

Saturnalia Short Guide

Saturnalia by Paul Fleischman

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Saturnalia Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
Setting.....	4
Social Sensitivity.....	5
Literary Qualities.....	6
Themes and Characters.....	7
Topics for Discussion.....	8
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	9
For Further Reference.....	10
Related Titles.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Overview

Fleischman addresses the complex issues of living in an imperfect world where one sometimes must accept less than perfect choices and make less than perfect decisions. So William must suffer silently under the tyrannical eye of Mr. Baggot. Offered the opportunity to escape, William reluctantly declines.

He is torn in two directions at once. He loves his Indian heritage, but he also loves his kindly foster family and the learning which Mr. Currie provides him.

Saturnalia is one of those books that makes one wonder what the distinction is between literature for adults and literature for young adults, for the short novel is as complex, subtle, and thoughtful as any book for adults.

Setting

Saturnalia takes place in colonial America, in snowy Boston of December 1681. It is a place of gloom, in which the Mr. Baggots of the world view happiness with suspicion, a world in which the "tithingman" would like to see independence and joy destroyed.

And yet, there are flashes of human goodness in this somber world—of William's family who loves him, of the celebration of Saturnalia—and there are flashes of humor and good fun in the story of poor, pompous Mr. Hogwood. Furthermore, Fleischman's writing has a mythic quality to it that makes the novel transcend the colonial setting and take on a timeless tone—much in the way Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing about colonial America transcends its period.

Social Sensitivity

Although *Saturnalia* is a historical novel, Fleischman, nevertheless, addresses one of the profoundest questions facing modern society. On the one hand, how do we maintain cultural distinctions and differences; and on the other hand, how do we meld all our exciting diversities into a peaceful and harmonious whole?

William wishes to cling to his Indian heritage. He is contemptuous of the harsh Christianity that Mr. Baggot represents. Yet, he recognizes Mr. Currie's virtues and compassion and is grateful for his kindness. He realizes that the coming of the "coatmen," as his Indian kinsman calls the Englishmen, represents the tide of Western Civilization with all of its good qualities as well as its bad ones. To strike a balance, William discovers, is neither easy, simple, nor painless.

Literary Qualities

Fleischman has a poetic, vivid style of writing. Indeed, sections of the novel can be read as if they were pure poetry. He penetrates characters with swift, sure strokes, highlighting their essential qualities—be it nobility, evil, pompousness, slyness, anguish, or pain.

Fleischman has a mythic style of writing that seems at times to place the story in a far-away legendary land.

Horn Book notes that Fleischman writes "as if Mark Twain had edited Nathaniel Hawthorne's books," and that is right on the mark. There is the humor and tall-tale quality of Twain and the otherworldly, unearthly quality of Hawthorne. That Fleischman makes this odd mixture work so successfully and smoothly is a tribute to his artistic skill.



Themes and Characters

Saturnalia is an extremely complicated novel. There are dozens of characters, each with his or her own story to tell. The novel shifts constantly from point of view to point of view, from story to story. Some of the stories have conclusions, while others linger unresolved.

The central conflict of the short novel is that between the clever, independent, and willful Indian boy William and the blindly bigoted Mr. Baggot. Baggot hates all who do not see the world through his opinionated eyes. They clash throughout the novel.

While William has several close calls, he always manages to elude Baggot's grasp. At the conclusion, William has, at least temporarily, bested the inexorable tithingman, but the battle is not over by any means. The issue becomes more complex when William declines the opportunity to flee the harsh Christianity of Boston.

Besides the story of William, there is also the heart-rending tale of Mr.

Speke, who roams the city at night in anguish. He is unable to shove from his mind the death of his daughter and the horrors he has seen. An artist, he finds peace in the lovely vision of a young girl as he carves her likeness for posterity.

Sandwiched between those two dramatic tales is a ludicrous story of Malcolm and the ridiculous Mr. Hogwood's pursuit of the widow Phipp.

Told with broad good humor like a literary Laurel and Hardy, it is a delightful contrast to the more somber stories of the book.

Besides these major stories, Fleischman draws many brief but vivid character sketches. There is Tut who exhibits a telescope; Mr. Trulliber, a nightowl, who relishes the night and the dark streets of Boston; the kindly Mr. Currie and the happy Currie family.

