

The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn

Short Guide

The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn by John Bellairs

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Overview

Unlike Bellairs's other novels, *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn* does not use the supernatural as part of the plot.

The narrative follows a search by its young hero, Anthony Monday, for a treasure hidden by a long-dead eccentric millionaire. Despite the fact that Anthony is trying to help his family out of financial difficulties, there are some disturbing moral questions involved in the way Anthony goes about seeking the treasure. Bellairs himself calls the novel an "odd book," whose creation was motivated by his desire to write a story that recalled his own family life. Perhaps because of the strong autobiographical element, this story, particularly its plot, is somewhat more uneven than his other novels.

Nevertheless, the novel displays Bellairs's essential strengths. Typically, Bellairs's greatest virtue has been his ability to create young protagonists whose weaknesses and vulnerabilities make them believable. Anthony Monday's constant fretting over his family's financial difficulties, added to his own lack of self-confidence, makes it easy for young readers to identify with him. Yet when Anthony faces personal danger, he manages to call up his courage, confront the peril, and do what must be done.

Bellairs consistently creates "heroes" flawed enough for his young readers to identify with, yet successful enough for them to emulate. In this way his novel offers an effective combination of realism, adventure, and moral value.

About the Author

John Bellairs was born on January 17, 1938, in Marshall, Michigan, a small, picturesque central Michigan town that has endeavored to sustain its heritage by preserving its magnificent nineteenth-century commercial and private buildings. Bellairs, whose father managed a saloon on Marshall's main street, attended the local Catholic school. A short, chubby child, he lacked the athletic ability to join his schoolmates in playground sports and turned instead to reading encyclopedias, history books, and novels. He would later use his childhood experiences as material for his novels. He left Marshall to attend Notre Dame University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1959; he earned a master's degree at the University of Chicago in 1960 and began working on his doctorate. While doing so, he accepted a series of teaching appointments that took him to Minnesota, Illinois, and finally Massachusetts, where he currently resides.

During this time, he began writing imaginative literature. He published a humorous treatment of his childhood Catholicism, titled *St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies*, in 1966. He followed this with a short, fairy-tale satire on scholarship titled *The Pedant and the Shuffly* (1968) and with his first full-length novel, *The Face in the Frost* (1969), a magical tale pitting good wizards against evil sorcerers in a fantasy setting.

These "adult" tales bore the seeds of Bellairs's later young adult tales. In 1973 he published *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*, a novel based in part on his hometown experiences. He transformed his hometown of Marshall into the imaginary town of New Zebedee, Michigan, and created a young hero who (like the young Bellairs himself) is pudgy and non-athletic and feels isolated from his playmates and peers. Nevertheless, the young hero finally exhibits the kind of courage and self-sacrifice that can save family and loved ones. Most of Bellairs's subsequent novels share this combination of an outwardly comic but inwardly courageous young hero, and an emphasis on the value of allegiance to family and friends. Two of his novels, *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* and *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn*, have been adapted as television dramas for the Public Broadcasting System's "Wonderworks" series of children's television dramas.

Setting

Bellairs sets his stories in small towns, often modeled after places where he lived in his youth or during his academic career. His first three novels are set in New Zebedee, clearly modeled after his hometown of Marshall, Michigan. After he moved to Haverhill, Massachusetts, he shifted the locale of his stories to the imaginary New England town of Duston Heights, Massachusetts. Like those other novels, *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn* is set in a small town similar to one Bellairs once lived in. He once held a teaching position at St. Theresa's College in Winona, Minnesota. He sets the action of *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn* in a small town he calls Hoosac, Minnesota.

The action of *The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn* takes place during the 1950s. Bellairs recreates the quality of small-town living as experienced by a young, growing boy. Because his own hometown maintained its links with the past through architectural preservation, Bellairs experienced an atmosphere that blended the comfortable familiarity of a small town with the mysterious suggestiveness that old buildings convey. As a result, the author communicates a combined sense of the familiar and the mysterious in all his stories. Architecture plays an important part in many of them. In this tale, Anthony searches out the hidden treasure within the confines of the town's public library—a building that contains both the warmth of the books Bellairs loved as a child and the mysteriousness of hidden rooms in which dusty tomes and even dustier mysteries might rest for decades.



Social Sensitivity

The effect of parents' worries—and often of their arguments—on their children is an important theme in the novel. Although Anthony's parents are loving, caring individuals, they are clearly unaware of how strongly their worries are being communicated to their son. The negative effect of those concerns might well serve as a warning to parents who do not realize that their supposedly hidden conflicts are sensed by their children.

There is also a moral issue involved in Anthony's search. He has no more right to Alpheus Winterborn's legacy than does his foe, Hugo Philpotts, and both he and Miss Eells do things that border on illegal to gain the fortune. Miss Eells persuades a friendly auctioneer to swing the bidding in Anthony's favor on an antique that contains a clue to the fortune's location, despite the fact that Philpotts is willing to bid higher. Later, Anthony attempts to break into a deserted house in search of the fortune.

Although Bellairs depicts Philpotts as an overbearing, selfish person, he never really confronts the fact that Philpotts has as much, perhaps more, right to the fortune than Anthony. He is foiled only because Miss Eells and Anthony indulge in some dubious tactics. These ethical questions can lead to intriguing discussion possibilities.



Literary Qualities

In all of his work, Bellairs writes from the young person's point of view, describing action, characters, and settings, as that person views them. Additionally, he conveys the young person's reactions to people and situations, and shows the worries and fears young people suffer as they try to resolve their problems. At the same time, Bellairs depicts the kinds of pleasures that make life worth living—the taste of hot chocolate on a cold winter's day; a warm meal served up by a loving parent, grandparent, or special friend; that special radio program that allows a young person's imagination to wander through realms outside his or her hometown.

