The Nargun and the Stars Short Guide

The Nargun and the Stars by Patricia Wrightson

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

The Nargun and the Stars is a touching story about a recently orphaned boy, Simon, and his quest for a place free from the depredation of mankind and its machinery. Simon's adventure involves conflict with the Nargun, a stone creature that is indestructible. It kills humans, sometimes for food, but mostly out of rage at the unnatural noise of their destructive machinery. The creature is therefore a threat to Simon's newfound home of Wongadilla, just as the humans threaten the peace the Nargun seeks. The humans win the conflict with the Nargun with the help of another mythical creature, the Potkoorok. This creature is a supernatural trickster who loves to play practical jokes. Its antics provide a playful and humorous subplot to balance the more serious major conflict of the story.

The ideas generated by the story call into question the right of humanity to destroy the environment in the name of development and progress. The story also points to the importance of people's love for the land and of the necessity to live in peace with all the Earth's inhabitants. Finally, the book raises the questions of the meaning of the concepts of home, family, and belonging and shows how Simon finds all three.

About the Author

Alice Patricia Furlonger Wrightson was born June 21, 1921, in Lismore, New South Wales, Australia, where students living in isolated rural areas ("the Outback") of Australia received standardized lessons by mail which they studied at home. Tests and homework were mailed to a central office for grading. After completing the State Correspondence School, Wrightson attended St. Catherine's College in Stanthorpe. She married in 1943 and had two children, a daughter and a son. In 1953, after ten years of marriage, she was divorced. In 1946 she began working at Bonalbo District Hospital as secretary and administrator and in 1960 she became administrator of the Sydney District Nursing Association. In 1964, she took a position as assistant editor of School Magazine, and became editor in 1970. She retired from her post as editor in 1975 to devote all her time to writing.

Her books for young readers have won numerous awards: the Australian Children's Book Award (1956), the Book World Festival Award (1968), and the Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award (1974 and 1978).

In 1978 Wrightson was honored by being made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. Both The Nargun and the Stars (1973) and Night Outside (1986) were named American Library Association Notable Books. A Little Fear won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in 1984.

Her unusual fantasies, which combine convincingly real characters, contemporary themes, and Aboriginal folkspirits (creatures from the mythology of the native Australian tribes), have been successful with young people in Britain and America as well as Australia.

Setting

The story is set in Australia, on a five-thousand-acre sheep ranch called Wongadilla. Because people's relationship to the environment is a major theme of the story, the setting is very important. Wongadilla contains a river, creeks, a swamp, forests, and part of a mountain range. It is wild, isolated, and beautiful. Simon, who grew up in a city, is at first alarmed by this new environment. When Charlie Waters, owner of Wongadilla and Simon's distant cousin, says, "It'll be yours some day if you want it," Simon is terrified. He later learns that perhaps no one ever really owns the land, but that we are permitted to be guardians of it for a time. Simon's acceptance of responsibility for looking after Wongadilla is part of his recovery of the idea of home. He had thought home was lost forever with the deaths of his parents.

Social Sensitivity

Environmental issues are treated through the medium of fantasy in The Nargun and the Stars. By using nature spirits from Aboriginal myth, Wrightson has given nature a voice to complain of humanity's destructive ways, and the power to combat them. Readers who sympathize with the Turongs, who are driven from their trees, or the Nargun, who is tormented by the roar and vibration of earth-tearing machinery, will be conscious that the destruction of the natural world takes place daily, and only human beings can stop it. The "owner ship" theme in the book brings up the moral aspect of humanity's relationship to the land: what right do temporary inhabitants of the land have to destroy it for everyone who comes after them?

Do we not have an obligation to be good caretakers of the earth?

A related issue is the difference in cultural attitudes between the progressive, technologically sophisticated whites and the Aboriginal population (here represented by the spirits from Aboriginal myth). The Aboriginals, like the Native Americans, had no concept of personal ownership of the land. They perceived the land as a living thing, something to which people owed respect and thanks. The white culture treated the Aboriginals with contempt, calling their lifestyle "primitive" and their beliefs "superstition." But the realities of toxic waste, acid rain, erosion, and other manmade environmental problems suggest that those early cultures may have been wiser than the "civilized" whites believed. Through fantasy, Wrightson contrasts these cultural attitudes and shows, through Charlie and Edie, that it is possible for whites to adapt their attitudes, accept the good qualities of other cultural beliefs, and live in harmony with the land.

Literary Qualities

Wrightson is noted for her excellent prose style. Her diction is simple but effective; it is clear, concise, and exact.

