Song emphasizes characterization over plot and plays with traditional folklore, including unicorns.The Last Song of Sirit Byar and the other novellas similarly emphasize characterization, each rewarding readers with insights into the human condition.

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