There's A Hair in My Dirt!: A Worm's Story Short Guide

There's A Hair in My Dirt!: A Worm's Story by Gary Larson

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Overview

When a worm family sits down to their dinner of dirt, the little worm discovers a hair in his dirt. Father Worm decides to tell him a story to restore his interest in dinner, and in being a worm at all. The story that Father Worm tells sums up more than the adventures of the fair maiden Harriet—it points out complex ecological facts and describes life from a worm's point of view.

About the Author

Best-selling author Gary Larson grew up in Tacoma, Washington, an environmentally lush region. His writing and cartooning show the effects of his interest in biology, though Larson fully acknowledges that he has been influenced by the cartoonists Don Martin of Mad magazine, George Booth of The New Yorker, and most particularly by B. Kliban. A careful reading of Larson's popular cartoons suggests that Gahan Wilson and Edward Gorey might also be credited as influences on Larson's sense of humor, which is sometimes grim or morbid but always odd and offbeat.

Born in Tacoma in 1950, Larson was fascinated by animals. With his older brother Dan's help, he would create swamps in the backyard for pet lizards, frogs, and salamanders. The brothers once built a huge sandy model of the Mojave Desert in the basement, complete with horned toads. The Larson parents, who worked as a Chrysler car dealer and a secretary, were remarkably tolerant of this animal-collecting habit.

According to Doris Larson, Gary's mother, the menagerie included at various times snakes, iguanas, pigeons, a monitor lizard, a small alligator, tarantulas, and a praying mantis. She can laugh now about catching a garter snake as it vanished into the sofa, or even about the day Mr. Larson found his son's eight-foot boa constrictor curled up in the sewing machine. For Mrs. Larson, her youngest son was a nice boy whose drawings of dinosaurs and gorillas were admirable—even when Gary drew so hard that he permanently outlined one dinosaur on the dining-room table.

Larson liked to draw as a child, but never formally studied art. Instead, he became a communications major at Washington State University in Pullman. He was a good student and took every college elective in science: ornithology, entomology, vertebrate zoology, invertebrate zoology, as well as anthropology and archaeology.

After graduation in 1972, Larson played banjo in a musical duo—though he was so shy that he faced away from the audience.

He worked in a music store but found the job so depressing that he quit in 1976 to try drawing. A local magazine did buy half a dozen of his cartoons for ninety dollars.

Larson went to work as an animal cruelty investigator with the Seattle Humane Society. On his way to the job interview, he ran over a dog. While investigating an animal rescue in 1978, he met a reporter for the Seattle Times, who suggested that he try selling his cartoons to the newspaper. "Nature's Way" was the result—a weekly cartoon that Larson drew for the Times. After a year, reader complaints about the subject matter led to the cancellation of his contract. While visiting San Francisco a few months later, in 1980, he brought cartoon samples to the San Francisco Chronicle. When he left, he had a five-year contract for "The Far Side," which became one of the most popular syndicated cartoons in the world.

For fourteen years, Gary Larson produced one-panel cartoons that were syndicated in up to 1,900 newspapers worldwide and collected in best-selling books. Readers would come to his signings and bring his cartoons, cut out from the newspaper, and ask him what they meant. He did not pretend always to have an answer for them; sometimes a cartoon had no higher agenda than being an outlet for doodling when he was bored.

Public appearances are no longer scheduled for Larson since the time he was hit with a pie by a woman in a bunny suit, but his anonymous, nondescript looks allow him to walk into Seattle neighborhood coffee shops without being recognized. He dresses casually in T-shirt, jeans, and running shoes and carries a sketchbook for doodling when he is not working at his drawing table. Sometimes deadlines have kept him working until 3:00 a.m., and other times he stops to play guitar or banjo.

"Maybe it's my blue-collar background, but work meant to me that you come home covered with sweat," he said to one interviewer. "Now I just have to brush away the eraser shavings."

Larson retired his popular cartoon strip on January 1, 1995, citing fatigue and concern that if he continued for many more years, he would "ease into the Graveyard of Mediocre Cartoons." Now he plays jazz guitar and works on writing and cartooning projects. Larson and his wife Toni live in suburban Seattle with their dogs and an assortment of weird collectible objects.