She uses many striking images: the wind "drew the fire up the chimney like a corkscrew;" the silence of the mountaintop is "a great quiet, like a roomful of giants thinking;" "the sky was sugared with stars;" "dripping water rang its silver gongs." The rhythm of her language is appropriate to what is being described, and there is variety in her sentence length. Simple declarative sentences are mixed in and balanced with compound and complex sentences.

Modes of speech are suitable to the characters talking. The nature spirits speak in a formal, rather archaic mode; they use numerous images, rhetorical questions, and inverted sentences. The Potkoorok says, "Does stone grow? When the wind rubs over it and the rain beats it and the frost squeezes it, does a stone grow bigger? The small Nargun will grow smaller. Watch your toes, Frog Boy or one day they may be bitten." Edie and Charlie both speak colloquially and in clipped sentences: "Just a bit of a storm, it won't last;" "Should be near here;" and "Potkoorok scare you?"

Wrightson uses a variety of incident to create tension and suspense in the plot.

For instance, the night that Simon goes out after the storm, he experiences tremendous elation when he sees the Turongs and Potkoorok hiding the road grader. He wants to dance and yell with joy and excitement. But on his way back to the house he encounters the Nargun.

He experiences soul-wrenching terror as he waits in the darkness to learn what it is, and then flees in panic. Similarly, Wrightson uses the benign and entertaining mischief of the Potkoorok to counterpoint the serious business of dealing with the Nargun.

Themes and Characters

Identity is a major theme of The Nargun and the Stars. It is primarily an issue for Simon, but it relates in some way to all the characters in the story. At the beginning, Simon is "a stranger even to himself." His sense of personal identity was lost along with his home and family when his parents died in a car crash.

Edie and Charlie Waters, a sister and brother who are his distant cousins, volunteer to be his guardians. Simon, who does not care where he lives, leaves the orphanage and goes to their ranch, Wongadilla. At first he cannot bring himself to call them by name, and he is startled and displeased when they call him "Simey." When he meets the Potkoorok, a mischievous spirit that lives in the swamp, Simon asks, "Is that your own name? Or is it what you are?" "That is my name that I am . . . You are Boy. I am Potkoorok." Later, the Potkoorok calls Simon "Frog Boy" because he carefully returns the body of a dead frog to the swamp.

Simon is besieged by questions, not just of who and what he is, but of who and what the new characters in his life are. When he is frightened by the Nargun, he calls for help from Charlie, using his name for the first time. After that he calls Edie by name also, and accepts their use of "Simey." His acceptance of a nickname that matches their names symbolizes Simon's acceptance of them as family.

The Potkoorok calls Simon "Frog Boy" partly to distinguish him from "Boat Boy," which was the name the Potkoorok gave to Charlie when he played in the swamp as a boy. Simon realizes that a boy like him is inside the grown-up Charlie, and that a grown-up Simon is slowly emerging out of his own boy-self.

He sees that it is possible to have many names, all of them true.

The most haunting transference of Simon's identity is when he scratches "Simon" into a lichen growing on the surface of a great rock. He does not realize that the rock is a living thing, the Nargun. But after that, when he sees the Nargun, his own name speaks silently to him from the Nargun's back. This symbolizes a close identification between Simon and the Nargun. At the beginning of the novel Simon has been driven by grief and loss back behind a stony wall inside himself. Psychologically, Simon has turned to stone. Both Simon and the Nargun project a terrible hunger and loneliness; both are strangers at Wongadilla. But as Simon becomes part of the Waters family and joins Charlie and Edie against the Nargun, he ceases to be a stranger and becomes a defender of Wongadilla, while the Nargun remains an outsider. When the Nargun is imprisoned under the mountain, the lichen dies and Simon's name fades from its back, a symbol that Simon is no longer a stone figure.

A related theme is mankind's relationship to nature, which is effectively represented by the "old things," the spirits of the natural world. The Nargun is one of the oldest and most powerful of these, dating from the creation of the world and made of living rock. "Fire is its dreaming," says the Potkoorok, and this means both that it loves fire and

dreams of it, and that fire is its origin; it was heaved up out of the primal fires at the beginning of time. But with the passage of time, humans developed technologies which can torture and rend even rock.

The rumble and vibration of machines tearing at the earth have awakened the Nargun, and its journey to escape the sounds of man's machinery has brought it to Wongadilla.

