

Slaves of Spiegel Short Guide

Slaves of Spiegel by Daniel Pinkwater

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Overview

Slaves of Spiegel is a reminder that reading can be fun, that the act of reading can itself be a pleasure. The Fat Men space pirates who dominate the universe are suffering from the feeling that they have eaten everything worth eating and that there is nothing left for them to accomplish.

Their emperor Sargon—"Sargon the Fortunate, Sargon the Fantastic, Sargon the Fattest of the Fat"—decides to find something new to do, and he declares that the space pirates will search the universe for the greatest fast food chefs, those who create the grossest junk food. The best of the best will be taken to the planet Spiegel for a competition to determine who is the ultimate creator of gross fast food.

Into this bizarre competition are pulled Norman Bleistift and his boss Steve Nickelson, owner of the Magic Moscow restaurant of Hoboken, New Jersey.

About the Author

Daniel Pinkwater looks like many of the main characters of his novels—not particularly tall, chubby, bespectacled, and somewhat odd—and he has made it his career to write about eccentric children and young adults, people who, as in his own case, do not quite fit into school or the ordinary activities of daily life. These offcenter young people usually gravitate to others like themselves to form tiny groups within the larger communities of schools and neighborhoods. These creative oddballs, regardless of their circumstances, always author their own adventures, seeing the action through to the end as the key actors in their personal dramas. Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century author of some terrific thrillers, once asserted *4858 Slaves of Spiegel* that an author's job was to find the romance in everyday life. This means finding the-amazing-in-the-ordinary by those who have eyes to see; it is also a key aspect of Pinkwater's fiction. His protagonists may be ordinary kids, but they uncover amazing places and people, usually right where they live, and they sometimes discover themselves to be also amazing.

Daniel Manus Pinkwater was born on November 15, 1941 in Memphis, Tennessee, to Philip and Fay (nee Hoffman) Pinkwater, a rag collector and a chorus girl. He grew up in Chicago, and his love for that city is evident in fiction such as *The Education of Robert Nifkin*. He seems to know where all the really interesting parts of Chicago are, as well as the best places to hang out. An avid reader as a youngster, particularly of adventure stories, Pinkwater contemplated becoming a writer, eventually rejecting the idea because "Writer's lives are disgusting, and writing is a horrible unhealthy activity". He attended Bard College in New York, decided to become a sculptor, and only turned to writing after four years of art study, graduating in 1964.

Pinkwater began his career as a professional writer almost by accident. He had made some drawings for a book envisioned for children, and he decided that dealing with someone else writing the text would be more annoying than writing the text himself. Even after the publication of this book, *The Terrible Roar* (1970), he still saw himself as a sculptor and illustrator. Nevertheless, he continued to write texts for his illustrations until he reached the point of being pulled so deeply into the creation of stories that he became a full-time writer. To this day he continues to illustrate most of his books.

Pinkwater married Jill Miriam Schultz in 1969, and they live in Hyde Park, New York. Pinkwater has been a commentator since 1987 for *All Things Considered* on National Public Radio; his often hilarious observations have won him a large audience. Although he has occasionally had small exhibitions of his art works, it is his fiction that has won him the most notice.

Lizard Music (1976) was named an American Library Association notable book; *Fat Men from Space* (1977) was a Junior Literary Guild selection; *The Last Guru* (1978; see separate entry, Vol. 9) was named an Outstanding Book by the *New York Times*; and *The Wuggie Norple Story* (1980, illustrated by Tomie de Paola) received a Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association.

Setting

Most of the action takes place on the planet Spiegel: "This is Spiegel the notorious, known on a thousand thousand worlds as the sugar vampire, the grease magnet, and the home of the fat guys." The fair and cooking contest are held in the crater Wimpy (one of many small bits of wordplay in the novel). The planet has only a small permanent population that lives in the trading village Porky; the Fat Men are nearly always off looting other worlds of their sugar and grease. Norman, Steve, and the entire Magic Moscow restaurant are brought to Spiegel where they are paraded before a huge audience of fat people as the prizes of Sargon himself. They find themselves in the middle of a great fair, surrounded by glitter and gorgeous colors, among fat women with huge bouffant hairdos, and fat men in leisure suits and two-tone imitation leather vinyl shoes.

Social Sensitivity

Part of the success of *Slaves of Spiegel* comes from its presentation of aspects of modern society: fast food, plastic, and UFOs. The Fat Men, "whose raids have depleted much of the junk food of the universe," are obsessed with fast food such as french fries and hamburgers; they even call their mighty warships "spaceburgers." There is little direct social criticism involved in the presentation of junk food; Pinkwater merely identifies the modern obsession with fast foods, takes it to an extreme, and has hyperbolic fun with the theme in the process. The presentation of artificial products, on the other hand, is a little more pointed. The space pirates and their wives, exaggerated though they may be, look almost familiar, as if they were someone readers may have seen at the grocery store or in a fast food joint. Imitation leather, imitation fabrics, and imitation food additives are all celebrated by the Fat Men in their hideous shoes, appalling clothes, absurd hairdos, and insane foods. Even so, Norman Bleistift notes that "Of course, the space pirates and creatures were better looking and better dressed than our usual clientele" at the Magic Moscow, "a sort of ice-cream stand and health-food restaurant." Sargon shows himself to be the paragon of artificiality and bad taste. When he presents himself to the public for the fair on Spiegel, "The crowd gasps at the splendor of his polyacrylic finery.