Setting

There are two settings in There's A Hair in My Dirt! Each is detailed with many complex visual elements in the drawings, even though the drawings are done in a rough, amateurish style. The beginning and ending frames for the narrative take place in the worm family's underground home, which is "beneath the floor of a very old forest, nestled in among some nice, rich topsoil."

When Father Worm begins telling a story to his son, he sets that story "in a forest not too far from here."

The forest setting bears a distinct resemblance to the coastal forests near Tacoma, Washington, where Larson grew up, and Seattle, where he lives now. The trees shown are mostly conifers and some hardwoods of a size and age not commonly seen outside the Pacific Northwest. The smaller plants-ferns, ivy, mushrooms, and meadow flowers—are consistent with those that can be found around Puget Sound.

With one exception, the birds, animals, and insects that Larson depicts in this forest setting are reasonable representations of species that can be found in this area, provided that one is willing to accept the notion of a gray squirrel smoking a cigarette and wearing a T-shirt. The one exception is a snake, distinctly patterned to look like a coral snake. There are no such snakes in Washington State.

Social Sensitivity

Larson seems to take particular delight in how his bear characters react to humans.

Reversing the ordinary roles of "hunter" and "prey" is only to be expected. The bears start out with a field guide to humans, grin over a fisherman and several jars of tartar sauce, and wait patiently to see what will emerge from a car that has sunk into a pond. Although there are no references to the bears in the text, they are drawn as supporting characters in the story. By-their presence, the bears provide a context to show that this story is very clearly not told from a human viewpoint.

Other characters interact in ways that show Larson's awareness of how social interactions can affect individuals in their communities. The gray squirrels shown shaking down a timid little red squirrel for his acorns illustrate that we cannot judge characters (and by extension, people) on appearances alone, not until we see how they treat those who are weaker. The Amazon ants shown stealing eggs from other species make it clear that enslavement brings degradation of more than one kind. And if Lumberjack Bob had had an education, he might have harvested the forest responsibly, in a sustainable fashion, rather than end up under a fallen tree.

The details added to the drawings will require either background knowledge or research if the reader is to understand the depth and richness of the scenes. For example, the drawing of the spawning salmon shows them leaping upstream through a clear-cut area, which will reduce the survival rate of their offspring. The significance of this clear-cut may be lost on some readers, but not on all. The annual salmon run is a powerful, elemental image in the minds of people who live in the Pacific Northwest. The facts of this migration may be less well known to people who live elsewhere, but the salmon run is known to almost everyone in the area where Larson lives. Nearly every student has made at least one school trip to a stream of spawning salmon. When Larson shows the salmon swimming upstream through a clear-cut area, he is showing yet another human influence on the plants and animals living in that stream. The influence is unintentional, but that is no excuse.

There is a throwaway line at the end of this page: Father Worm lets slip to his son the fact that earthworms contain both male and female reproductive organs. This one line is reason enough to schedule the study of this book after a health class in which the differences between male and female reproductive organs have been discussed.

Literary Qualities

Gary Larson often uses words that are not in the daily vocabulary of many of his readers. Some students will enjoy looking words up in the dictionary to understand exactly what Larson means. For others, context will shed enough light on what Larson is talking about, and they will skip cheerfully past unfamiliar words to continue enjoying the story.

This is an excellent book for reading aloud in the classroom. Students appreciate the contrast between the juvenile storytelling structure and the ironic commentary on the real motivations of plants and animals.

In this book, the text plainly spells out for the reader the difference between Harriet's perspective on each scene (as it appears on first glance) and the underlying motivations for what is going on. The illustrations also make this difference clear, but more subtly. Harriet never understands what is really going on around her as she walks through the woods near her home, not because she cannot read the words at the bottom of the page, but because she does not pay enough attention to understand what she is seeing. The ants are not carrying their own babies but have stolen them from another anthill. The tortoise that Harriet throws into a marsh has the wrong kind of feet for a swimming turtle. The dragonflies take out mosquitoes with all the grace of fighter jets.

While the text states the unifying theme that "Nature really is red in tooth and claw," as Edward O. Wilson notes in the Foreword, the superficially pretty scenes of meadow, marsh, and forest are clearly meant to be inspected carefully for the telltale signs of rivalry, competition, and general grossness. Larson is a master at depicting the disgusting qualities of slugs with a few simple lines and dots. Readers who do not have the vocabulary to read well can look carefully at the pictures and learn what Harriet does not. As Father Worm tells his offspring, loving nature is not the same thing as understanding it.