The Potkoorok is younger than the Nargun, but ancient nonetheless. It is nearly as old as water, and its relationship to humanity is basically benign. It likes to play practical jokes on humans, and it hates destructive machines; It hides the road grader under the waters of the swamp because the machine is "wrong." But it also helps to defeat the Nargun because the great and dangerous power of the Nargun is uncomfortable for lesser powers to live near. In addition the humans have asked for help, and the Potkoorok has kindly feelings for those humans who preserve its swamp and who do not needlessly destroy plants and animals.

The Turongs are tree spirits, and as such they are very vulnerable to humanity's destructive acts. When their trees are cut down, they must flee to another forest; and when there is no more forest, they will die. The Nyols are cave spirits, seldom troubled by humans, yet disliking the shaking of the mountain caused by machinery. Just as the Turongs and the Potkoorok stole and disposed of the road grader, the Nyols have stolen the bulldozer and hidden it in the heart of the mountain. They refuse to help Charlie, Edie, and Simey drive the Nargun away because stone is their dreaming; the Nargun is like a god to them.

All of the "old things" stand for aspects of nature, and all of these nature spirits have reason to resent the destructive powers of humans. Very few humans in the book are even aware of the nature spirits, but the three who are—Charlie, Edie, and Simon—feel much sympathy with the old ones and want to protect them and their environment. The government workers with their chain saws, bulldozers, and explosives are near Wongadilla, but not within its boundary. Charlie and Edie have never exploited their land. "I've never cut a tree without I had to," Charlie reminds the Potkoorok. Wrightson shows that it is possible for human beings to live cooperatively with the spirits of the land and to care about the land as deeply as any mythical beast. But she also shows that some people have a careless indifference toward the natural world, and that their carelessness, like that of the government workers, is as destructive as if it were deliberate and vicious.

Throughout the story Wrightson highlights the difference between appearances and reality. The Nargun looks like a boulder, but is a living creature. Edie's appearance is humorous, but she is wise and kind. The Potkoorok can create an illusion of the Rainbow Serpent and a great flood, but Simon emerges from the flood only slightly damp. In The Nargun and the Stars, it pays to look beneath the surface of things.

The major human characters in the story are fully developed. Simon is sullen and withdrawn at first, startled by the new sounds of the wilderness of Wongadilla. But he is capable of tenderness and empathy. When he picks up the dead frog and carries it to

the swamp, we see him through the eyes of the Potkoorok: "For every ripple that glinted on the swamp, the Potkoorok had known ten boys; but never one who returned a dead frog so gently to the swamp." His meeting with the Potkoorok and the Turongs puts him more at ease in his wild surroundings. The patience of Charlie and Edie, who accept Simon without questioning or prying, inspire his trust. His nervous fear of the Nargun and his belief that it is his personal antagonist break through his sullenness. He persuades the Potkoorok to help defeat the Nargun, and convinces Charlie that he, Simon, has the right to defend Wongadilla. In the end, after the last violent confrontation with the Nargun, Simon, Charlie, and Edie hug one another, reassuring themselves that each is safe and well. Simon is able to touch and be touched by these two people, his new family.

Edie is not a physically attractive woman; she has a heavy body set on skinny legs, and her clothing is dowdy.

When Simon first meets her, he sees that she looks "nothing at all like his slim young mother." She does not say much. "She was still, like a swamp," and the comparison to a swamp appears more than once when Edie is mentioned.

But on Wongadilla, the swamp is deeper than it looks and it contains something wonderful. Edie is patient and quiet, kind and caring, and totally accepting.

She knows that Simon went out the night of the storm, but she neither scolds nor questions him. When he asks her for an apple (he wants it for the Potkoorok) she gives him two, and silently continues to give him two every day thereafter. Even more than Charlie, she loves nature and readily accepts the spirits. When Edie plans to drive the tractor back and forth across the mouth of the gully where the Nargun is, hoping the noise may drive it away, Charlie warns Simon, "And see you don't let her make friends with the brute and try to bring it home." Charlie knows that Edie has the capacity to care about the Nargun because she cares about all living things. She is also brave; driving the tractor in the dusk is fraught with danger, but she does it as she does most things, awkwardly but without fuss.

When Charlie wants to leave Simon and Edie behind while he follows the Nargun, Edie insists that they stay together.

She is the character whose quiet caretaking holds them together; she is the heart of the family.

Charlie is a quiet person, except when he is trying to conceal something. When he does not want Edie to know how dangerous the Nargun is, he talks continuously, teasing Simon with false heartiness, telling stories and making jokes. He is an outdoor man, a competent rancher, and a preserver of nature. He respects the land and its spirits.

