

Raptor Short Guide

Raptor by Paul Zindel

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Contents

Raptor Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

Zindel is a master of exciting thrillers, and *Raptor* is among his most breathtaking.

The novel begins with a bang: dark caves, something moving around, the suspicion of a practical joke, then eggs, a giant head full of daggerlike teeth, panic, a fall. The novel barely pauses for breath—just long enough for Professor Norak to tell his son Zack to retrieve something. What that something is begins as a mystery for Zack, but it soon turns into a sprinting narrative for Zack and his friend Uta when they discover that not all dinosaurs are extinct and they are not particularly picky about who they eat.

An action-filled adventure with suspense and surprises on every page, *Raptor* is very hard to put down before it reaches its suitably electrifying conclusion.

About the Author

Paul Zindel was born on Staten Island, New York, on May 15, 1936. His father abandoned his family when the author was still very young, and this abandonment may explain why he writes so often about broken families. His family moved frequently in New York, dogged by poverty. At fifteen, Zindel was diagnosed with tuberculosis and placed in a sanatorium for a year and a half, delaying his graduation from high school by a year. He attended Wagner College, earning a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1958, and eventually a master's in chemistry as well. After a brief stint as a technical writer, he became a high school chemistry teacher, teaching on Staten Island from 1959 to 1969.

He had already begun writing plays while in college, and his interest in writing combined with his interest in his teenage students to result in *The Pigman* (please see separate entry), a novel for young adults that was well received and ended up on several best-books-for-children lists. Although he published more well-received novels for young adults, it was a play that brought him national stature as an important writer. Produced off-Broadway, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* was a notable success, winning several drama awards and the 1971 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Although generally regarded as a play for adults when it was first produced, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* has since been recommended as a best-of-the-best work for young adults by the American Library Association.

Zindel married on October 25, 1973, and has two children. He presently lives in New York and has become one of the most admired writers for young adults.

Setting

The events of Raptor take place in northeastern Utah, a region long famous for its fossils and fossil hunters. The area is remote enough from civilization that helicopters are needed to fly injured people to a hospital, which even then is hours away.

Uta describes the region beyond her reservation as vast, complex, and almost impenetrable. Into this region come tourists, interested in seeing the digs of paleontologists as well as purchasing goods from the Utes, such as Spider Grandma. The paleontologists come to hunt for the remains of extinct animals, hoping to find a new species or the fossils of a special animal that will make them famous. Hunters also come to the area, seeking bear, deer, and other game. It is a perilous region, abounding with mountains, rock slides, abandoned mines, and unexplored caves. As Raptor begins, it is about to become even more dangerous.



Social Sensitivity

There is much in *Raptor* that could draw socially sensitive commentary, yet the only objections anyone is likely to make to the novel would come from scientists, who may question the natural history of the Utah raptors.

The behavior of the animals seems driven more by the needs of the plot than by instinct. The Utes in the novel are well-drawn people; there is no condescension toward them, and their customs and attitudes are presented matter-of-factly. All in all, a more honest, upfront portrayal of Native Americans would be hard to find in a novel that features sensational events rather than careful scholarship.

In *Raptor*, Zindel repeats something he does in *Loch*: he portrays animals in need of defense from rapacious explorers who would kill them rather than capture them. In *Loch*, the millionaire Cavenger hopes to vindicate his years of work in cryptozoology (hidden [crypto] animal science [zoology]), or the study of hidden animals, a term applied to the studies of the Yeti, the Loch Ness Monster, and other creatures thought by mainstream science to be mythical or extinct. In *Raptor*, Dr. Boneid and Zack both hope to realize fame and riches from the discovery of a still-living species of dinosaur. Zack hopes to reveal a live specimen; Boneid is willing to kill all of the Utah raptors just to have a specimen to show off. Both Cavenger and Boneid are outsized villains, almost insanely determined to have their way, but Cavenger is a much more well-rounded figure. Boneid is a stereotype of the egotistical, cruel academic who is devoted to self-glorification, even if it means taking credit for the work of other people, such as Zack's father. The portrait of Boneid as a naturalist who would kill all the specimens of a newly discovered animal may be somewhat unfair; outsized egos do not necessarily compel researchers to conduct themselves as unprofessionally as Boneid does, but academics may recognize in Boneid the ruthless pursuit of self-promotion that the publish-or-perish environment of universities often stimulates.