What sets There's A Hair in My Dirt! apart from other works by Gary Larson is that he sustains one story for the entire book. Most of his previous works are collections of his one-panel "Far Side" cartoons. Only in The Curse of Madame "C" did he attempt to tell a multi-page story.

Larson's trademark cartoon style is simple black-ink drawings that are often quite rough and unpolished. The colored covers for his cartoon collections, and his prehistoric panoramas in The Pre History of The Far Side, clearly show that Larson can also create pictures that use perspective, depth of field, and a series of characters whose actions imply ongoing activities and interaction. In There's a Hair in My Dirt, he employs these sophisticated drawing techniques in his untutored way, and the results are as accessible and enjoyable for his readers as a note passed in class.

Themes and Characters

Larson has always been willing to personify animals in his cartoons and does so with particular glee when drawing bears.

In this story, and throughout his works in general, bears are recurring characters who try to understand important things about humans. Often, as in this story, the bears are asking two questions: how dangerous are humans, and are they any good to eat?

Larson is always willing to work with the faintly repulsive and, on occasion, the downright repugnant elements of life. Usually he does this by lampooning human behaviors, as in his drawing of a worm dancing with a slimy slug at their high school prom.

Throughout his career, Larson has shown more interest than any other artist or writer has ever shown in depicting insect and invertebrate life in his cartoons. The biggest fans of Larson's cartoons are entomologists, who have honored him for his success at putting bugs 'n' slugs in the public eye by naming a species of butterfly after him (Serratoterga larsoni) as well as a chewing louse found only on owls (Strigiphilus garylarsoni).

Topics for Discussion

1. What are the popular stories known as "urban legends"? How do these stories change over time and in different circumstances? If the urban legend of "The Hook" becomes "The Teenage Worms and the Insane Trout Fisherman," what changes would be rung on other urban legends as told by Larson's worm family?

2. How could Lumberjack Bob have benefited from a better education? What sort of education could he have sought?

What job opportunities would he have had? Would his life have been improved even if he had still been employed in the logging industry? Would learning the history and technology of his craft make Bob a better lumberjack? Is there any reason to encourage laborers to see an education in the arts and sciences?

3. Naturalized gardens are a popular trend.

Discuss the relative merits of xeriscaping and sowing meadow flowers compared with maintaining a conventional lawn of Kentucky bluegrass on a privately owned suburban lot. Do public parks and playgrounds need to maintain green grass playing fields, or should alternatives be considered? What will happen if an increasing number of cities, and Canada as a country, ban the domestic use of herbicides and pesticides?

4. Using Larson's worm family as a model, imagine a conversation among the ants seen by Harriet. What would be the ants' viewpoint on the moments when Harriet's path crosses theirs? What would they be discussing?

5. Discuss ways that composting can be implemented to handle organic garbage for households, neighborhoods, and communities. What are some of the reasons a composting program succeeds or fails? Do you prefer to have a compost system for your own organic garbage?

6. Pest removal is not a simple problem. What kinds of pests do people prefer to remove from their homes and cities? Are there environmentally sensitive ways to deal with all pests? How can we choose the appropriate removal method?

7. Name some examples of protective coloration in lepidoptera (such as viceroy and monarch butterflies) and in other species. How effective is protective coloration for the individual animal? For its species? Are there any comparable human examples, and how would these be identified?

8. "Foreshadowing: a sign of quality entertainment," said the cartoonist Berke Breathed in his own cartoon strip "Bloom County. " Discuss some story elements that are foreshadowed in There's a Hair in My Dirt! How does the representation of some characters change? For instance, Harriet almost steps on a mouse nest, which is later

filled with a family of mice. What do these changes mean to you? Is there significance to all of these foreshadowings?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How are trees harvested from forests? What logging methods are used in different terrains and different countries? Why have laws been passed in Canada and the United States to regulate the logging industry? How can the education of lumberjacks and logging companies contribute to the sustained harvesting of forests? Can the methods used by Merv Wilkinson on Vancouver Island be applied in other places?

