The Shell Collector Study Guide

The Shell Collector by Anthony Doerr

Contents

Introduction

Anthony Doerr's "The Shell Collector" is the first story in his collection by this title, which appeared in 2002. The eight stories included depict unusual characters, often in exotic places. In "The Shell Collector," which is set near Lamu, Kenya, the blind protagonist, a man of sixty-three, gains international notoriety after two people dangerously sick with malaria are suddenly healed by being exposed to the poisonous venom of a certain snail in a cone shell. Doerr explores man's relationship to nature and the complications that arise when a reclusive person living a simple life in a remote place is suddenly bombarded by the news media and urban dwellers. Doerr is knowledgeable about nature and the environment, and his scientific interest informs his creative writing. Foreign and scientific terms occur frequently in this story; when they appear in this chapter, they are explained parenthetically.

Author Biography

Anthony Doerr, also known as Tony Doerr, was born October 27, 1973, in Cleveland, Ohio. In high school, he developed an interest in writing, and by the time he was in his mid-twenties, Doerr was submitting his work to magazines for publication. Although his mother was a high school science teacher who encouraged family interest in science, Doerr, who writes a lot about science and the environment, did not pursue formal education in science. He obtained a B.A. in history at Bowdoin College in 1995 and an M.F.A. in writing at Bowling Green State University in 1999. After that, he taught at various institutions, including the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Boise State University, and Princeton University.

Doerr's essays and short stories have appeared in various magazines and journals, including the *Paris Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Zoetrope: All Story*. In addition, some of his stories have been anthologized: for example, "The Shell Collector" was included in *Best American Short Stories 2003*; "The Caretaker" appeared in *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories* (2004); and "The Demilitarized Zone" was included in *The Best Underground Fiction, Volume One* (2006). His book reviews, often connected to science, appeared frequently in the *Boston Globe* during the early 2000s.

In 2004, Doerr's first novel, *About Grace*, appeared. This work tells the story of a man who is haunted by dreams that come true. When he dreams that he in unable to save his infant daughter, Grace, from drowning, he abandons his wife and daughter without offering an explanation. He harbors the hope that doing so will avert the fulfillment of this apparent prophecy. Doerr's *Four Seasons in Rome: On Twins, Insomnia, and the Biggest Funeral in the History of the World* was expected to appear in 2007.

Doerr's short stories collection, *The Shell Collector: Stories*, won the Barnes & Noble Discover Prize, two O. Henry Prizes, the Ohioana Book Award, and the Rome Prize. *About Grace* won the 2005 Ohioana Book Award for Fiction, for the best book of the year. As of 2006, Doerr and his family lived in Boise, Idaho.

Plot Summary

“The Shell Collector” opens at the kibanda (beach house) of a blind shell collector, who is cleaning limpets (a marine mollusk that clings to rocks). A water taxi arrives, bringing two overweight journalists (both named Jim) from a New York tabloid, who offer the shell collector ten thousand dollars for his story. They ask him about his childhood experience hunting caribou, about his losing his eyesight, and about the recent cures, but they do not ask about his son’s death. They ask about cone shells and the strength of their venom. They wonder how many visitors come to the shell collector’s home.

The men stay overnight and are bothered in their sleeping bags by biting red ants called siafu. Next morning the shell collector goes out to the water, led by his German shepherd, Tumaini. The collector walks quickly and with confidence, while the heavy New Yorkers lumber well behind him.

The shell collector hears the muezzin (the English word for the Muslim official who calls the daily hours of prayer to the Islamic faithful) in the nearby town of Lamu and explains that it is Ramadan (the sacred ninth month of the Islamic year celebrated with fasting from dawn to dusk). He collects shells by wading out on a reef a kilometer or more from shore. He handles a number of different kinds of shells and snails, some of which are poisonous. For example, he finds nematocysts, which are poisonous even after they have died. Meanwhile, the journalists use snorkel masks to examine marine life.

The reclusive shell collector is something of a local celebrity now, in part because rumor has spread the news of his having cured a Seattle woman of malaria, who was accidentally stung by a cone shell in his kitchen. The narration turns at this point to the collector’s life up to the time when the two New York journalists arrive.

At the age of nine, the protagonist had hunted sick caribou with his father. He had leaned out a helicopter and culled the herds. But shortly thereafter he developed choroideremia (progressive degeneration of tissue behind the retina in males) and degeneration of the retina; by the time he was twelve, he was blind. At that point, his father took him to Florida to an ophthalmologist, who instead of examining him removed the boy’s shoes and socks and walked the child out the back of his office and onto the beach, introducing him to shell creatures. The introduction to the sea “changed” the boy. He saw the shells more clearly than anything else; feeling them gave him all the details he needed. Immediately, “his world became shells.”

Back in Whitehorse, Canada, the boy learned Braille and read books on shells throughout the coming winter. When he was sixteen, he left home and worked as a crewmember on sailboats traveling in the tropics. He was obsessed with “the geometry of exoskeletons.” He came back to Florida and completed a B.S. in biology and a Ph.D. in malacology (the study of mollusks). After that, he traveled around the equator; visited Fiji, Guam, and the Seychelles; discovered some types of bivalves and several other kinds of shell creatures.