His belt and shoes are of the whitest plastic, and his shirt and necktie are of matching paisley design. Sargon is the handsomest and heaviest of men."

Abductions by space aliens are part of modern popular culture, and *Slaves of Spiegel* has some fun with UFO societies and stories of abductions by UFOs. When Steve reports his experiences, a local flying saucer club responds: First of all, everyone knows that extraterrestrials are little green men with big heads, or shapeless pink things with eyes on stalks.

There has never been any report in the history of flying saucer watching to suggest that beings from another planet are "fat people," as Mr. Nickelson describes them.

Many of our members have been abducted by beings from space, and none of them has reported being wrapped in aluminum foil and reduced to a tiny size.

Our club has always maintained the highest scientific standards.

We must be careful not to discredit the valuable research we have done by endorsing the statements of cranks, loonies, prevaricators, or practical jokers.

No one has ever heard of a planet called Spiegel.

It seems all individuals and groups have biases, and even a flying saucer club can be as close-minded and rigid in its collective dogma as any skeptic can be in holding his or her own doctrines.

Literary Qualities

Slaves of Spiegel, as might be expected from the plot and characters, is not constructed like a typical novel. Its structure is chaotic and lacks smooth narration; it jumps back and forth among several different narrators. The very structure of the book, in which Pinkwater whimsically plays with the standard rules of storytelling, is intended to add to the unconventional delight of reading it. For instance, when he decides to briefly use an omniscient narrator to explain a part of the novel, he begins the chapter with: AN UNNAMED THIRD PERSON WHO KNOWS EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THIS STORY SPEAKS.

Pinkwater uses the device of shifting narrators, as well as the further dislocation of shifting back and forth to different periods of the story, to create a narrative structure that promises surprises at every turn—there is no telling what will happen next or who will be involved.

Themes and Characters

The theme of *Slaves of Spiegel* is junk food. There are not many novels about which one can say that; nor many that feature space chickens, a moon filled with Milky Way candy bars, and people wrapped in aluminum foil and then shrunk for easy storage. In *Slaves of Spiegel*, where the unusual is the norm, one should not expect to discover ordinary characters, and one does not.

This novel, as befits such a surpassingly quirky work, has outsized characters, menacing figures who are the scourges of the cosmos. The Fat Man of Spiegel are pirates, "the feared and hated Fat Men, whose raids have depleted much of the junk food in the universe." Appropriately, they live on a bizarre world of "scorching Spiegelian days and freezing Spiegelian nights": In a far distant corner of the universe, in an unnamed galaxy, in an unimportant solar system, a small untidy planet hurtles through time.

stars, printed in a million languages, tumble across the arid ground. Soft drink cans, of every imaginable shape and size, rattle and click together in the solar wind. Here is a half-eaten taco from the planet Glupso in the Mouse Nebula. Here is a Styrofoam box which once contained a deluxe cheeseburger from Earth.

The pirates themselves are suitably imposing figures, favoring plaid checked jackets and white vinyl shoes.

One can tell the top pirates from the low ones because the low ones have scuffs on their shoes. The pirates also speak in an heroic manner, suited to their dominant status in the universe: "Silence, dog! This is Sargon, known as the merciless, the malevolent, the mean. Speak when you're spoken to, or you'll feel my leatherlike vinyl twotone oxford" (the pirates are paragons of bad taste).

Their leader is the emperor Sargon, "Sargon the Magnificent, Sargon the Merciless, Emperor of Everything." It is he who rules the Fat Men, and he who at a word can send their spaceburgers (their spaceships) from one end of the universe to the other. Sargon has looted junk food throughout the universe in his flagship Cholesterol.

He and his pirates would seem to have everything they could ever want: "Our raids have been successful, and our underground vaults are utterly full of potato pancakes—all of which belong to me by royal right—cheese-burgers, pizzas, cupcakes, and every sort of sugary, starchy, greasy, sticky thing," he declares. His personal wealth in candy bars is impressive. Yet, he is a man of action, not one to enjoy resting on his past accomplishments. After a great pigout brings little satisfaction, he decides to galvanize his followers by sending them on a great quest to find the foremost creator of junk food in the universe.