2. Find a nurse tree or a rotting log in a park or forest. What kinds of plants and animals can you find on it? Can you estimate how many of each? How long will it take for the nurse tree to decompose completely into soil? How can you tell where a nurse tree used to be before it became compost?

3. How do plants compete with other plant species? What are they competing for? List some examples of competition among plants. What use can humans make of plant competition? How do plants compete with farmers' crops?

4. List a number of introduced species imported into various parts of the world. How was each of these species moved and introduced? What was the immediate result? What was the result after a few years? What has been the longterm result? Have there been any benefits or problems for local species? What has been the human reaction?

5. What is air? How do we study the atmosphere? Was air always like it is today? What has happened to change air since life began? What changes have humans made to the atmosphere?

6. What risks do frogs and toads face? How do frogs and toads survive among predators and other threats? What happens to an area if all the toads and frogs are wiped out? What happens to an area when foreign toads and frogs are introduced, as when the cane toad was imported to Australia?

7. Are baby birds as helpless as they seem? What is a cuckoo? Why do most of the eggs in a nest hatch at about the same time even if they were not laid on the same day? How does a baby bird compete with other fledglings in the nest?

What are some differences between domesticated birds and wild birds? What do migrating birds find in the Arctic tundra that makes it worthwhile to fly all that way to make their nests?

8. What are the worms that live in lawns in cities and towns? List the names and make sketches of the nematodes and annelids that can be easily found in your own area. Are these creatures harmful or helpful to the gardener?

What role do they play in the local ecology? Should they be encouraged to live in our gardens, or discouraged?

Why and how would a gardener do so?

9. What are some of the negative and positive aspects of forest fires? How are forest fires fought, and why? What are ecologists learning from the recent forest fire in Yellowstone National Park?

For Further Reference

Barrientos, Tanya. "'Far Side' Creator's Retirement Underscores Rift in Cartooning Community." Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service (October 10,1994): K2289.

An article discussing reactions to Larson's sabbatical and retirement, which some cartoonists would never consider.

Barry, John. "A Tribute to Cartoonist Gary Larson, Who's Vanishing into 'The Far Side.'" Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service (December 7, 1994): K6576. A cheerful tribute to the cartoonist on the announcement of his retirement, with quotes from his friends and colleagues.

Kelly, James. "All Creatures Weird and Funny; Cartoonist Gary Larson Views Man and Beast from The Far Side." Time 128 (December 1,1986): 86. A brief article on Larson and how he became a popular cartoonist obsessed with biology.

Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service (October 10,1994): K2306. A humorous obituary for "The Far Side" as Larson announces his retirement.

Related Titles/Adaptations

The collected cartoons from Gary Larson's "The Far Side" have never gone out of print and can be found in bookstores and libraries across the continent. A reader who enjoys There's A Hair in My Dirt! is likely to also enjoy any of these collections.

Readers looking for a critical analysis of this book's genre of cautionary tales could try reading Tree and Leaf by J. R. R. Tolkien.

The essay "On Fairy-Stories" identifies the talking animal story as a "beast-fable" and has much to say about the noble art of writing fantasy stories.

Two half-hour television shows based on "The Far Side" were not critically successful and are not available commercially on video.

Adaptions of Larson's work are not confined to movies and collectible toys based on his books but also include greeting cards, T-shirts, calendars, and coffee mugs bearing "The Far Side" cartoons. The most prevalent adaptation of Larson's work, however, is the display of cartoons in the homes and workplaces of readers, like the display of icons of saints on the walls of Orthodox homes. When "The Far Side" was syndicated in 1,900 newspapers, it was common to have a Larson cartoon stuck on to a refrigerator in many homes. But it was impossible to enter the arts and sciences faculty areas of any college or university in North America without finding many "Far Side" cartoons stuck on bulletin boards in hallways, classrooms, laboratories, and offices. Now that Gary Larson cartoons can be found only in his books, pages from the books are being photocopied and displayed.

Readers might enjoy There's A Hair in My Dirt! even more if it is read after a science unit on the spawning run of salmon in West Coast rivers—preferably after October, when the runs occur. Few of the books available on the subject of the salmon run are as entertaining as this work by Larson, though most of them list considerably more facts than does the single page in this book.

It would be interesting to compare books sponsored by the fishing industry or by hydroelectrical utility companies with this book, which attempts to tell the story of the salmon run from an animal's point of view.

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