After publishing on these subjects and after having “three Seeing Eye shepherds, and a son named Josh,” the shell collector, then fifty-eight years old, went into retirement, settling near the Lamu Archipelago. He spent his days on the beach and wading out onto the reef, identifying and collecting shells, always fascinated by the “endless variations of design.” He made his living by shipping these collections to a university where they were studied.

In the recent past, at the age of sixty-three, the collector found an incoherent American woman on the beach: Nancy was suffering from sunstroke and malaria. He took her into his kibanda and called Dr. Kabiru for help. When she recovered, Nancy talked about her life, her husband and children in Seattle, her travels to Cairo, and her meeting with a “neo-Buddhist.” The collector and Nancy had a sexual relationship, but they did not understand each other.

Then one day a cone shell got in the kibanda and stung Nancy, causing a catatonic trance and slow heartbeat. Certain cones have tusks “like tiny translucent bayonets.” The sting causes paralysis. The doctor came to attend her and assumed her condition was fatal. Ten hours later she recovered, claiming to be cured of the illness and suddenly feeling “*balanced*,” almost euphoric. She even begged to be stung again. A week later, the doctor returned with the mwadhini (the Swahili word for muezzin) from the largest Lamu mosque and some of his brothers. The mwadhini asked the collector to give his dangerously ill daughter, Seema, the same treatment that saved Nancy. The Muslims insisted that the collector find a cone shell and take it to the sick child and deliberately sting her with its venom. He acquiesced with great reservations; he went to the city and put the cone into her hand, closing the fingers around it. To the collector’s amazement, the child recovered quickly. This event was perceived to be a miracle by townspeople.

Word of the so-called miraculous cure spread “like a drifting cloud of coral eggs, spawning.” A local paper ran an article, and a radio station gave a one-minute spot to the story. This news transformed the hermit’s kibanda into “a kind of pilgrim’s destination.” Sick and mentally ill people lingered around his place. Others carried off his conches, limpets, and Flinder’s vase shells. Some even followed him into the lagoon, many falling and injuring themselves. The collector had a feeling of dread that something really terrible would happen, so he stopped collecting. When reporters came, he advised them to write of the danger of cones and not of these recent miracles. But these people only focused on miracles.

The collector’s thirty-year-old son, Josh, wrote, saying news of the miracles had reached the United States. He also said he had joined the Peace Corps and had taken an assignment located in Uganda but would visit his father first. When he arrived, Josh cleaned up inside the kibanda. He tried to help the people gathered around outside and invited them to dinner, saying his father “can afford it.” The collector stopped collecting shells because he did not want people who followed him into the water to get hurt; instead, he began slipping away on the trails to walk with his dog in new areas inland. He was fearful of thickets, though, and often hurried back. One day on a path he found a cone shell half a kilometer from the sea, an inexplicable event. Increasingly, he found

cones inland, on tree trunks, and in a mango cove. Then he began to doubt himself, wondering if he mistook a stone for a shell, a marine mollusk for a tree snail. The island became “sinister, viperous, paralyzing.” Back at the kibanda, Josh gave away “everything—the rice, the toilet paper, the Vitamin B capsules.” Josh was enthusiastic, altruistic, but naïve. He relished the idea of doing good, but he dismissed his father’s warnings. While Josh busied himself with the little boys, his father sensed an impending disaster.

After three weeks, Josh told his father that U.S. scientists believed cone venom may have medicinal applications for stroke and paralysis victims and that what his father did may help “thousands.” Josh read the collector’s books in Braille and took three mentally ill boys searching for shells. The collector warned them, but they would not believe the shells were dangerous. Then Josh was stung on the hand and died within an hour. The mwadhini arrived to comfort the collector, telling him he would be left alone from now on. The mwadhini compared the collector to a shelled creature, blind, armored, and able to withdraw. One month later the reporters named Jim arrive.

The reporters want the story. They say Nancy has given them “exclusive rights to her story.” The shell collector imagines how his experience will morph into tabloid text: “a dangerous African shell drug, a blind medicine guru with his wolfdog. There for all the world to peer at.” At dusk on the second day, the collector takes the two Jims to Lamu, where the streets are crowded and vendors are selling food and other items. While they are eating kabobs, a teenager sells them some hashish, which they smoke with a water pipe. The teenager tells them: “Tonight Allah determines the course of the world for next year.”

The three men return by taxi after midnight, getting out of the boat into “chest-deep water.” Under the drug’s influence, they try to make their way to shore, and as the Jims admire the phosphorescence of some sea creatures, they ask the collector what it feels like to be stung by a cone shell. The collector takes up a search for a cone shell, turning in circles, becoming disoriented, thinking he will find one and sting the Jims with it. He loses his bearings, indifferently lets his sunglasses slip away, and realizes he has lost his sandals. He finds a cone shell and carries it, he thinks, toward the kibanda, thinking first of killing the Jims with it and then realizing he does not want to hurt them. He heaves the shell back into the sea: “Then, with a clarity . . . that washed over him like a wave, he knew he’d been bitten.” He realizes he is lost in the lagoon and lost in other ways also as the venom pulses through his body: “The stars rolled up over him in their myriad shiverings.”