More controversial are the actions of Zack and Uta. Their plan to save the Utah raptors involves setting the animals loose in the badlands of northeastern Utah. These are not cute, cuddly creatures, but animals that emerge from their eggs already equipped with big, razorlike teeth and large appetites. Uta says that the beasts would be very hard to find in the rocky, mountainous country, even though they are big. This may be fine for the Utah raptors, but what about other animals and people? The mother raptor chopped up a full-grown mule in seconds! Vacationers, hikers, fossil hunters, rangers, and those who live in the region, such as the Utes, are all at risk, and what the Utah raptors do to captured prey is uncommonly nasty. Furthermore, Boneid is not typical of naturalists. Most would prefer to study the living dinosaurs rather than stuff and mount them. If Zack and Uta were to take advantage of their opportunity to tell researchers of their discovery, authorities would be able to create a scientific plan for the conservation of the animals, but they do not avail themselves of it.

Violence in literature for young readers is a common concern, especially among parents and teachers. *Raptor* has some scenes of frantic violence, yet it is a bit tame compared



to Reef of Death; the violence here is more like that in *The Doom Stone*, in which an extreme act of violence creates menace in the rest of the novel. At the start of *Raptor*, Zack's father is badly mauled by a Utahraptor, and the action rarely lets up after that, but although a house is torn up, violence is not visited upon the characters again until the climax, when Boneid is killed along with a huge dinosaur. Indeed, if the pace were slowed, the violence would seem dubious.

For instance, Boneid's huge rifle should be able to blow apart even the monster that attacks him, but that would put a crimp in his death scene. Much of the action in *Raptor* involves gross-out scenes rather than bodymangling violence. Even when Zack is injected with a paralyzing venom, the scene is played more for its bizarre ickiness than for violence; besides, when the plot demands it, he recovers remarkably quickly. Even so, the scenes in the lair of the Utahraptors are nightmarish, and while pleasing to horror story fans, they may be too much for sensitive younger readers.

Literary Qualities

Raptor is a one-thing-after-another tale, told principally in action. The object of such a narrative is to pile exciting or suspenseful events one on top of another, with few pauses for explanations. Thus, the main character, Zack, is swept up in events that propel him into adventures. Even the pause during which Zack and Uta consult Spider Grandma has its adventurous side—Zack eats a fried grub to prove himself a wolf.

This incident highlights another tried-and-true aspect of adventure writing: the exotic locale. Authors have long known that readers love to be transported to unfamiliar places, especially ones where remarkable events can occur. Homer knew this when he composed the *Odyssey* about three thousand years ago, peopling his remote islands with witches and one-eyed giants, and Zindel uses the technique to very good effect. His main character Zack is used to city life, to movies and hot dogs, and he is very uncomfortable in the environment of Raptor, where neighbors live far apart and none of his familiar amusements are available. Throw in a crazed scientist, giant wolves, a giant catfish, and some man-eating dinosaurs, and his environment becomes otherworldly—a strange and dynamic place where anything can happen.

In that sense, Raptor is a daydream with a plot; it is in the tradition of the adventure tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard. As a daydream, it invites readers to join in its fantasy, to picture themselves as the heroes and heroines of the adventures it describes. Also as a daydream, its events do not have to make much sense or be credible—in fact, incredible escapes from certain death are an advantage to the narrative. Thus, Zack's remarkable recovery from being paralyzed is explicable as a product of the dreamlike story: if he does not recover, the dream ends, and in dreams anyone can recover from anything.



Themes and Characters

The upper ridges of her [the mother raptor's] skull were pronounced like a gorilla's— thrusts of brow overhanging hugely swollen and yellow eyes. Her teeth were bared, thick jagged points that meshed perfectly into a hideous smile. A dark band ran from her head down to the tip of her thick, rigid tail.

