Townsend's Warbler Short Guide

Townsend's Warbler by Paul Fleischman

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Contents

Townsend's Warbler Short Guide....1
Contents....2
Overview....3
Setting....4
Social Sensitivity....5
Literary Qualities....6
Themes and Characters....7
Topics for Discussion....9
Ideas for Reports and Papers....10
For Further Reference....11
Related Titles....13
Copyright Information....14

Overview

Fleischman is deeply interested in American history, and his books often focus on historical events. He is also interested in the natural history of birds. He combines these interests in Townsend's Warbler. The book describes both the 1834 expedition to the American northwest of Nathaniel Wyeth and the migrations of Sylvia townsendi, better known as Townsend's warbler. The paralleling of two separate journeys, which result in the crossing of paths of the naturalist John Kirk Townsend and the bird that will be named after him, makes for interesting reading. Townsend is driven to travel across North America out of sheer curiosity; the birds are driven by instinct, traveling to where their food will be abundant.

Setting

The birds divide their lives between Central America and the Pacific northwest of North America. Central America is full of insects; the birds feed on them by scraping their beaks along leaves and twigs. Their trilling calls serve to alert others of their species to their presence, ensuring that they spread themselves out away from each other, thus making sure each has enough territory to provide him or her with ample food. Come spring, they gorge themselves, building up their fat for the long journey northward.

Primarily in what are today Oregon and Washington, the birds mate and raise their young. The males display yellow hoods and sing songs that declare their territory and attract females.

The female does most of the work of building a nest and of sitting on the eggs until they hatch, but both female and male provide the hatchlings with food. According to Fleischman, not much is known about the birds' habits.

They spend most of their time high atop trees, making them hard to observe.

Wyeth's expedition begins its arduous journey from Independence, Missouri. There Townsend and Thomas Nuttall met up with Wyeth's group.

The two would serve as naturalists on the expedition, although Townsend's being a physician had to be an added benefit. From Independence, the group rode to Independence Rock in Wyoming, then to the Columbia River. In the Great Plains they ate their fill of buffalo, although the traveling was hard enough that several members of Wyeth's group, including the cook, deserted. Eventually, the group climbed the Rocky Mountains, where they suffered from lack of food and water.

Apparently Nuttall annoyed the other men with his persistent joy at discovering new plants, even while the group endured frustrating hardship.

The Columbia River was a wonderful sight, according to Townsend, who called it "the noblest-looking river I have seen since leaving our Delaware."

Having suffered from great thirst in the dry northwest highlands, Wyeth's men must have been overjoyed :at the sight of a full, powerful river. From there Townsend and Nuttall sail to the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii) and study the unusual plants and animals there; then they return to the Far West.

For them, the results of their journey through strange lands were joyous.

They were delighted and excited over every new species they discovered; they were the first to scientifically describe many plants and animals.

Social Sensitivity

There is little in Townsend's Warbler that could be deemed socially sensitive. Native Americans are scarcely mentioned, and when they are, it is to express Townsend and Nuttall's interest in them. Some readers might disapprove of Townsend killing birds in order to preserve them, but this was how science worked in his day, and many an exhibit at a museum of natural history would be impossible without samples such his. The work he and Nuttall undertake—they conduct their work with care and sensitivity, wasting nothing—is plainly contrasted with the attitudes of those who would simply exploit the natural world.

Literary Qualities

Books reviewers and other readers may be forgiven for having difficulty determining what the intended audience for Townsend's Warbler is. The publisher seems to think that the book is for older children and early young adults. Reviewer Roger Sutton thinks it is best suited to older readers. The book is short, suggesting suitability to early readers, yet its language and ideas are complex, suggesting an audience of mature readers. Older readers will probably miss the characterization that would have made Townsend and Nuttall more fully rounded, thus making their adventures all the more meaningful. Another five to ten pages about them could have made a big difference, enhancing the book for young adults.

On the other hand, the book is about ideas more than it is about people. Its emphasis on the parallels between the journeys of men and birds suggests that human beings are still closely linked to the natural world.

Further, Fleischman's style serves to convey a great deal of information in few words. His prose is not terse; it is too graceful for that. Rather, his wellconstructed sentences pull together images and ideas so that they work in harmony. For instance, he says, "The sky was filled with smoke, the sun hidden. Vast wildfires raged around them, hundreds of square miles in extent, blackening the grass that should have fed the party's horses. The men as well ran low on food." In this brief passage, Fleischman conveys the party's isolation and the vastness of the territory in which they traveled. The fires add suspense and make the scene dreamlike, as if the men are traveling in an unearthly world; this suggests how alien they felt in strange lands far from civilization as they knew it. Further, the events in the landscape are tied to the party's immediate needs: The horses cannot eat. Fleischman then reemphasizes the parallel between the animal world and the human one that he has been developing throughout the book: Like the horses, the men are short of food. Later, Fleischman will describe a horse's collapse from exhaustion, overheating, and thirst, then describe a parallel incident in which a man collapses for the same reasons, and like the horse refuses to travel any farther.