In the morning, he is found by Seema, the daughter of the mwadhini whom he cured with the cone shell. He is a kilometer from his kibanda, and his shepherd is with him. Seema gets him into her boat and takes her to his beach house. There over the following weeks she cares for him, visiting daily, giving him chai, keeping him warm. Gradually, she engages him in conversation about shells and collecting; as he recovers, she takes him by the wrist and guides him into the shallows.

The final scene takes place a year after the collector is stung. He is wading on the reef, “feeling for shells with his toes.” On a rock nearby, his shepherd sits, and near the dog, Seema sits, “her shoulders free of her wraparound,” and her hair down. She is comforted by being with a person who cannot see and who does “not care anyway.” The collector feels a bullia (a slender, spiraled shell creature) under his foot. It moves blindly along, “dragging the house of its shell.”

Characters

Jims

Described and referred to collectively as “the Jims,” the two New York journalists representing some U.S. tabloid publication are thrust into the natural world of coastal Kenya by their work assignment. Heavy-set, out-of-shape, they lumber clumsily through the environment, ignorant of its risks. They represent a world that exploits the strangeness of an exotic place, distorting it for profit but not seeking to understand it. That they ask only some questions while avoiding other ones suggests that they investigate only up to their set boundaries of preconceived conclusions.

Josh

At the outset of the story, Josh, the idealistic, thirty-year-old son of the shell collector, has died of a cone shell sting. Reared by his mother, Josh joined the Peace Corps and stopped in Kenya to see his father en route to Uganda where he planned to begin his assignment. Described as a “goody-goody,” Josh was sincerely intent on helping and yet dangerously chose to dismiss his father’s warnings about the risks in this environment. With the idealistic optimism of the young and untried, he made the fatal mistake of not heeding the advice of his father about cone shells.

Dr. Kabiru

Dr. Kabiru, the local physician from Lamu, comes by water taxi to the collector’s kibanda when Nancy is sick and when the collector’s son is bitten. In each case, Dr. Kabiru can do nothing to help. His delayed arrival attests to the local obstacles to traveling quickly and delivering immediate medical assistance in emergencies. After the miraculous cures, Dr. Kabiru claims to have conducted research on cone venom and to have anticipated the positive outcomes for both Nancy and Seema.

Muezzin

See Mwadhini

Mwadhini

The mwadhini is the official at the largest mosque in Lamu whose role it is five times each day to call the faithful to prayer. (The English word for his title is muezzin.) He is described as having “a strident, resonant voice,” one that “bore an astonishing faith.” When his daughter, Seema, falls dangerously ill with malaria and the congregation’s

prayers seem to no avail, the mwadhini enlists the help of the shell collector, coercing him to expose Seema to the cone shell venom.

Nancy

A Seattle-born wife and mother, Nancy happened upon the shore near the collector's kibanda, suffering from sunstroke and recurrent malaria. She told the collector that she had a sudden realization back in Seattle that "her life—two kids, a three-story Tudor, an Audi wagon—was not what she wanted." In Cairo, she met a "neo-Buddhist" who introduced her to the value of "inner peace and equilibrium," terms that seemed to focus her quest. Ironically, the venomous sting of a cone shell, that puts her in a catatonic trance, makes Nancy feel "*balanced*" for the first time, completely cured of her recurrent malaria, and even willing to return to Seattle.

Ophthalmologist

The ophthalmologist met the protagonist when he was twelve years old and already blind. Instead of wasting time examining the boy's eyes, the wise doctor removed the child's shoes and socks and led the boy by the hand to the beach. Thus, this doctor ushered the boy into the world of shells that became the protagonist's lifelong obsession.

Seema

The eight-year-old daughter of the mwadhini, Seema is dangerously ill with malignant malaria. Urged by her father as a last resort, the shell collector deliberately encloses a cone shell in her hand, stinging her. Seema recovers within the next twelve hours. As if returning that assistance, Seema discovers the collector on the morning after he is bitten, gets him back to his kibanda, and thereafter cares for him daily.

Shell Collector

The unnamed protagonist of the story was born in Canada and as a boy of nine shot sick caribou while leaning out of his father's helicopter. By the age of twelve, he was blind from a disease of the retina. Introduced to shells, he took on the study of conchology, learned Braille, and became "obsessed over the geometry of exoskeletons." He earned a B.S. in biology and a Ph.D. in malacology (a branch of zoology that studies mollusks). He married, had a son, was divorced, and succeeded in an academic career during which he published widely in his field. Yet he retired at fifty-seven and withdrew to the remote exotic coastal region of Kenya near the island of Lamu. There, by a sequence of accidental events, he observes both the surprising benefit of cone shell venom in treating malaria and the anticipated deadliness of the sting when it takes the life of his son.