In the dark of night, in an isolated house, this is what Zack and Uta see, the mother of the egg they took to Zack's home. The mother raptor is an important character, not a mindless monster, but someone with personality. She is impatient and lethal; she is also decisive, going after Professor Norak the instant she realizes he is near her nest.

She also couples motherly concern for her brood with determination—she tracks her missing egg a long way before finding it in Zack's house. This also shows that she is intelligent—she counted her eggs and had a good enough memory to realize that she was one egg short. In addition, she is very focused on the task at hand; once she has her hatchling, she heads for home, leaving Zack, Uta, and Picasso alive.

Without the mother raptor there would be no story. In addition, there would be no story if Zack, the main character, were not someone who takes the initiative when something needs to be done. Only a vague word from his stricken father is enough to send him on a perilous quest to uncover the mysteries of the living dinosaurs, the "Utahraptors." His friend Uta has a strongly positive view of Zach: "Uta had liked him the second she'd seen his narrow, handsome face last spring. His wolflike eyes had reminded her of photos she'd seen of her own father when he was young." From her point of view, as well as in the view of her uncle, Larry Ghost Coyote, and Spider Grandma, there is much wolf in him, and his dogged pursuit of his quarry even into great danger suggests a wolf on the hunt.

Even so, Zack is not a perfect warrior off to defeat evil. When he seizes the egg his father dropped, his thoughts are of fame and riches. When Honker hatches, it is to him a creature to be exploited, something that will get his father out from under Boneid's thumb and bring wealth to his family. It takes most of the novel for Spider Grandma's admonition to sink in: "All animals are our equals in this world. They have wisdom to share with humans, and you [Zack] should know that." Boneid's rapacious, destructive desire for fame and glory serves as an example of where Zack could be headed in his desire to exploit the Utahraptors, but Zack eventually chooses another path for himself.

His friend Uta is no mere hanger-on— she is the voice of conscience in the novel and a clever, active partner in the adventures. Zindel does not devote much space to descriptions in *Raptor*, but he paints Uta sharply from Zack's point of view: "He [Zack] recognized Uta, a young Indian girl with dark bronze skin and straight black hair that fell to her waist." She suggests to Zack that it would be best to leave the egg alone and to leave the Utahraptors alone: "That's the first rule about wilderness— leave wildlife alone!" Further, she is a reminder that the Utes lived in the region long before the scientists and miners came, and that they have had generations to learn how to adapt



to their environment: "Growing up on my reservation is like one long survival course," she says. This idea is reinforced inside the caves where the Utahraptors make their home. Passages are marked either with flute players and ladders or with threatening images. The flute players and ladders mean safe passage; the threatening images mean dangerous passage. Spider Grandma's remarks imply that the Utes long ago learned of the dangers of the caves and made their marks inside them to help travelers. When Zack ignores the warnings, going against the knowledge of the Utes, he places himself in jeopardy; he is fortunate that levelheaded Uta is close by to save him from his own foolishness.

In this tale of amazing adventure, the villain is almost an afterthought. The Utahraptors provide a plenitude of thrills without the need of a human villain. Even so, Dr. Boneid adds to the difficulties that Zack and Uta face: Boneid is "a death spirit," Zack has heard one of the old Ute Indian workers say about him. "His heart is like death." Dr. Boneid invented his own nickname, "Dr. Bones," because it might appeal to people interested in dinosaurs; he wants to be famous for his work—as well as famous for the work of others that he claims for himself. That includes the discovery of the Utahraptors, an accomplishment more rightfully claimed by Zack's father. To Boneid, paleontology is all about feeding his ego, and his lust for fame overwhelms his academic training and common sense.

He will kill every living Utahraptor in order to have a specimen, even if dead, of the only (once) living dinosaur. He is the embodiment of bad science—motivated not by a love of learning or dedication to knowledge, but by an outsized ego.