The author's re-creation of this childhood perspective—with its wonderful warmth and its troublesome fears—is something that all young readers can immediately recognize and that all older readers can remember with fondness.

successfully conveys the sense of worry and inadequacy that sensitive young people like Anthony often feel: Listening to his parents argue made Anthony feel sick to his stomach. He lay there, eyes wide, staring at the dark wall next to his bed. He heard his mother say that if they didn't watch out, they'd all be out in the street . . . He wondered if his family really would go broke someday. He worried a lot about money, and considering what his mother was like, this was not very surprising.

Yet if a youngster's imagination can exaggerate worry, it can also create compensating fantasies: The shelf clock downstairs struck half past twelve. Anthony started to feel drowsy, and as always his mind drifted from worry into daydream.

First he was a diver, stumping across the floor of the ocean in a diving suit, poking among the rotting ribs of a Spanish galleon till he found a chest full of golden coins.

Then he imagined himself sitting at his own kitchen table downstairs.

The table was covered with a heap of gold coins. . . . Now his mother would never have to worry about money again, not ever.

Bellairs's language rarely becomes more sophisticated than his own heroes would normally use. His description of childhood pleasures is simple, yet evocative. For example, when Miss Eells makes tea for Anthony: The kettle started to make aboutto-boil noises. It trembled and rattled and whined, and little wisps of steam came curling out of the spout. . . . They waited for the tea to steep; then Anthony held the strainer as Miss Eells poured it out.

It smelled smoky and tasted strange, but Anthony didn't mind.

He just liked the idea of having tea with Miss Eells. It was a warm, friendly thing to do.



Themes and Characters

In this novel, Bellairs deftly conveys the unhappiness that Anthony Monday feels when he senses that his parents are having financial or personal difficulties, and he captures the torment that a young person can suffer at the hands of cruel schoolmates or unthinking teachers. Anthony enjoys less warmth at home than Bellairs's other young heroes do. His mother, Ginny, continually worries over the family's shaky finances, and Anthony responds by wishing desperately that he could help.

Anthony finds solace in an understanding and sympathetic older person who serves as a surrogate parent. Miss Eells, the somewhat bumbling town librarian, offers Anthony a part-time job at the library and, more importantly, serves as a friend and confidante when his mother cannot give him the assurances he needs.

When Anthony's father suffers a heart attack, Mrs. Monday's sense of the family's financial difficulties intensifies, and Anthony becomes even more desperate to help the family. Anthony discovers clues in the library that indicate that Alpheus Winterborn, Hoosac's deceased eccentric millionaire, may have left behind a hidden treasure. Anthony embarks on a search for the money, only to find that Winterborn's nephew, the local banker Hugo Philpotts, is also looking for it. After a series of adventures and misadventures, both searchers end up at the library within reach of the fortune. But a tremendous storm is threatening Hoosac, and the town is in danger of being flooded. It is finally Anthony's determination to help his family, in combination with Hugo's greed, that decides the fate of the treasure.



Topics for Discussion

1. Compare Anthony's mother, Ginny Monday, with Miss Eells. What is good or bad about Ginny's influence on Anthony? What, if anything, does Miss Eells provide for Anthony that his mother does not?
2. Bellairs makes Anthony's friend a librarian, his enemy a banker. Is he indulging in social stereotypes by doing so? Does the characterization of Miss Eells as a person who spills and breaks things make her more or less endearing to readers? Why?
3. Discuss the ethical issues involved in denying Philpotts the right to buy the mirror. Does Anthony have the right to break into the deserted house? Should the treasure rightfully belong to Philpotts?
4. Discuss the degree to which luck allows Anthony to discover the treasure.

Are there too many coincidences to make the story convincing?

5. Is the ending, with the storm, the flood, and the shaky ladder, too unlikely to be convincing?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In his novels, Bellairs typically uses "substitute parents," such as Miss Eells, who seem to act as better parents than the main character's own parents. Compare Miss Eells and Anthony's parents to real-life parents. What does Bellairs suggest that ideal parents should provide their children?
2. D. H. Lawrence wrote a short story called "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932) that deals with a young boy who is bothered so much by his mother's preoccupation with the family's lack of money that he goes to extraordinary lengths to find a way to bring the family money. Read Lawrence's story; then develop a report comparing it to Bellairs's novel. What do both stories say about the influence parents have on their children and on their children's peace of mind?
3. Is Anthony's desire to help others— not only his parents but also Miss Eells after she is injured—typical of real-life young people? You might want to write a report comparing young people today with young people of Bellairs's and Anthony Monday's era, or with young people of some other era.
4. Anthony thinks that finding money will solve his family's problems. Will money itself normally solve personal problems? Should a person put so much hope into finding a "jackpot," rather than finding a more realistic way of solving a problem?
5. Discuss Anthony's obsession with finding the money. Is it like Philpotts's at some points in the story, or is it wholly determined by his desire to help his family?

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Available through the Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

"Review." *Booklist* 74 (March 1, 1978): 1098. Criticizes weak characterization of Philpotts but finds the story to be "a brisk, full-bodied mystery filled with tantalizing clues and bits of humor."

"Review." *New York Times Book Review* (April 30, 1978): 44. Brief review cites Bellairs's effective combination of humor and suspense.

"Review." *Publisher's Weekly* 213 (February 6, 1978): 102. A very positive short review, which finds this novel to be as successful as Bellairs's first three children's novels.

"Review." *School Library Journal* 24 (May 1978): 84. Finds Hugo Philpotts to be a "perfect villain" and compliments Bellairs for his ability to create "bizarre" plots.



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