Themes

The Effects of Sea Creatures on Humans

“The Shell Collector” is mostly about the effects sea creatures can have on human beings. The blind protagonist is obsessed with marine shell life, a part of the natural world he can investigate through his sense of touch. But when some sea life comes into contact with humans, it can be hurtful, even fatal. The cone shell kills Josh and threatens the life of the collector himself. The people who fall against fire coral are badly cut and burned. It takes knowledge and care to avoid being injured, and the collector avoids being hurt until the night he is drugged with hashish. Nearby in Lamu, people believe the sting of the cone shell which cured Seema may be able to deliver them from various other afflictions: lepers and mentally ill people flock to the collector’s kibanda and take away shells in hopes of a cure. Josh reports that American scientists believe the venom of the cone shell may have medicinal uses. Indeed, the collector makes his living by supplying university researchers with boxes of shells. The story seems to be a qualified recommendation of the cone shell as possibly a medical gift from the sea. The recommendation comes with a warning, though, that carelessness or uninformed handling of sea life may take its toll on unsuspecting humans.

Urban versus Indigenous Life

“The Shell Collector” contrasts urban life with the life lived in nature far removed from twenty-first century western technology and amenities. The protagonist is presumably a Canadian by birth, a highly educated and well-traveled man. But from the age of fifty-eight on, he lives more in the style of indigenous people, in contrast to his son, who grows up in the United States. The collector lives in harmony with nature, aware of its wonders and respectful of its dangers. He is remote even from the closest small town, Lamu, and finds the incursion of motor boats both stressful to him personally and destructive to the vulnerable reefs near his kibanda. The technically developed centers, such as the university to which he sends boxes of shells and the urban center where his son studies current shell research findings, are placed at the periphery of the story. In the foreground is the Lamu Archipelago, the heaving presence of nature, the abundant wildlife, the smallness of the individual human in the vastness of the natural environment. The collector lives in and with nature. He is surprised when Josh wipes up the counters and when Nancy talks loudly and fast about her life in Seattle. The modern world and people from it generate shockwaves in this pristine setting and against the eardrums of this blind man who has developed a simple lifestyle in harmony with nature. The health problems that plague people in such a remote area are acknowledged: if a doctor can be found he may well arrive too late, and poverty and scarcity of supplies leave many in need of medical treatment to suffer alone. But also acknowledged is the naivety and arrogance of urban people who presume uninvited upon such a setting, presumptuously imposing their values on it. It is a mixed problem with perhaps a mixed solution: Nature is often the resource for new medicines, but nature mishandled can

take its toll on human wellbeing. Both urban and remote locations offer knowledge, but the people in them have different sets of assumptions, beliefs, and goals. When people from these different places meet, the clash can be less than productive. Certainly, Josh's fate suggests that negative effect: he arrives newly enlisted into the Peace Corps with altruistic intentions, but because of his inexperience and ignorance, he is snuffed out like a little flame.

The Role of Broadcast and Print Media

"The Shell Collector" dramatizes the way sensationalism affects the choice of subjects covered in the media. It also shows the limitations both of journalists in writing on subjects they do not really understand and of newscasters who can only devote brief attention to a given subject, no matter how complex it is. After both Nancy and Seema recover, rumors spread fast through Kenya of the miracle cures. At first not a big media story, the events are covered by the local radio and newspaper. However, as news spreads further, other journalists arrive. These reporters want to cover only the sensational angle. They ask the shell collector if he has "tried pressing cone shells to his eyes." The story is promoted in a U.S. magazine, *The Humanitarian*, yet humanitarianism had nothing to do with these events. What kind of reportage the Jims do after their visit to the kibanda is left to the reader's imagination; however, when the collector imagines it, he envisions a lurid text that distorts every aspect of what he believes is true. In all of these ways, the story seems to recommend a good dose of skepticism on the part of those who depend on the news media. By contrast, the story recommends the serious investigation and research that the collector engages in as a boy and in his university training. These serious ways of learning increase one's understanding and respect for nature and help prepare a person who wants to investigate natural creatures firsthand.

Style

Setting

“The Shell Collector” is set on the northern shore of Kenya, near the island of Lamu. This setting provides a perfect location for a reclusive shell collector. So remote from western lifestyle, this world offers natural riches to a man who has an endless enthusiasm for sea life and who has recoiled, for whatever reasons, from the academic and urban life he led during his middle years. Nature in this area is not compromised by modern technology, except for the motorboats that threaten the coral reefs, nor is the area much able to benefit from current medical research for people who contract malaria or are otherwise injured by contact with natural phenomena, such as fire coral. Such a place provides a plethora of marine life, shows how people live with nature and are subject to it, and offers a setting in which there is a high likeliness of contracting malaria. The presence of media representatives from Great Britain or the United States would be remarkable in such an out-of-the-way place, and their long trek would suggest their view of the local miracles as an important story. The news of the miracles and the detail Josh provides in his comment that U.S. scientists are “trying to isolate some of the toxins and give them to stroke victims. To combat paralysis,” suggest the story takes place in the 1970s or early 1980s, when research into the medicinal use of cone shell venom was getting underway in the United States.