Thus, in a few words, Fleischman conveys the sophisticated idea that human beings, like animals, are dependent on their environment.

Themes and Characters

John Kirk Townsend was a physician and only twenty-four years old when he began his journey with Wyeth's men across the continent. He had been recommended by Thomas Nuttall, who had been impressed with Townsend's abilities as a naturalist. Townsend's specialty was birds; Nuttall's was plants; but each man would discover and describe animal and plant species.

Nuttall was already a seasoned adventurer who had traveled extensively through the American wilderness. His unrelenting joy in his work as a naturalist had earned him the nickname "the fool" during an earlier expedition.

Neither Townsend nor Nuttall is fleshed out as a full character. Their personalities are scarcely touched on, and most of their likes and dislikes are left undescribed. Likewise, their family and social backgrounds are by and large left dark. Although Townsend is frequently quoted, the.quotations say little about him. What is emphasized about each is his dedication to research, which led each passionately to take care with every specimen and to overcome exhaustion and deprivation to gather important scientific information. The others in Wyeth's expedition, including Wyeth himself, are scarcely described at all. They seem to be a hardy lot; most of them lack Townsend's evident concern for the preservation of wildlife. They gun down animals for the pleasure of it. On the other hand, without them Townsend and Nuttall probably would not have survived a trip across America. By the time they reach the Pacific coast, they have been transformed from what they regard as civilized men to what they regard as more natural men. Their clothes have become animal skins, bathing has become a rare luxury, and they have learned to eat off the land.

The unifying theme of Townsend's Warbler is that of travel. The chapters contain parallel descriptions of the Wyeth's party's long journey and the migrations of what will be called Townsend's warblers. The birds manage at least two full migrations during the party's trip. Fleischman emphasizes the hardships in both journeys. The birds must fly roughly the same distance the men must travel, about three thousand miles. They must overcome fatigue and hunger as they work their way along the Pacific coast. Each day, they stop to feed, then they rest until dark. At night they travel, using the stars for guidance. The men use trails and landmarks for guidance, for awhile following a long, shallow river. Like the birds, they must find food as they go, stopping and resting periodically.

Fleischman describes both Townsend and Nuttall as so excited by their work that they overcome fatigue to take great pains to preserve their discoveries, even while the other men seem unable to move. Theirs is a journey of discovery, even though what they discover about themselves is left undescribed. On the other hand, Townsend's Warbler is instructive of how much a human being can endure when his journey has great meaning for him.

For Townsend and Nuttall, the journey brought discoveries that energized their minds and spirits; that meaningful work can make even a difficult life worthwhile is a point Townsend's Warbler makes subtly but well.

An important motif in the book is that of scientific inquiry. That Wyeth even chose to have a couple of naturalists in his expedition suggests that he thought scientific discovery important.

Further, the scientific study of the natural history of the Pacific Northwest in particular would enhance the claim by the United States to territory that Great Britain also claimed. This implies that people thought that understanding the natural world gave people a greater claim to it. This is not an entirely happy idea. Fleischman notes the careless way most of Wyeth's men treated the natural world—looting it for pleasure. The behavior and attitude of Townsend is sharply contrasted to their conduct. Townsend kills with great care, taking only the bird that he needs for a specimen; to his scientific way of thinking, the wanton destruction of animal life serves no one.

Natural history is omnipresent in Townsend's Warbler. Fleischman takes care to place the Townsend's warblers in the context of their natural world.

Townsend and Nuttall are shown trying to gather samples of species in an effort to form a picture of the natural world. Their joy at finding something new is tempered by their commitment to spend the long hours necessary to fully record their findings so that others may learn about the world they are studying. By paralleling human behavior with the behavior of animals, Fleischman suggests not only how dependent human beings are on the natural world, but how important human beings are as part of the natural world.

Topics for Discussion

1. What would you like to know about Townsend and Nuttall that Townsend's Warbler does not tell you?

2. What have you learned about how naturalists studied the environment in the 1830s?

3. Compare the journeys of the birds and Wyeth's expedition. How are they similar? How are they different?

4. What were Wyeth's goals in leading the expedition?

5. How well does Fleischman convey the differences in terrain as Wyeth's expedition crosses through different regions of America?