When he calls himself "the man in charge" in his message to the Potkoorok, Simon exclaims, "But you're not the man in charge! You OWN it!" Charlie replies, "Do I? For sixty years or so maybe, but how long do you think the Potkoorok's owned it?" This response shows that Charlie is neither greedy nor grasping, nor is he one to insist on

what is "his." It shows a certain humility, a sense of himself as a short-lived creature briefly occupying the same space as other, stranger but more lasting things; and it shows a willingness to recognize the rights of those other creatures.

Finally, it shows an attitude toward the land that is very different from that of developers and destroyers. He is just "the man in charge," a kind of caretaker; his tenancy is brief, but the land is eternal, and he has a responsibility to it.

Charlie's matter-of-fact acceptance of even the most incredible things makes it possible for Simon to trust him and tell him about the Nargun. Charlie's attitude toward the Nargun is very practical: first they must learn as much about it as they can. Then, if they cannot live with it, they must do something about it. His calmness reassures Simon, who learns to approach the old things with the proper ritual, to do first things first, and, finally, to do what must be done without fuss and without panic. Charlie is brave and caring. After he has seen the Nargun, he sits up all night by the fire, keeping watch. He wants to prevent Simon's underwater journey with the Potkoorok and trail the Nargun alone.

Protecting Edie and Simon is Charlie's natural way of showing love.

The two major supernatural characters are also well drawn. The Potkoorok is a yellow-green aquatic creature with golden eyes and a froglike face. It has a childish sense of humor—it loves to steal apples from Simon—and delights in practical jokes. It is less interested in removing the Nargun from Wongadilla than playing its grand joke of driving the Nyols from the cave with an illusion of the Rainbow Snake. The Potkoorok's joke makes it possible for Charlie to enter the cavern and start the bulldozer, thus drawing the Nargun into the mountain. The Potkoorok gloats and boasts about fooling the Nyols, and gets sulky and affronted when Simon implies that the Potkoorok lacked the power to go into the mountain. Its powers are primarily the powers of illusion.

For all its childishness, the Potkoorok has its own wisdom and understanding, and its own kind of love. Unlike the Nargun, it needs humans to play tricks on and to be friends with, and it is upset that Charlie has grown up. Humans, unlike the mountains and the stars, vanish quickly. They grow up, grow old, and die—and leave the Potkoorok lonely.

The Potkoorok can convey real sadness when grieved by the death of the frog, or when contemplating the speed with which people vanish. It is because of this contradictory mixture of characteristics, its silliness and its profundity, that the Potkoorok is such an endearing creature.

The Nargun is a grander and more terrible spirit. It remembers the making of the earth and is angered by its destruction. It kills in anger, when disturbed by the noise of human machines, or it kills for food. But it does not eat often, sometimes as seldom as once in fifty years. Although made of stone, it moves, sometimes on four stubby limbs of rock, sometimes upright like a man.

It has a face—a stubby snout, a dark cavity like an eye—and its cry is full of loneliness and anger. It longs for fire and visits the ranchhouse one night to lean against the fence and stare through the window at the flames in the fireplace.

The Nargun loves, but in a way that is difficult for humans to understand: "In its cold heavy way it loved the mountain.

It had come to love distance and sky and high rocky places; and though it had killed only a sheep, it knew there were men near. In its cold, still way the Nargun loved men: loved them even when it killed them."

The Nargun is a paradox. It loves all created nature, all living things, but it kills. It hates machinery, the unnatural creations of mankind. In its way, it is nature in revolt and striking back; but it makes no distinctions between good people and bad, nor between good uses of machines and destructive. It is an impersonal force like a hurricane, except for the fact that it feels emotions. It has great power; it can generate a kind of protective shield around itself that repels missiles; if a piece of it breaks off, that piece becomes a Nargun; it can, when angry, move with great speed. But its greatest power is the power of stone, of the bedrock of earth itself. It is hard, invulnerable, and nearly eternal. It is not evil, but it is dangerous; yet its loneliness and longing are moving.

When the Potkoorok tells Simon that the Nargun is imprisoned until the mountain crumbles or some force opens a way out of the mountain, Simon cries, "Poor thing." There is no place in the world of men for this ancient power, but its loneliness and unfulfilled love are emotions which humans can also feel and pity.

Topics for Discussion

1. Fire is the Nargun's "dreaming;" stone is the Nyols'. The swamp is a "dreaming of many rivers." That all things have a "dreaming," an object of desire that is also their source, is an Aboriginal concept. What, do you think, is the dreaming of humans? Of Charlie and Edie?

2. Despite the fact that it nearly killed him twice, in the end Simon pities the Nargun. Why? How can he feel this way about a creature so terrible?