Characterization

The blindness of the shell collector restricts descriptions of him and others to the senses he does have. The collector hears and feels rather than sees and so description of others in the story often comes through his available senses. For example, that the Jims are not used to the heat comes through to the collector via their handshakes, which are “slick and hot.” When they sleep the first night in their bags, the collector hears “siafu feasting on the big men.” The next day, when they follow behind him to the shore, the collector hears how out of shape the New Yorkers are as they huff “to keep up.” They rely on their eyesight, watching the thorns along the path, but the agile collector feels his way familiarly and confidently. Similarly, when the Muslims arrive, eager to persuade the collector to use the cone shell to heal the mwadhini’s daughter, the collector determines how many of them are present by the distinctive sounds made by their clothing, “these ocean Muslims in their rustling kanzus and squeaking flip-flops.” He also identifies the scent of their professions, “each stinking of his work—gutted perch, fertilizer, hull-tar.” The mwadhini is characterized by his voice, which bears “an astonishing faith, in the slow and beautiful way it trilled sentences, in the way it braided each syllable.” The shock to the collector of having his son living in the kibanda is reported through the sensory details the collector picks up: It was strange “to hear him unzip his huge duffel bags, to come across his Schick razor . . . [hear him] chug papaya juice, scrub pans, wipe down counters.” When the three boys are invited to eat dinner in the kibanda, the collector observes: “they shifted and bobbed in their chairs and clacked

their silverware against the table edge like drummers." Hashish dangerously dulls the collector's senses, turns him around, gets him confused. In this dulled and thus especially vulnerable state, he gets the sting he would have easily avoided if sober. Coming to his senses, feeling the shells beneath his toes again and knowing Seema's presence without seeing her, marks his return to health. Blind, yes, but at the end, the collector is in full command of his other exquisitely trained modes of perception.

In addition to perceiving the world through his available senses, the collector's perceptions are filtered through his formal education and career in North America and his experience in Kenya. He is shaped by his knowledge and understands the world in terms of it. Moreover, in a strange way the collector has come to be like the subject he studies. "A stone fish sting corroded the skin off the sole of the shell collector's own heel, years ago, left the skin smooth and printless." Like a "printless" snail, the collector moves carefully across the lagoon, not disturbing the coral reef, aware of the dangerous creatures around him. Like a shelled creature, the collector is armored and withdrawn, keenly aware in some ways and overall quite self-protective and defensive. The so-called miraculous cures draw strangers to this place. Yet they come also to examine the collector, believing him to be some rare type of nature healer, one who heals with poison. They are drawn, it seems, by something more insidious, something growing "outward from the shell collector himself, the way a shell grows, spiraling upward from the inside, whorling around its inhabitant." In this sense, the collector is tempted to wonder if something in him has drawn Josh to this place, too, some inevitable force that the collector in all his knowledge is unable to forestall and whose tragic outcome the collector with all of his warnings is unable to avoid.

Historical Context

The History of Lamu, Kenya

The Swahili town of Lamu on Lamu Island, just off the northeastern coast of Kenya, is the oldest East African settlement. According to some sources, Arabs arrived on the island as early as the eleventh century, bringing their culture, language, and religion, Islam. During the 1500s, after the Portuguese arrived, the island town became a busy port from which timber, various spices, ivory, and slaves were exported to Europe and the Far East. By the eighteenth century, the export of slaves was the dominant source of income. When slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, the Lamu economy suffered. By the middle of that century, the area became a subject of the sultanate of Zanzibar, which controlled the coastal areas until Kenya attained independence from Britain in 1963. In the late twentieth century, Lamu remained virtually a nineteenth-century place, without most modern technologies. There are no cars on the island, which is populated by about four thousand people. It is strictly Islamic, and visitors to the island are advised to comply with conservative dress codes. English, Swahili, and Arabic are used on Lamu. (There are forty-two native languages in Kenya as a whole.)

Medicinal Uses of Cone Venom

Historically, the meat of cone shells was considered a delicacy. People the world over collected cone shells for food. In the twentieth century, many scuba divers knew they should not pick up cone-shaped shells on the ocean floor since these creatures have a harpoon-like striking apparatus that can inject paralyzing venom into their enemies or prey. Since cone shells are so slow moving, they evolved this mechanism to paralyze their prey, giving them time to ingest the tranquilized victim. If a diver is stung, the venom can paralyze the person’s hand and, in the worst cases, can ultimately cause respiratory paralysis and death. However, in the 1970s, U.S. pharmacological researchers began analyzing the cone shell venom in search of some chemical that might be medically beneficial. Throughout that decade and the two decades following, this research sought to isolate certain chemicals, called conotoxins, in the venom. These chemicals prevent nerve cells from communicating, so they cause paralysis. Medical researchers see conotoxins as having painkilling properties. In the 1980s and 1990s, many medical and pharmacological articles were published about different types of conotoxins and their probable medicinal applications. In 2004, ziconotide, a drug derived from a conotoxin, was approved by the FDA for the treatment of intractable pain. This drug is the synthetic form of the conotoxin derived from the cone snail *Conus magus*. Researchers claimed this drug is a thousand times more potent than morphine. Pharmacological research continued in the early 2000s to produce other synthetic painkillers based on cone shell venom. Ziconotide and similar drugs are injected directly into the spinal cord. They are used to treat chronic pain, epilepsy, seizures, and in some cases schizophrenia. Peptides in the venom work on the gateways that control the action of nerves and muscles. Collectors of shells seek a perfect cone shell for its

beauty, but pharmacology experts know the beauty of this creature lies, ironically, in its deadly venom.

