

# **Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros Short Guide**

## **Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros by Peter S. Beagle**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Professor Gattesman and the Indian Rhinoceros Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>



## Overview

In his introduction to *Immortal Unicorn: Volume One*, Beagle cites a passage from the Renaissance explorer Marco Polo that likely inspired "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros": . . . and great numbers of unicorns, hardly smaller than an elephant in size. Their hair is like that of a buffalo, and their feet like those of an elephant. In the middle of their forehead is a very large black horn. Their head is like that of a wild boar, and is always carried bent to the ground. They delight in living in mire and mud. It is a hideous beast to look at, and in no way like what we think and say in our countries, namely a beast that lets itself be taken in the lap of a virgin. Indeed, I assure you that it is altogether different from what we fancied.

It is not hard for a modern reader who has perhaps visited a zoo or watched nature programs on television to recognize Polo's "unicorn" as a rhinoceros, and it is easy to imagine how Polo, having read about unicorns, would think that he had actually found them in India. Beagle does not like to repeat himself in his fiction, so Polo's odd account offers him a chance to explore a new idea about unicorns: what if they could do everything myths say they can but they looked almost nothing like the descriptions in myths? Out of this question he builds a comedy of a man devoted to reason who is willing to accept the fact of a talking Indian rhinoceros but is unwilling to believe the rhinoceros could actually be a unicorn.

## 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 at a somewhat earlier age than most in 1959. 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 subsequently married Indian author and photographer Padma Hajmadi, and they are well-known habitués of the environs of Davis, California.

Beagle declares that he does 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 Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros 307 publisher and fans' requests and wrote *The Unicorn Sonata*. He insisted that it not be a continuation of *The Last Unicorn* but rather a tale set in a new world with unicorns unlike those in his earlier novel. Beagle has responded further to readers' requests for more unicorn tales 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

The main setting for "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" is Gottesman's house in a Midwestern American city. It is old and cramped, with narrow stairs and a slim bathtub. Its fireplace is artificial. Even so, an enormous rhinoceros moves in, lying on the floor in front of the fireplace like a dog. It loves bathing, especially with Epsom salts, and somehow it manages to make its way up the narrow, winding stairway and to squeeze into the small tub. It explains that it is a unicorn and therefore can do such impossible things, but Gottesman insists that he is just a remarkable rhinoceros.

Touched on briefly is the zoo where Gottesman meets the rhinoceros, who already knows who he is. Gottesman's seven-year-old niece wanted to see tigers at the zoo, and the tigers were opposite the pen from the rhinoceros. The pen is dirty and unpleasant, as is the rhinoceros's odor, so it is not entirely surprising that he would prefer to live in Gottesman's home. He assures Gottesman that the zoo would not report him missing because losing a huge rhinoceros would be embarrassing, and, sure enough, when Gottesman returns to the zoo to see for himself, elephants are in the pen and a guard insists that the elephants were always there. Also touched on is the apartment of Gottesman's old friend Sally Lowry. It is cluttered with books and other objects that a college professor would collect, and it seems to represent her solitary, iconoclastic life.

## Social Sensitivity

This book is about solitary lives and an endangered species. Beagle knows his characters, and he knows the demands teaching can place on teachers. Both Gottesman and Sally Lowry give themselves over to educating college students. For Gottesman, teaching is a joyful exploration of subjects he loves, and he encourages debates in his class over the philosophers whose ideas animate his intellectual life. Lowry, on the other hand, sees her life as having been one of teaching useless information she loves to idiots. Both end up with adequate pensions and little else except for the wonderful talking rhinoceros. That teaching college can demand the whole of a teacher's life is often ignored when the subject of college education comes up, but Beagle remembers it in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros."

The Indian Rhinoceros itself is near extinction, as is mentioned in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros." In the words of Marco Polo that Beagle cites, there are "great numbers of unicorns, hardly smaller than an elephant in size." In his day, they must have been an impressive sight, moving in great numbers across India.

As of the early 2000s, the rhinoceros that Marco Polo thought was the true unicorn of myth may disappear forever. In spite of efforts to protect this splendid animal, poachers manage to kill it, mostly only for its horn, which is sold as an aphrodisiac. Although this may seem like an ancient, primitive custom, it is actually a modern development, a twentieth-century superstition.

## Literary Qualities

Beagle's language is distinguished, often making wonders come to life. It is often a pleasure to read just for the sound of his words, as if a story were a musical composition. In "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros," Beagle has set himself the task of telling a funny story with sadness in it.