3. Critics have said, and Wrightson has confirmed, that her works tend increasingly to present the "other" point of view. How does this appear in The Nargun and the Stars, and what is its significance?

4. Does your community have local environmental problems that you are aware of? Is there a piece of wetlands or park under threat from developers? Is there a toxic waste dump nearby? How clean is the river or the ponds? Discuss these problems from the perspective of the nature spirits in the book. What would, or could, they do about them?

What would Simon do? What could you?

5. At the beginning of the story Simon does not like Charlie and Edie, and he hates Wongadilla (he thinks it is a "weird place"). Why and how does he change?

6. The men who are clearing land for the government near the boundary of Wongadilla do not appear for very long in the book, nor are they very fully developed as characters. Yet it is their machinery and their work that has distressed the old things. Are they the villains of the story? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research Native American attitudes toward the land and compare them to the Aboriginal attitudes which the old things and Charlie have in The Nargun and the Stars.

2. Read the Native American nature myths. What are their "trickster" spirits like the Potkoorok? What spirits do they think live in trees or in water? Write your own story in which the American spirits defend the land.

3. Why is the book called The Nargun and the Stars? What is the connection between stars and the Nargun? How do the stars figure in the text?

4. The mythological characters in The Nargun and the Stars are also comparable to the traditional figures of European myth: elves, leprechauns, fairies, and other magical creatures.

Were you aware of this comparison while reading the book? Why? What makes the Potkoorok and his fellow Old Things different? Would the fantasy work as well for you if the Potkoorok were an elf, the Turongs were fairies, and the Nyols dwarfs? Why or why not?

5. Apply the principle of respect for the land to some ecological problem in your community. Compose a letter to the editor of your local newspaper written from the point of view of the land itself, and of the animals.

6. The Nargun has mad a long journey to Wongadilla. Why? Is it running from something or looking for something? Wongadilla is the end of a journey for Simon. What is he looking for? What does he find?

For Further Reference

Babbitt, Natalie. Review of A Little Fear by Patricia Wrightson. The New York Times Book Review (November 13, 1983): 440. Babbitt, a leading American writer of fantasies for children, says Wrightson's work "is special for the quality of the writing alone."

Gilderdale, Betty. "Patricia Wrightson."

In Twentieth Century Children's Writers, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick.

New York: St. Martin's, 1978. Contains a brief autobiographical sketch and a critical essay on her work by Gilderdale.

Heins, Ethel. Review of The Nargun and the Stars by Patricia Wrightson. Horn Book 50 (August 1974): 382-383. A brief but favorable review of the novel written when Wrightson was still relatively unknown in America.

Saxby, H. M. A History of Australian Children's Literature. Vol. 2. Sydney: Wentworth Books, 1971. A brief assessment of Wrightson's early works.

Shaner, Mary. "Twentieth-Century Children's Fantasy." In Masterworks of Children's Literature: The Twentieth Century. Vol. 8. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. A brief assessment of The Nargun of the Stars as mythic fantasy.

Townsend, John Rowe. ASense of Story.

Boston: Horn Book, 1971. An essay on Wrightson's writings prior to 1971; particularly useful sections about I Own the Racecourse!

——. Written for Children. Boston: Horn Book, 1974. Brief comments on The Rocks of Honey, Down to Earth, and I Own the Racecourse!

Wrightson, Patricia, "Ever Since My Accident: Aboriginal Folklore and Austrian Fantasy." Horn Book 56 (1980): 609-617. A very valuable piece in which Wrightson explains her use of Aboriginal folklore and her conception of fantasy.

——. "The Fellowship of Man and Beast." Horn Book 61 (1985): 38-41. A short essay on the importance of man's relationship to nature.

——. "The Geranium Leaf." Horn Book 62 (1986): 176-185. Wrightson expands on her understanding of the interdependence of all nature and on the importance of that theme for children's literature.

Related Titles

Although Wrightson has not written a sequel to The Nargun and the Stars, readers interested in her theme of "ownership" would enjoy A Racecourse for Andy (also published as I Own the Racecourse!) which treats the same idea.

Readers interested in Wrightson's use of Aboriginal myth should also read The Crooked Snake, The Bunyip Hole, An Older Kind of Magic, A Little Fear, and her trilogy for older readers, The Ice is Coming, The Dark Bright Water, and Journey Behind the Wind (also published as Behind the Wind). She treats the theme of preservation of the environment forcefully in An Older Kind of Magic. The perspective of the "other" on human nature and behavior is amusingly presented in Down to Earth, in which the reader views the modern city of Sydney through the alien eyes of a visitor from outer space.

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