Critical Overview

The Shell Collector: Stories garnered a remarkable number of awards and was similarly well-received by reviewers. Called a “skillful first collection,” in the *New York Times Book Review*, the book was praised in *Library Journal* for its characters that “are limned by the things around them.” *Library Journal* compliments Doerr for his “subtle linguistic self-consciousness [and] fluid and eddying plots.” A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* adds that “Nature, in these eight stories, is mysterious and deadly, a wonder of design and of nearly overwhelming power.” The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes too that this “delicate balance” is sustained in the title story about the discovery of a poisonous snail that can both “kill and . . . effect a rapid recovery from malaria.” The attention that this event brings to the protagonist, the reviewer writes, disrupts “the carefully ordered universe that he has constructed to manage both his blindness and his temperament.” Also commenting on the title story, a reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* points out that the collector’s accidental cure leads him to be “mistaken for a great healer.” The reviewer concludes that Doerr’s collection is “the best new book of short fiction since Andrea Barrett’s *Ship Fever*.”

Similarly impressed was Tim Appelo, writing for *Seattle Weekly*. Appelo begins his review by stating, “It’s easy to see why Anthony Doerr was crowned king of last year’s literary debutants, showered with cash and raves by the NEA, the *Times* of New York, L.A., and Seattle, the O. Henry and New York Public Library Young Lions Awards, and *Entertainment Weekly*.” This is a different brand of writing, Appelo explains: “Instead of trendily transgressive coming-of-age-as-a-cool-kid-like-me tales, [Doerr] gives us a whirlwind tour of the world.” Comparing Doerr to one of the greatest American naturalists, Henry David Thoreau, Appelo asserts that Doerr reels “in nature imagery with the deft hand of a poet and the eye of a mystic.” Appelo criticizes the “plotting” and thinks Doerr can be “too pat,” but he still concludes, “his fiction is an exotic specimen well worth collecting.”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Monahan has a Ph.D. in English and operates an editing service, The Inkwell Works. In the following essay, she explores the central theme of how knowledge is obtained and how it is handled in "The Shell Collector."

Anthony Doerr's "The Shell Collector" explores how people learn about nature and what factors determine how they react to and interpret what they come to know. The story also suggests how print and broadcast news media change information by interpreting it in certain ways and shrinking it to fit their delivery formats, and how preexisting belief systems can impose meaning, too. The events of the story highlight the risks of living in a remote natural environment and how learning can occur through accidental injury. The story raises questions about the price involved in the acquisition of knowledge and who is responsible for its mismanagement. In all, the story addresses how these characters learn about the saltwater shell creatures, what happens as a result of the information they gain, and how that information affects those who acquire it.

The collector's deliberate, conscientious ways of learning are contrasted with the ways information travels and transforms through gossip and news media.

At the center of the story is the unnamed protagonist, who at the age of twelve meets an intuitive ophthalmologist, who knows he can do nothing medically for the boy's blindness and yet who knows enough about shells to introduce the boy to mollusks. Though the child gets only a vague idea of beach and sea, "the blurs that were waves . . . the smudged yolk of sun," he perceives acutely the mouse cowry in his hand, "the sleek egg of its body, the toothy gap of its aperture." So much information comes to the child through handling the shell that he concludes, "He'd never seen anything so clearly in his life." As the world available through sight closes for him, the world of conchology opens brightly. The boy learns Braille and studies books on shells. He adds to this book learning the firsthand experience of working as a sailboat crewmember, traveling through the tropics. During these formative years, "his fingers, his senses . . . obsessed over the geometry of exoskeletons." Blindness heightens the young man's other senses, making him all the more able to perceive through touch and smell because of the one disability. Through the following years, during which he acquires a B.A. in biology and Ph.D. in malacology, the protagonist gains much theoretical knowledge of shell creatures. He has an academic career, his scholarship based on his discoveries of "new species of bivalves, a new family of tusk shells, a new *Nassarius*, a new *Fragum*." After his marriage dissolves, he retires to an extremely remote and shell-rich location on the Kenyan seashore near Lamu, where he lives like a hermit.

The retirement to Kenya and daily work collecting shells presents the protagonist with what he does not know; "malacology only led him downward, to more questions." In this practically pure natural setting, he faces with wonder "the endless variations of design"

and ponders what factors cause different types of shell formation. Studying the diverse, beautiful shell creatures in solitude is a privilege, bringing him face-to-face with the "utter mystery," which elicits in him "a nearly irresistible urge to bow down." The protagonist is slow-paced, diligent, mindful of what he does not know and in awe of nature's complexity. Alone, working quietly and methodically, he is able to maintain an inner equilibrium. However, this peaceful solitary life is disrupted when newcomers arrive.

