

# Reef of Death Short Guide

## Reef of Death by Paul Zindel

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## Overview

Reef of Death is a fast-paced adventure populated by mysterious friends and deadly enemies who confront each other in an exotic location. Teenaged PC McPhee thinks he is in for the usual summer of adventure while working for his Uncle Cliff on another one of the uncle's nutty, doomed schemes to get rich, but he is quickly immersed in a frightful life-or-death battle against an array of forces, human and inhuman: greed, a crazed and homicidal scientist, evil magic, and horrifying monsters of the deep. Danger is found at every turn, and not all of PC's companions will survive their encounter with the reef of death.

## About the Author

Paul Zindel was born in Staten Island, New York, on May 15, 1936.

His father abandoned the family when Zindel was still very young, and this desertion may be the source of the many broken families in his writings.

His family, dogged by poverty, moved frequently in New York. Zindel was diagnosed with tuberculosis when he was fifteen and was 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. 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 led him to write *The Pigman* (1968; see separate entry, Vol. 3), a novel for young adults that was well received and ended up on several best-books-for-children lists.

Although he published other wellreceived 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 had two children. He presently lives in New York and has become one of the most admired of writers for young adults.

## Setting

The action takes place along a remote area of Australian coast where the adjacent waters are filled with ancient coral reefs and a rain forest covers the area inland. The region, though far from population centers, is being developed for tourism. The coastal ocean is treacherous, and swimmers among the reefs need to be aware of the change in tides because they risk being dashed on rocks or reefs if they are in the water at the wrong time. The setting of Reef of Death abounds in more singular hazards such as a giant fish that will eat people alive and a mysterious freighter that may be illegally mining minerals in the reefs.



# Social Sensitivity

Some Australians may be put off by Zindel's uncomplimentary portrait of the state of affairs in their homeland.

Maruul seeks the treasure of her people because they are about to be cheated out of their land, and she makes this sound like a common occurrence in Australia, a nation portrayed as being owned by corporations. "The Aboriginal lands are being stolen from us!" she declares. When PC notes that the mysterious freighter is drilling, which would be illegal, Maruul remarks, "Probably paid off some politician, like everyone else does in this country." Throughout Reef of Death there is a profound distrust of the Australian government and its representatives.

This distrust of the Australian government is tied to a broader suspicion of corporations in general. PC declares: There aren't any more countries in the world, you know. There are only corporations with two kinds of people; the ad guys and the Dr.

Ecenbargers, the ones who call the shots on the whole scam.

They're the mutations—monsters who'd cut our noses off and try to kill us for a buck. There are Ecenbargers all over the place now!

These remarks go unchallenged and are reinforced by events within the novel.

Reef of Death features intense, bloody scenes of violence and torture. In the introductory passages of the novel, Maruul's brother Arnhem is attacked by a monstrous fish that has been mysteriously summoned to eat him.

He is savagely bitten, "The taste of blood filled his mouth. In his final second alive, he saw a long, red eel bursting out of his waist." This is followed by Maruul's observations: Maruul screamed. She saw Arnhem's intestines and legs fall away from him. A shudder racked her body and she began to choke uncontrollably. It had to be a dream, an impossible nightmare!

The creature dove to follow the sinking limbs. It snapped at them as the girl saw Arnhem's torso float up to the surface, saw the white flash of spine and the circle of shredded, raw flesh.

This is grim and grisly and may be more than a sensitive young reader can handle. The novel also features innovative torture scenes that are even more intense than the bloody ones of sudden violence such as the fish's attack. In the most detailed description of torture, a man has his head locked into a box full of water with a respirator over his mouth so that he can breathe. A spider crab is released into the box and it tears out clumps of the man's hair, tears off his ears and eats them, tears at his lips, and so on, eating his face alive. Enough said. The scene illustrates just how very evil Dr.



Ecenbarger is, although it follows the somewhat superfluous convention of the insane-leader story, in which the crazed mastermind torments an ineffective underling as a lesson in terror to his other followers. It never makes any sense in the countless motion pictures that have such scenes, and it makes no more sense here—especially since Ecenbarger already uses a very effective system of terror based on weird mysticism created by the Aboriginal shaman. Ecenbarger, though, takes so much pleasure in inflicting pain that she is plainly insane—and insane actions do not have to make sense. However, this undercuts Zindel's attacks on ruthless corporations, since the cruelties inflicted by Ecenbarger are not the result of cold-hearted corporate planning but are instead the result of one aberrant human being's madness.