Things brings us to Norman Bleistift, a youngster who works for Steve Nickelson, owner of the Magic Moscow, a restaurant that features outrageous meals. Pinkwater's achievement with Norman can easily be underestimated because of the low-key way in which he tells his part of the novel's cockeyed narrative, but he adds a special level of comedy to an already very funny book. Whereas the Fat Men are hilarious in their excesses, Norman is a deadpan humorist who is able to calmly explain outrageous events. He notes, for example, that "Steve says it's really lucky for a kid my age to get to visit another planet at all, let alone one on which there is a big fair and a cooking contest." Kidnaped from his bedroom by Fat men in tasteless clothing, wrapped in aluminum foil, shrunk for easy storage, paraded before dignitaries from numerous alien worlds, as well as "Dr.

Kissinger, the reincarnated Attila the Hun, the three stooges, and the ghostly form of Alexander the Great," and plopped down in the middle of a crater with the Magic Moscow restaurant, Norman responds calmly, with admirable self-control, and he labors mightily to help Steve cook for and serve millions of Fat Men in order for Steve to win the contest for the universe's greatest junk food chef. He is wonderful, taking in stride fantastic experiences and relating them matterof-factly, as if every person could look forward to traveling the cosmos, becoming a slave of Spiegel, and serving food to millions of enormous people in Slaves of Spiegel 4861 leisure suits.

Topics for Discussion

1. What is the grossest ice cream treat you have ever seen? How does it compare with the Moron's Delight, the Nuclear Meltdown, and the Day of Wrath? Could Pinkwater have been inspired by a real-life ice cream concoction?

2. Where in your town or city would you go if you wanted to eat something truly unusual? What would you be able to order? How would it compare with the dishes served at the Magic Moscow?

3. What is the appeal of junk food?

What elements do popular junk foods have in common (for example, fat)?

4. What dish would you make to win the contest on Spiegel. What would its ingredients be? How would you mix and prepare them? Let your imagination soar. (This could also be a short writing assignment.)

5. Why would the Flying saucer Club of Hudson County, New Jersey reject Steve's report about his experiences with the space pirates?

6. Pinkwater includes references to other novels he has written. For instance, zitzkisberries and Rolzup are from Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars. Why would he do this? What affect does it have on the story?

7. The organization of *Slaves of Spiegel* is unusual, with strange chapters and shifting points of view. What effect does this have? Does it put you off or is it part of the fun?

8. *Slaves of Spiegel* seems to be a lighthearted celebration of junk food.

Does the subject require a more serious handling than Pinkwater gives it?

Should it be lampooned as it is in the novel?

9. Is it okay for a novel to be written just for the fun of reading it, or does that make the novel too trivial to be worth reading? Is *Slaves of Spiegel* worth reading?

10. Is Pinkwater making fun of fat people?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Are there UFO societies that gather information on UFO sightings and experiences? Who are they and what do they do?

2. Compare Slaves of Spiegel to Attila the Pun. Are their structures similar?

Does one make more sense than the other? Do they make fun of the same topics?

3. What do the space pirates do after they have established who is the greatest junk food chef in the universe?

Write a story that shows what Sargon and the Fat Men decide is their next quest. Try to write in the same style as Slaves of Spiegel.

4. The Magic Moscow serves strange food. Create another bizarre dish for the menu and write a story about what kind of people (or creatures) it attracts and the adventure that follows for Norman and Steve. Try to write in the same style as Slaves of Spiegel.

5. What are the aspects of junk food that may make it bad for people to eat?

Which of these aspects does Pinkwater mention in Slaves of Spiegel? How does he present them?

6. Not everyone thinks that all junk food is bad for people. Some researchers think that some junk foods such as pizza can be nourishing. Who are these researchers? What kinds of junk foods do they think can be good for people? What would make them good?

7. What aspects of popular culture does Pinkwater have fun with in Slaves of Spiegel?

For Further Reference

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Related Titles

Pinkwater's books tend to be highly imaginative, and the adventures his protagonists have are frequently bizarre, but he seems to have taken weirdness to a higher level in *Slaves of Spiegel* than in most of his other works.

In books such as *The Snarkout Boys* and *the Avocado of Death* (1982; see separate entry, Vol 9), events and characters can be very bizarre, but they usually have traditional narrative structures and plots that have an orderly chronological sequence of events. Both novels succeed, in part, because their plots take a normal youngster and introduce him into increasingly bizarre situations until it seems only natural that he has ended up in a world very different from his own.

Alan Mendelsohn, *the Boy from Mars* (1979; see separate entry, Vol 9), also uses this technique of progression from relative normalcy to utter strangeness. The book begins in a boring junior high school, introduces a boy who says he is from Mars, drifts into bookstores where the kids look for comic books, then into mind control devices, then into moving objects with the mind's power, then into folksinging motorcycle gangs, and so on, until Leonard can transport himself from one plane of reality to another and Alan really is a being from Mars.

In *Slaves of Spiegel*, there is no such gradual development; the novel opens with the planet of the Fat Men and their obsession with junk food and then merrily hops around from one funny idea to another, without concern for logic or rational development.

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