The collector's deliberate, conscientious ways of learning are contrasted with the ways information travels and transforms through gossip and news media. The sensational report of cone shell venom being used to cure malaria in Lamu spreads through "the daily gossip of coastal Kenyans," who know full well the constant threat of malaria. Always in a rush to get the most recent news, journalists report from a distance and through brief interviews on the newsworthy incidents. The *Daily Nation* covers the occurrences in "a back-page story," and KBC radio devotes a "minute-long . . . spot" to them, which includes "sound bites" of Dr. Kabiru's boasts that he has done research on this new application of cone venom and is "confident" of its efficacy. The actual events suggest a different interpretation of the local doctor's role, however. As the events unfold, Dr. Kabiru concludes that medically he can do nothing to save Nancy and is surprised by her inexplicable recovery after he pronounces her case terminal. The doctor's involvement in the second case amounts only to his acquiescence in bringing the mwadhini to the collector. As he is quoted on the radio, the doctor suggests the credit for these events belongs to him; in the safe after-the-fact glow of the positive outcomes, he claims to have researched the venom and anticipated the cures. In actuality, Nancy's sting was accidental; her recovery a complete surprise. The mwadhini's insistence that his daughter be stung comes out of the father's desperate leap of faith in the face of his daughter's imminent death and Nancy's surprising recovery. But these aspects of the events are not reported in the local news. The third incident regarding the collector's son, Josh, is omitted entirely.

The first round of reportage is picked up by global news services: "A BBC reporter came, and a wonderful-smelling woman from the *International Tribune*." The protagonist advises them and other people who collect around his kibanda that cone venom can injure and kill. Though the journalists are "more interested in miracles than snails," he begs them "to write about the dangers of cones." Still, the media emphasize the cures and give no space to the venom's danger. The protagonist's son, Josh, comments on a U.S. journal, *The Humanitarian*. This publication prints a blurb "about the miracles [the collector has] been working." One accident and one desperate experimentation based on it are transformed in this publication (whose title suggests its slant) as ongoing miraculously effective philanthropic work performed by an altruistic scientist. The truth of the actual events, along with the motives of those involved, is distorted as the report is slanted toward the sensational conclusion. Ironically, as the news media and its readers jump to conclusions about a miracle cure, the collector himself becomes more focused on the risks, worrying about the pilgrims who follow him into the lagoon and who may be stung or fall against the fire coral and be injured. He even worries about his son's safety and that of the boys who go along the shore with him.

Perhaps the most striking contrast to the collector's slow-paced, sustained, and respectful acquisition of knowledge is made by the "two big Jims" sent by a New York tabloid to get the scoop on the miracle cure. These men blunder into the seashore environment of Lamu with no preparation or understanding but well equipped with foregone conclusions. They have ten thousand dollars to offer for an interview and assume the money gives them the right to spend a couple nights in the collector's kibanda and traipse after him out onto the coral reef. The proverbial bulls in a china shop, they lumber and huff after him, irritated by siafu and pricked by thorns.

In contrast to the superficiality of the journalists, the shell collector's knowledge of his environment runs deep. He is at one with it, but always aware of its dangers. As he searches for shells while "the Jims" look on, he thinks of the venom of various nematocysts (jellyfish) and their acute and immediate effect on humans stung by them, how the "weeverfish bite bloated a man's entire right side." He finds a cone shell and lifts it up for the Jims to see. One of the journalists dismisses the cone, after all his "pinkie's bigger," as though size determines strength. The collector informs him: "This animal . . . has twelve kinds of venom in its teeth. It could paralyze you and drown you right here." These city men observe the water through their snorkeling masks, while the collector inches his way, barefoot, finding the undersea world through the immediacy of touch.

The following night, under the dulling intoxication of hashish, the Jims carelessly wonder how the sting of a cone shell feels, and the collector, led astray by them and similarly intoxicated, thinks temporarily that their dying that way would not be such a bad idea. People see the world differently in drug-induced states and while natural beauty comes through, the dulled senses increase human vulnerability. Ironically, the stoned Jims make it back to the kibanda, but the collector becomes disoriented and is stung by the cone he holds while being tempted to satisfy the journalists' dangerous curiosity. The Jims leave with enough of what they came for to write the marketable lurid story; the collector is left to struggle through the effects of the sting.

Nancy's naïve quest into this region, seeking the elusive "inner peace and equilibrium" promoted by some "neo-Buddhist," and Josh's idealistic Peace Corps sojourn to Africa suggest two other ways the unknown world is experienced and interpreted. Seattle-born Nancy, urban, moneyed, with husband and children yet in midlife crisis, wanders along some self-referential mission into Africa, placing herself at risk and quickly acquiring sunstroke and malaria. Josh, even at thirty, is in some ways a child at heart. The Peace Corps appeals to his patronizing altruism, and clouded by both his American culture and a distorted view of his father's work, he comes to Kenya ready to see his father's miraculous deeds. Josh's uninformed enthusiasm, untempered idealism, and careless efforts to help put at risk the boys who follow him about the lagoon and ultimately cost him his life when he foolishly picks up a cone because it is pretty.

Add to these inexperienced Americans, the local Muslims who confront the ravages of malaria, cholera, and other physiological problems, and find that community-wide prayers are unhelpful. The faithful mwadhini is so afraid for his acutely ill daughter, he is willing to jump to the conclusion that if one person can recover from malaria after being

stung by a cone then perhaps his terminally ill daughter can, too. To the extent that these local people are uneducated about their environment and without the necessary medicines to treat injury and disease, they are daily at risk. The irony here is that the blind faith of the mwadhini brings about the lucky cure of his daughter, literally restoring her to health within a day.