## Literary Qualities

Reef of Death is similar to the adventure tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard in that it can be considered a daydream with a plot. As a daydream, it invites readers to participate in its fantasy by picturing themselves as the heroes and heroines of the adventures it describes. Also as a daydream, the events of the novel do not have to be rational, logical, or credible—in fact incredible escapes from certain death are an advantage to the narrative. Thus, as an example, Maruul saves the fatally poisoned PC by shocking him with electric eels!

Would this work in real life? Probably not. But the point of this episode is that Maruul's solution is amazing and ingenious, and it was even foreshadowed by an earlier explanation of how the eels were electric.

The novel may be full of implausibilities and extraordinary characters, but it is nonetheless well constructed.

The structure is tightly organized, with the main plot of the search for the treasure of the Morga tribe neatly tied to subplots such as Dr. Ecenbarger's exploiting of Australian natural resources. The language is also distinguished, offering an excellent prose style and vivid scenes, as when PC, Maruul, and Wally see the opal slab for the first time: "There was an explosion of light and color. Reds, golds, blues, orange. A vast wall of stone that seemed to be burning. Stone aflame.

Pulsing. Dazzling. Blinding."



# Themes and Characters

It is a time-honored convention of the action-and-adventure tale that what the main characters fear the most as the story begins will be what they must face and defeat as the plot progresses. When viewers of *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) find out that Indiana Jones is afraid of snakes they know that he will encounter more snakes than he could ever imagine even in his worst nightmare. Reef of Death is no exception to this hallowed principle of increasing physical fear through psychological terror. PC McPhee (Peter Collins McPhee) has a "deep-seated fear," "The fear of being eaten alive." Readers may be certain that being eaten alive is a probable fate that will confront our hero. Reef of Death thus features a huge, mysterious fish that lives near a reef, one that answers an "EEEEEEEE. EEEE." sound in the water by rising from the depths to gobble up swimmers.

PC is an adventurous American teenager who during his summers has helped his intriguing Uncle Cliff with various get-rich-quick schemes in different parts of the world. Thirty-eight-year-old Uncle Cliff is a man who has faced life's injustices with grace and fortitude, but his purpose in Reef of Death is to act as a plot device.

How does one transfer a teenage boy from the United States to Australia without his parents coming along to restrict his actions? You have an eccentric uncle invite the youth to Australia. Soon after PC arrives down under, Uncle Cliff is eliminated with ruthless convenience so as to leave the young protagonist without family help when exposed to hideous danger.

This provides readers with a hero of about their own age who will always be at the center of the action, even if it is hard on Uncle Cliff.

When PC comes on the scene, Uncle Cliff is helping Maruul, an Aborigine teenager, find the hidden treasure of her tribe. The sixteen-year-old beauty has already experienced the mistreatment of her tribe by those who want its land, the kidnaping of her tribe's shaman, and the return in a box to her village of what seems to be the shaman's still-warm heart. She has also seen, as if these traumas were not enough, her brother Arnhem devoured alive, although she has blotted this last horror out of her memory.

The inevitable strong attraction between handsome PC and lovely Maruul offers a cleansing counterpoint to the brutal events in the novel.

Their relationship reflects the enduring worth of other relationships bound by love and family, and provides a solid thematic context for PC's renewed dedication to his family at the end of the novel.

PC and Maruul are joined in their adventure by Wally Wallygong, who represents that popular paradox in storytelling, the wise fool. Such a figure is traditionally eccentric in behavior, manner, and speech, and though he tends to be funny, sometimes in perplexing and peculiar ways, he also is often craftier than most people and possessed



of great wisdom. One of the best known personifications of the wise fool is Obi-Wan "Ben" Kenobi from the motion picture Star Wars (1979); Kenobi befriends Luke Skywalker, and Wallygong befriends PC and Maruul. Wallygong's ability to laugh in the face of great peril makes him an very appealing, even endearing, figure, and his humorous remarks lighten what could be a bleak narrative. The vile Dr. Ecenbarger is also a familiar figure in action-and-adventure storytelling. She is the crazed scientist whose life of evil is driven by greed and lust to cause pain. Her phony laboratory on her freighter fools the coast guard officers who visit it, but PC, Maruul, and Wallygong realize that is just a sham since none of the "scientists" are actually doing any research. She is their rival for the great slab of fiery opal that is the hidden treasure of the Morga tribe, and her elaborate traps and dog-headed guards are the obstacles the adventurers must overcome. As so often happens to the prime adversary in tales of adventure, she becomes a victim of her own cruelty.