Topics for Discussion

1. Does the explicit violence of Raptor make it unsuitable for children? Under what age?
2. How well does Zindel show rather than tell what he means?
3. Does the action in Raptor remind you of any movies you have seen? Which ones?
How is the action in Raptor reminiscent of the action in the movies?
4. What was the most exciting part of the novel? What made it exciting?
5. How well depicted are the Utes in Raptor? Are they more than stereotypes?
6. Is the novel's plot predictable?
7. Why would Zindel include scenes of goo and slime in Raptor?
8. Why would Zack's father put up with Boneid's abuse?
9. How could the Utahraptors remain hidden from humans for as long as they have? Or have they?
10. Why would Zindel remove both Zack's father and Zack's mother from the plot early in the novel?
11. Zack's eyes seem "wolflike" to Uta; he is said to have the spirit of a wolf. Why is it important to the novel that Zack be wolflike?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What dinosaurs are called raptors? Why are they so named?
2. Where in Utah are dinosaur remains to be found? Where would tourists be able to go to see dinosaur digs?
3. What kinds of dinosaurs have been found in Utah? Have any of them been found anywhere else?
4. What is the history of dinosaur fossil hunting in Utah?
5. If you were to mount an expedition to hunt for dinosaur remains in Utah, what would you need? How would you organize the expedition? Who would you need to join you?
6. Is there such a thing as a Utahraptor? If so, who first identified it? What sets it apart from other dinosaurs? When did it live? How much of Zindel's description of Utahraptors is from science and how much did he make up?

338 Raptor 7. Are there mines in northeastern Utah?

What has been mined there? Are there mines like the one in Raptor?

8. What dams are in Utah? Which ones are in the region where the action in Raptor takes place? For what are the dams used?

9. What does the interior of a large dam like the one in Raptor usually look like?

Is the description in Raptor realistic?

10. What federal laws would cover a newly discovered species such as the living Utahraptors? Would they be protected from hunting? Would Dr. Boneid's activities be legal or illegal?

11. Who are the Utes? Where do they live?

Are they accurately depicted in Raptor?

For Further Reference

Kinney, Molly S. *School Library Journal* 44, 10 (October 1998): 148-49. Highly recommends Raptor.

Publishers Weekly (October 19, 1998): 81. A somewhat positive comment on Raptor.

Sherman, Chris. *Booklist* 95, 1 (September 1, 1998): 111-12. Sherman says of Raptor, "Suggest this one to your reluctant readers; they won't be able to put it down."

Related Titles

Raptor is one of a series of thrillers that Zindel has recently written. The others, so far, are Loch (please see separate entry), Reef of Death (please see separate entry), and The Doom Stone (please see separate entry). Like Raptor, these novels feature frightful monsters. Like Raptor's plot, The Doom Stone and Loch plots turn on the fate of their monsters; in Reef of Death, the monster fills a secondary role as one among several sources of chills. Like Raptor, Loch features dinosaurs, the aquatic plesiosaurs. In Loch, three youngsters take on a rapacious research expedition bent on capturing the plesiosaurs dead or alive—more likely dead. In Reef of Death, two young adults and an elderly man take on an illegal mining operation that is disguised as a research ship. The bloody scenes in Reef of Death and Loch equal those in Raptor, providing vivid descriptions of dismemberment and gore. The Doom Stone is more circumspect about gory scenes, relying on a hideous monster and perilous situations for its scary effects. Loch uses a plot device similar to that in Raptor to place its main character in peril; in Loch, the main character, Loch, accompanies his father on an expedition in search of lake monsters, much as Zack has accompanied his father.

Both novels feature expedition leaders who humiliate the boys' fathers; in Loch, the leader is the millionaire publisher Cavenger, a man almost as ruthless as Boneid. Of Loch, Reef of Death, The Doom Stone, and Raptor, Loch has the most complex plot, one into which the characterizations are seamlessly woven; Reef of Death and Raptor feature somewhat more common plots, familiar from numerous monster movies. Of the novels, The Doom Stone and Raptor surpass the others in sheer, gripping suspense, although those who enjoy reading them are likely to enjoy both Loch and Reef of Death as well.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
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Cover Design
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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

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996