Usually irrepressible, when Gottesman thinks of his life near the end of the story, he sees himself as ordinary, having accomplished little. "I am like the old, old star that died so long ago, so far away, that its last light is only reaching our eyes today," he says to the rhinoceros. "They fall in on themselves, you know, those dead stars, they go cold and invisible, even though we think we are seeing them in the night sky." This is a poignant thought, put poetically by the funny, enjoyable Gottesman, yet it is contradicted, at least in part by the end of the novelette. "Now has come the time for silence. Now I think you should come and live with me," the rhinoceros says to Gottesman after Sally has died, and after Gottesman's sister Edith has died prematurely. The rhinoceros offers the promise of life in another place, hinting that the light of the star does not necessarily go out.

There is wonder in Beagle's words, and he creates striking images. For example, he tells of Gottesman's experience riding the back of the rhinoceros to Sally's apartment: "Instead he felt himself flying, truly flying, as children know flying, flowing with the night sky, melting into the jeweled wind."

"Flowing with the night sky" and "Melting into the jeweled wind" draw reader's attention. They convey a sensation of flying that is not only memorable but emotionally gratifying. One would like to fly like that. Later, Beagle says that "there came a surge like the sea under him [Gottesman] as the great beast [the rhinoceros] leaped forward." Beagle's audience has perhaps felt the surge of an automobile as it begins moving forward, of an aircraft, or of a train, but "a surge like the sea" evokes the sensation in a special, memorable way.



## Themes and Characters

The main character of "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" is Professor Gustave Gottesman, whose last name translates as "God's man." Given the company he keeps for most of his life, a rhinoceros who can talk comfortably for hours about both famous and obscure philosophers, and given an ending in which the rhinoceros carries Gottesman off to a wonderful place, the last name "God's man" suggests that Gottesman has been chosen by the divine, touched by the supernatural, and at the end is perhaps carried off to heaven. At least, the rhinoceros tells him, its stairs will be wider, even if the baths are not as reliably heated as in Gottesman's old home.

It is extraordinary how Beagle creates an engrossing tale about an intellectual who has no outwardly unusual qualities: "He was tall and rather thin, with a round, undistinguished face, a snub nose, a random assortment of sandyish hair, and a pair of very intense and very distinguished brown eyes that always seemed to be looking a little deeper than they meant to, embarrassing the face around them no end."

Perhaps the eyes are the clue to what makes him exceptional, because the talking rhinoceros must have some reason for choosing him as a special companion.

Although Gottesman declares that he is an unexceptional thinker with no creativity of his own, others disagree. His friend Sally Lowry thinks him special because he saw in her special quality that no one else could see. Perhaps Gottesman can see in the rhinoceros what other people cannot recognize. His niece Nathalie loved him when she was a child, and, years later, after having married and had children she says to her husband, "Something looks out for [Gottesman]... I always knew that, I couldn't tell you why. Uncle Gustave is somebody's dear stuffed Charles" (Charles was her stuffed tiger).

"'Why, Professor Gottesman—how nice to see you at last.' It was a low voice, a bit hoarse, with excellent diction, speaking good Zurich German with a very slight, unpleasant accent." Gottesman was born in Zurich, but hearing German spoken to him in an American zoo is a surprise. When he looks to find who was speaking to him, he sees only a zoo animal: "It was an Indian rhinoceros, according to the placard on the gate: as big as the Professor's compact car, and the approximate color of old cement." And it smells of urine. It is odd enough that a rhinoceros talks German in an American zoo, but this one has sensibilities. For example, the animal comments on Gottesman's niece: "'A mannerly child [Nathalie],' the rhinoceros commented. 'One sees so few here. Most of them throw things.'"

Gottesman is more unusual than he himself realizes; he is able to accept the idea of a German-speaking rhinoceros from India, but he thinks himself a realist, so when the rhinoceros says, "I myself, as it happens, am a unicorn," Gottesman says, "I would feel so much better if you could see your way to being merely a talking rhinoceros."





Yet, says the rhinoceros, "Suppose that everything you believed about unicorns—everything except the way they look—were true of me?" Gottesman is stubborn. "The fact remains, a rhinoceros is and a unicorn isn't." If a man can accept the idea of a talking rhinoceros, especially one that likes courteous little girls, why not a rhinoceros?

It is part of the comedy of "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" that the professor of philosophy can accept the notion of a talking rhinoceros because rhinoceroses are known to exist, but he can not accept the notion of a unicorn—talking or otherwise—because unicorns are known not to exist. The reasoning is pleasantly daffy, enhancing the humor of the novelette.

The rhinoceros turns out to be a warm and friendly companion. It at first seems almost like a pet: "The rhinoceros was in the living room, lying peacefully on its side before the artificial fireplace—which was lit—like a very large dog." And at first he seems but a guest, and "As a houseguest, the rhinoceros's only serious fault was a continuing predilection for hot baths (with Epsom salts, when it could get them)."