There are the heartless Mr. Rudd and his two helpless servants, the noble Michamauk and the innocent Ninomi.

They remind William that he is also the Indian Weetasket and that he should not forget his Indian heritage.



Topics for Discussion

1. Saturnalia examines the relationships of several different masters and servants—William and Mr. Currie, Malcolm and Mr. Hogwood, Mr. Rudd and his Indian servants, even Madam Phipp and Giles. Some relationships are comical; some are tragic; others are fulfilling. What did Fleischman accomplish by writing about these different situations, rather than just one?

2. Fleischman chose Saturnalia, a pagan Roman holiday, as the focus of his book, rather than a Christian holiday such as Christmas. Why do you suppose he did that?

3. William is torn between a love for and loyalty to his heritage and for his foster family. Do you think the decision he finally makes is realistic? Is it wise? Is it the right one? Is there a right one?

4. Does a historical novel of three hundred years ago have anything to say to us in our modern times?

5. What value do you think Mr. Currie found in celebrating the Roman holiday Saturnalia? What was Fleischman trying to show us?

6. What is the value of holidays?

What are some illustrations of their value?

7. Sometimes a happy ending is not always truthful. Saturnalia shows us that sometimes any decision we make can have its unhappy side as well as its happy. Would the story have been better if William had fled Boston with his Indian relatives?

8. The story of Mr. Speke, the wood carver, illustrates the healing power of art. Is that possible? What are the uses and purpose of art?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Authors often select names for their characters that serve artistic purposes. *Saturnalia* is filled with unusual names. There are Mr. Rudd, Mr. Speke, Mr. Baggot, Madam Phipp, and Mr. Hogwood. Analyze how the author uses names to emphasize certain personal characteristics and traits.

2. Fleischman loves music, and he often attains a music-like quality in his writing. *Saturnalia* has been called fugue-like. What similarities can you find between a fugue and the novel?

3. The author uses a snow storm to illustrate how humans can make mistakes as they feel their way through the snow storm of life. Mr. Trulliber mistakes a stone sundial for a boy in the snow, while missing the real boy entirely. Things are rarely what they seem in this novel. What other examples of misunderstandings and errors can you find, and what do they illustrate?

4. *Saturnalia* is a novel of contrasts.

Among other devices, Fleischman uses the contrast between day and night.

What other contrasts can you find?

And what does Fleischman accomplish with his emphasis on contrasts?

5. Is William betraying his heritage by learning English and English culture? Why or why not?

6. What purpose does the man with the telescope serve in the novel?

Fleischman uses the incident of the man in the moon to show what about human nature?

For Further Reference

Fleischman, Paul. "Sid Fleischman."

Horn Book 63 (July/August 1987): 429-432. Writing about his father's work, Fleischman reveals a pleasant memory of his growing up.

Fleischman, Sid. "Paul Fleischman."

Horn Book 65 (July/August 1989): 452-455. The author's father writes about his son's early apprenticeship and interest in writing as a career.

Holtze, S. H., ed. "Paul Fleischman."

Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. In this autobiographical sketch, Fleischman relates his passion for music and how it has influenced his career as a writer.



Related Titles

Fleischman has found the early years of the founding of America a fruitful time for his ideas and writing. For instance, the epidemic that took place in Philadelphia in 1793 that drove Congress and other luminaries out of the city is the setting for Fleischman's novel *Path of the Pale Horse*. As with William in *Saturnalia*, the young hero of the novel is left with less than perfect choices in his life. Lep wishes to be a doctor, yet his iron belief in science and medicine is questioned when he cannot save those whom he loves dearly. *Graven Images* is also set in that semi-legendary land of early America that Fleischman is fond of. It too contains a courtship of errors that is hilarious in the same way that *Saturnalia* contains the error-riddled courtship of Mr. Hogwood. *Coming-and-Going Men* draws its inspiration from many of the same concerns as *Saturnalia*. Once again it is early in America's life—this time, 1800; once more the setting is New England—Vermont, rather than Boston, and the stories are about servants and masters. Ultimately *Coming-and-Going Men* is a study of the secrets of the heart, of the invisible torments we carry within us and of how some people break free of them and others do not. The stories are eerie and romantic and have the tang of folk tales to them.



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 Baziotès 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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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