The plot is usually the main attraction in adventure novels, but in Reef of Death themes serve to bind events together and to give readers a consistent perspective on events. The principal theme here is that of the exploitation of national resources for the sake of greed. The adventure would never take place without this theme; the illegal exploitation of the reef is what motivates the killings of Arnhem and Uncle Cliff, and the illegal exploitation of Aboriginal lands is what motivates Maruul to search for her tribe's treasure. It is important to note that Zindel has his characters frequently speak throughout the novel about corporate thievery and the loss of resources that belong to Australia as a whole. These remarks and observations help ground events in a particular context which enables readers to measure both characters and deeds against this theme of illegal exploitation. Evil characters tend to be very exploitative, whereas good ones tend to be very giving. Good characters understand the morality of acquisition; if it does not belong to them they should not take it. This explains why Maruul takes only enough opal to help her tribe and leaves all the rest, as well as why neither PC nor Wallygong take advantage of the situation to lift some opal for themselves. This simple but profoundly important principle is nicely illustrated in Reef of Death.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What was the most exciting part of the novel? What made it exciting?
2. Are any of the novel's characters stereotypes?
3. Is the novel's plot full of surprises, or is it predictable?
4. Is Reef of Death too gory?
5. Reef of Death ends with "He would go home for a while, enjoy them—and show them what a real family should be." What is meant by this? Is it well motivated?
6. What are arukas? Who are the arukas in Reef of Death? What makes them arukas?
7. One chapter is titled "Toward the Dreaming." What does "toward the dreaming" mean? Why is it important?
8. Does Uncle Cliff's demise early in the novel surprise you? Why would Zindel kill him off so early?
9. Do you agree with PC that the world is controlled by corporations?  
Do they supersede the world's countries as PC asserts?
10. What is important about the paintings on the opal slab?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are Australia's laws regarding who may own Aboriginal lands?

How are the rights of Aboriginal tribes protected?

2. What are mining operations off the coast of Australia like? What do they mine?

3. What are Australia's biggest corporations? What businesses are they in?

4. Where in Australia are rain forests found? What plants and animals are found in them?

5. How important is tourism to Australia's economy? How big a part of tourism is devoted to water sports?

6. What are opals? What kinds of opals are there? Where are they found? What are they used for?

7. What are the safety precautions scuba divers must take when diving near reefs?

8. Maruul's tribe has a shaman.

What is the shaman's role in the affairs of an Aboriginal tribe? Does the role vary significantly from tribe to tribe?

9. Compare Dr. Ecenbarger to other mad scientists in novels and motion pictures. Is she a typical mad scientist character?

10. What species of fish live along the coast of Australia? Which are dangerous?

11. Have Aborigines recorded some of their history with paintings like those on the opal slab? If so, what are the paintings like? What do they record?

12. Part of the mystery of the treasure in Reef of Death is a riddle passed down through generations until Maruul puts it to use. How important is the oral tradition to Aboriginal culture? Does the oral tradition include rhymes or songs? What does the oral tradition record?

## For Further Reference

Leslie, Roger. Booklist 94, 13 (March 1, 1998): 1125. A brief, very positive review of Reef of Death.

Publishers Weekly 244, 51 (December 15, 1997): 59. Likes the action in Reef of Death.

Shoemaker, Joel. School Library Journal 44, 3 (March 1998): 226. A tepid review that finds Reef of Death to be shallow.

## Related Titles

Reef of Death is one of a series of thrillers that Zindel has recently been writing, and of particular interest to readers of this book is *Loch* (1994; see separate entry, Vol. 9), another primarily aquatic adventure involving frightening beasts lurking underwater. The plot of *Loch* deals not with conflict among humans as does much of *Reef of Death* but rather turns on the fate of plesiosaurs, hungry survivors of the dinosaur ages. In *Reef of Death* the monster fills a secondary role as one among several sources of chills. In *Loch*, three young people take on a rapacious research expedition bent on capturing the plesiosaurs dead or alive—more likely dead. Its bloody scenes are at least equal to those in *Reef of Death*, and its protagonists are as appealing. *Loch* has the greater literary merit of the two novels, featuring as it does a more complex plot into which the characterizations are fully integrated; *Reef of Death* has a somewhat more common plot that is familiar from numerous monster movies.

# Copyright Information

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