Eventually, it becomes like family. Gottesman looks forward to getting home, not something he had done before meeting the rhinoceros, because the "beast" enjoys discussing philosophy with him into the wee hours of morning, as well as because the rhinoceros is a good and kindly sort. Even so, especially after Sally's comment, "Well, any rhinoceros that could handle those stairs, wedge itself into that skinny tub of yours, and tidy up afterwards would have to be a unicorn," Gottesman maintains, "I still must regard you [the rhinoceros] as an exceedingly learned and well-mannered Indian rhinoceros," not as a unicorn. It seems likely that most readers of "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" will agree with Sally, but the question regarding if the rhinoceros is a unicorn does not matter much to Gottesman, who accepts the rhinoceros as a good friend regardless of what he looks like or says he is.

The rhinoceros is not the only good friend in Gottesman's life. There is also "Sharptongued, solitary, and profoundly irreverent" Sally Lowry, a teacher of Latin. Her characterization is not as well rounded as those of Gottesman and the rhinoceros, but it is still credible. "Professor Gottesman grew placidly old with the rhinoceros— that is to say, the Professor grew old, while the rhinoceros never changed in any way that he could observe," Beagle notes, and during the passage of years Gottesman's dependence on Lowry for companionship and emotional support is developed. Irritating she may be to other people, but to Gottesman she is fun to have around. However acerbic she may be, one loves her for what she does after Gottesman is mugged.

Two thugs beat him and try to rob him but are found by police lying near Gottesman, severely beaten themselves. Gottesman has no trouble realizing that they had been stomped on by a very large beast, and Sally herself believes in the existence of the rhinoceros partly because she has seen its big three-toed footprints at Gottesman's home, but "Sally impishly kept the incident [the mugging] on the front pages for some days by confiding to reporters that Professor Gottesman was a practitioner of a longforgotten martial-arts discipline, practiced only in ancient Sumer and Babylonia."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is the ending of "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" too sentimental? Explain your opinion with details from the book.
2. What does a talking rhinoceros, or unicorn, see in Gottesman, who says of himself that he is an unoriginal thinker?
3. Where is Gottesman going with the rhinoceros at the end of "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros"?
4. "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" has sad passages, but it is a funny tale. Explain how this so.
5. Will Gottesman be happy in the rhinoceros's home?
6. How can "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" be funny if people dear to Gottesman die in it?
7. Beagle says that he does not like to repeat himself. Has he succeeded in creating a new vision of unicorns in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros?"
8. What makes Gottesman an interesting protagonist?
9. What are the qualities of the rhinoceros's character? Does he or she (Gottesman never learns its gender) ever seem human?
10. Why would the rhinoceros spend time thinking about humans and about human philosophy?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a story of your own about riding on a rhinoceros like the one in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros."
2. Do some research on the Indian rhinoceros. What is being done to preserve the animal from extinction?
3. What is the history of the rhinoceros's horn being an aphrodisiac? Do some research to determine the size of the market in rhinoceros horns.
4. How is a college "Comparative Philosophy" taught? What are students expected to learn in it? Why did the author choose this subject to be Gottesman's specialty?
5. Compare "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" to Beagle's other tales about unicorns. What do they have in common? What makes each unique?
6. Beagle says, "But what amazed me as these stories [from *Immortal Unicorn: Volume One*] began to come in is the eternal command the unicorn retains over the human imagination." Read the stories in *Immortal Unicorn: Volume One*. How varied are they? What do they have in common? How do they measure up to "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros?"
7. Draw or paint a picture of one of the unusual moments in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros," perhaps one of the scene in which Gottesman and the rhinoceros talk at the zoo, or the one of the rhinoceros on the floor in front of the fireplace, or taking a bath, or of the wild ride to Sally's home.
8. Beagle says in his introduction to *Immortal Unicorn: Volume One* 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." How well does "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" exemplify these ideas?
9. What is the karkadaan mythological beast of India? How does it relate to unicorns?
10. The rhinoceros mentions the writings about unicorns by Isidore of Seville, a medieval writer. Find his description of unicorns. What aspects of his description still are part of folklore about unicorns? Are any reflected in "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros?"

## 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, Inc., 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 entry summarizes Beagle's life and the role writing has played in it.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

"Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" is not directly linked to any of Beagle's other works, and Beagle has made it very different from *The Last Unicorn* and *The Unicorn Sonata*. However, 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*, "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" is a sentimental comedy; like *The Unicorn Sonata*, it places its story in modern times, telling of a person's wonderful, spiritually enriching experiences with the supernatural.

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