What is the shell collector's responsibility in all of this and what is the story's ultimate message? The first question is raised yet left unanswered. As the shell collector goes about his reclusive work, collecting shells and boxing them up to be sent off to universities, events happen which he does not design or control. Nancy and then Josh come to him; one recovers inexplicably by accident, the other gets a lethal sting and dies though he has been warned repeatedly. The shell collector has to wonder if these events inevitably swirl around him like a shell forms, creating out of its own nature an enclosed world to armor the shelled creature inside. It seems to be a spiral of events "at once inevitable and unpredictable." A hermit by choice and profession, the collector wants to be left alone. Yet for awhile all the world finds a way to his door, locals plagued with disease and seeking cure and journalists bent on reading in his crusty, sinewy nature and lifestyle the sensational story that sells yet unwilling to provide space for the cautionary note. Josh's death serves as a warning for those who take time to hear the meaning in this story. One point to Doerr's story is that people in this kind of environment need to tread gently, acquire information objectively without preformed belief or agenda, and take the necessary time to learn. Still, accidents happen for good and for ill. The same substance that can paralyze and kill in a moment may in another application have medical benefits. Science explores, and sometimes accidents confirm that investigation or redirect it.

Source: Melodie Monahan, Critical Essay on "The Shell Collector," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Find or purchase a seashell and write a poem or short story about it in which you characterize the creature that lived within it in terms of its shell.

• Do some research on various mollusks and then make a chart on which you describe their distinctive characteristics. Give a presentation to your class.

• Interview someone who has made a lifelong study of some particular subject, spent years at a particular hobby or at creating a collection, and then write a report about the person, in which you describe the activity, information gained from it, and any recommendations the interviewee has for others who are interested in making collections.

• Visit a nature center or natural museum, see the exhibits and pick up various brochures available that describe programs and activities offered by or sponsored by the center or museum. Bring these brochures and information to your class and enlist others who may be interested in attending a future event. Talk about what you learned during your visit.

What Do I Read Next?

• *About Grace* (2004) is Doerr's first novel, which tells the story of a man whose dreams foretell the future and who attempts to avert the fruition of a dream about the death by drowning of his infant daughter. Readers who enjoy *The Shell Collector: Stories* will enjoy how Doerr handles this Cassandra theme with a twist.

• Caldecott Medal winner *Snowflake Bentley* (2004), by Jacqueline Briggs and illustrated by Mary Azarian, tells the story of the photographer Wilson Bentley, who set out to record snowflakes on film. One of Doerr's science heroes, Bentley had an interest in the fine details of the natural world that is similar to Doerr's own.

• The eight stories in the National Book Award winner *Ship Fever* (1996), by Andrea Barrett, tell stories that braid together a fascination with science and the natural world with an examination of the professional and private lives of people who study them. The stories are set in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In an interview, Doerr remarked that Barrett's writing showed him how to write.

• *The Sea around Us* (1951), by Rachel Carson, introduces readers to marine life and topographical features. This poetic and scientific book inspired an award-winning documentary and stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirty-one weeks.

Further Study

Erdman, Sarah, *Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*, Holt, 2003.

This book gives a portrait of an African village in Ivory Coast, where Sarah Erdman lived for two years. She describes a place where sorcerers still conjure magic and where expected installments of electricity never occur, a place ravaged by AIDS. Erdman was the first Caucasian in the village since the time of the French colonialists.

Lytle, Mark, *Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring and the Rise of the Environmental Movement*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

This biography of Rachel Carson maps out her development as a scientist, her love of the sea, and her growing awareness of the environment and what was needed to protect it, culminating with her landmark, *Silent Spring*, which began the environmental movement in the United States.

Romashko, Sandra D., *The Shell Book: A Complete Guide to Collecting and Identifying*, Windward Publishing, 1992.

This popular book serves as a guide for collectors and helps them identify shells by presenting color photographs of shells found in various shorelines, including the Atlantic Coast, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and the West Indies.

Sill, Cathryn P., *About Mollusks*, Peachtree Publishers, 2005.

Written by an elementary school teacher and intended for young readers, this book describes mollusks, their environment, and their behavior. It is beautifully illustrated by the author’s husband, John Sill.

Thomsen, Moritz, *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle*, University of Washington Press, 2003.

At the age of forty-eight, Thomsen joined the Peace Corps and went to live in Ecuador. His story is touchingly comic and sad by turns and includes wonderful descriptions of the Ecuadorian landscape.

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Doerr, Anthony, “The Shell Collector,” in *The Shell Collector: Stories*, Scribner, 2002, pp. 9–39.

Review of *The Shell Collector: Stories*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. 69, No. 220, November 15, 2001, p. 1566.

Review of *The Shell Collector: Stories*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 127, No. 1, January 2002, p. 156.

Review of *The Shell Collector: Stories*, in *New York Times Book Review*, Vol. 107, No. 10, March 10, 2002, p. 22.

Review of *The Shell Collector: Stories*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 248, No. 48, November 26, 2001, p. 39.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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