6. How well does Fleischman convey the differences in terrain as Townsend's warblers travel up and down the west coast?

7. Is Townsend's Warbler a good title for this book? Why or why not?

8. Fleischman has written several historical novels, yet he chose to make Townsend's Warbler strictly nonfiction.

What limitations does nonfiction like this book put on an author that he would not have to deal with if he wrote a historical novel instead?

9. Is the book too short? 10. To whom would you recommend this book?

11. In Townsend's Warbler Fleischman describes a little-known aspect of American history. How does he make it meaningful for his readers?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Before Wyeth's expedition, there was that of Lewis and Clark. Wyeth's expedition even visits spots where Lewis and Clark had been. How were these expeditions similar and how were they different? Were their goals the same? Did the members of the expeditions share any similarities in the way they conducted themselves?

2. How would modern naturalists go about studying new plants and animals? What would they do differently from Townsend and Nuttall?

3. Read Townsend's journals, then write a description of his personality.

4. What were the most important discoveries made by Townsend and Nuttall?

5. After such a long time since Townsend first noted the bird, why has Townsend's warbler not yet been fully studied? What is known about the bird? What is yet to be discovered?

6. Why is studying natural history important?

7. People shoot and kill animals for fun. Why do Fleischman and Townsend dislike this?

8. What other birds besides Townsend's warblers migrate up and down the Pacific coast of Central and North America?

9. Fleischman mentions that Townsend's warblers share their territories with other species of birds. What birds share the same environment with Townsend's warblers? Why are these different species able to live together without using up the food supply?

10. Write a biographical summary of the life of Townsend, that of Nuttall, or that of Wyeth. What were they like?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Fleischman, Paul." In Something About the Author.

Vol. 39. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985.

A brief listing of the highlights of Fleischman's life and career.

Fleischman, Paul. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." Horn Book (July/August 1989): 442-449. Fleischman tells a little about himself and mentions several of his works.

——. "Paul Fleischman." In Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. Edited by S. H. Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 114-116. An autobiographical article that mentions Fleischman's interest in music. This should be read together with "Sound and Sense."

——. "Sound and Sense." Horn Book (September/October 1986): 551-555.

Fleischman tells how he emphasizes the sounds of words when he writes.

Fleischman, Sid. "Paul Fleischman." In Horn Book (July/August 1989): 452455. Sid Fleisehman is Paul's father.

He describes his son as intelligent and curious.

Graustein, Jeannette E. Thomas Nuttall, Naturalist: Explorations in America, 1808-1841. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967. Covers the Wyeth expedition.

MacPhail, Ian. Thomas Nuttall. Lisle, IL: The Morton Arboretum, 1983. (The Sterling Morton Library Bibliographies in Botany and Horticulture, 2.)

A resource for researching Thomas Nuttall.

Nuttall, Thomas. Description and Notices of New or Rare Plants in the Natural Orders Lobeliaceae, Campanulaceae, Vaccinieae, Ericaceae, Collected in a Journey Over the Continent of North America. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1843. (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, Vol. 8).

Nuttall gives an accounting of some of what he discovered on the Wyeth expedition.

Phelan, Carolyn. Review. Booklist 88 (August 1992): 2006. Phelan says that Townsend's Warbler is "unlikely to arouse much interest in young readers."

Sutton, Roger. Review. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 46 (September 1992): 10. Sutton says that the Townsend's Warbler is "a little too terse to be really involving." Even so, he admires Fleischman's account of the birds. He suggests that the book's

audience will be "older kids and adults who can fill out the text's brevity with an understanding of the winds that drive both birds and men."

Townsend, John Kirk. Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River. Introduction by Donald Jackson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978 (first published in 1839). Townsend's own account of the events on the journey with Wyeth's group.

Wyeth, Nathaniel J. The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1831-6: A Record of Two Expeditions for the Occupation of the Oregon Country. Edited by F. G. Young.

Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1899. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1973. Covers the period of Wyeth's expedition to Oregon.

——. The Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth: With the Wyeth Monograph on Pacific Northwest Indians Appended.

Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1969. Includes mention of Wyeth's expedition to the Far West.

Related Titles

Fleischman has written primarily historical fiction. Structurally the most complex, Bull Run describes events leading up to and through the first Battle of Bull Run and its immediate aftermath. Like Bull Run, The Borning Room uses first person narration, but it reveals only at the end that it was primarily a flashback. It tells about life in the late nineteenth century in Ohio.

Path of the Pale Horse tells of an epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. Saturnalia tells of events in Boston in the late seventeenth century. I Am Phoenix and Joyful Noise contain poems about birds and insects. These books reflect Fleischman's deep interest in American history and his interest in natural history, particularly that of birds, and if read in order of publication, show how confident he has become as a stylist, willing to take chances and trusting to the intelligence of his audience.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

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