The Twenty-One Balloons Short Guide

The Twenty-One Balloons by William Pène du Bois

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Overview

In this story, a sixty-six-year-old retired arithmetic teacher decides to take a hot-air balloon trip around the world in an effort to get away from everyone. Halfway around the globe, however, he becomes stranded on a volcanic island that is about to experience a massive eruption. The fantasy of The Twenty-One Balloons is built around an actual historic event—the massive volcanic eruption that destroyed the Pacific island of Krakatoa in 1883. But there the connection with history ends. The Professor discovers that the inhabitants of the island have established a unique, Utopian society, which he seeks to understand. Threatened with destruction, the Professor and the inhabitants must cooperate and discover a way to escape the island before the final explosion.

Humor, social vision, fantasy, and realism combine in this multi-layered narrative. The captivating, period-style illustrations by the author add a further dimension to the reader's pleasure.

About the Author

William Pene du Bois was born on May 9, 1916, in Nutley, New Jersey. He attended Miss Marstow's School in New York and in 1924 moved to France, where he studied at Lycee Hoche in Versailles until 1928 and at Lycee de Nice the following year. In 1930 he returned to New Jersey, where he studied at the Morristown School until 1934. Du Bois served in the U.S. Army from 1941 to 1945. After his discharge from the army, he became a correspondent for Yank magazine and later became an art editor and designer for the Paris Review.

Du Bois has been a prolific author and illustrator of books for children and for young adults. His first work of fiction for children was Elizabeth, the Cow Ghost (1936), followed by Giant Otto (1937), a book about a giant otterhound who befriends the Sphinx in the course of his extraordinary adventures. The many sequels of this book include Otto at the Sea (1958), Otto in Texas (1959), and Otto in Africa (1961). Du Bois has won several book awards, including the New York Herald Tribune Spring Book Festival Award in 1947 and 1956, and the Newbery Medal in 1948 for The Twenty-One Balloons.

Du Bois's fiction displays tremendous variety, but several of his books share a common comic theme—a character's commitment to excessively eccentric behavior. Du Bois has also written a series of books concerning figures who represent the seven deadly sins, all of which are obvious examples of excessive behavior. One such is Porko von Popbutton, who quite literally embodies gluttony, and another is Bandicoot, who is the essence of greed.

Du Bois's talent as an illustrator is also impressive. As well as illustrating all of his own works, he has illustrated books by other authors including Rumer Godden, Isaac Bashevis Singer, George MacDonald, and Jules Verne.

Setting

Although the narrative begins and ends in San Francisco and offers an intervening excursion to New York City, most of the action takes place on Krakatoa, a volcanic island west of Java in the Pacific Ocean. The year is 1883.

The events of the plot are defined by the volcanic setting in many ways. An ominous rumbling permeates the land as the ground constantly shifts and settles. Because of the quivering landscape, people must acquire "mountain legs" to walk steadily, just as a sailor needs "sea legs." Krakatoa also boasts several rich diamond mines that keep the first settlers on the island in spite of the dangers.

In addition to a dramatic, towering volcano, du Bois's Krakatoa also offers many technological wonders, including the House of Marvels, a museum filled with wildly imaginative inventions such as a bed-making machine; and a balloon merry-go-round, consisting of seven boats joined together to form the rim of a wheel, each held aloft by a balloon.

Social Sensitivity

In The Twenty-One Balloons, du Bois pursues an egalitarian ideal. The depiction of the community on Krakatoa is a model of social equality. The families living there have learned to share their resources and responsibilities equally.

They have established a government, arrived at by consensus and honored by all. Their considerable free time is devoted to mutually beneficial projects.

When the Professor arrives in their midst, the families are constructing an amusement park, a shared aim with joint effort and commitment.

The cooperation, resourcefulness, and mutual respect that make the isolated community on Krakatoa a success, also make possible the safe escape of everyone from the island when the disaster finally strikes. The twenty families take enough food in their balloons for all to survive, carefully rationing it and fairly doling it out. They plan to jump to safety by parachute in a systematic way. Although the Professor is sad to see his friends depart, he stays on board the balloon until all have safely landed. He is the last to jump.

When Professor Sherman returns home, he insists on telling his eagerly awaited story first to the Explorers' Club because he has taken a solemn oath of membership. He does not mind in the least keeping the mayor, the president of the United States, and a host of other top officials waiting their turn. He firmly places duty and friendship above social status.

Literary Qualities

The impending volcanic eruption generates tension and suspense. The reader wonders when the explosion will occur and how the islanders will cope.

The events of the story move from the initial account of the Professor's rescue at sea to a lecture he gives before his beloved Western American Explorers' Club, in which he relates his adventures in flashback. By placing the Professor's fantastic adventures within the framework of the lecture, du Bois makes the events of the story seem more realistic.

The blend of fantasy and realism is an effective literary device. The details of life on Krakatoa are realistic, even though the concept of the isolated settlement is fanciful. The episodes involving the farfetched inventions recall Jonathan Swift's island of Laputa in Gulliver's Travels (1726). Like the narrator of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719), the Professor accidentally ends up on a remote island, but in du Bois's tale the survivor is met by a man dressed in formal apparel, waiting to provide him with spats and a fresh collar.

Du Bois's style is lively and rich in concrete details. The author describes the fabulous diamond mines with a striking simile: "If the famous Jonkers' diamond had been tossed on the brilliant floor of the Krakatoa diamond mines, it would have been as impossible to find as a grain of salt in a bag of sugar." At times the sheer accumulation of details creates a humorous effect, as when the narrator lists the improbable array of items that he throws overboard when his balloon is damaged: *I threw chairs, table, books, waterdistilling apparatus, water cans, dishes, garbage containers, cups, saucers, charts, globes, coathangers, clothes—everything noneatable. Clocks, scissors, towels, combs, brushes, soaps, everything I could lay my hands on I threw out through the doors, off the porch, out of the windows.*

Themes and Characters

The intrepid Professor William Waterman Sherman, the narrator-adventurer of the story, sets off alone to encircle the globe in his hot-air balloon. He is a retired arithmetic teacher, who is tired of forty years of spitballs and gum on his chair. He has not, however, lost either his sense of humor or his intellectual curiosity. The Professor is an eccentric individual, although a totally likable one. His desire to maintain solitude aboard his balloon is an eccentric urge that he never loses—at the end of the book he is ready to try once more. With quiet irony the author places the Professor in a society filled with eccentrics, among whom he seems comparatively ordinary. His own curiosity and flair for experimentation are reciprocated by the inventive islanders and their fabulous creations.

When Professor Sherman lands on Krakatoa, he finds himself in the midst of a peculiar Utopian society. The twenty families that live on this island have agreed that their mutual survival depends on two things—keeping their fabulous wealth a secret from the rest of the world, and cooperating totally with one another. They have, therefore, devised an unusual kind of democracy.

Under their constitutional Gourmet Government, each of the families operates a restaurant where everyone else eats on one day of each twenty-day month. In this way everyone makes a good living, and no one has to work more than one day out of twenty.

In their impeccably democratic way, each of the families goes by an alphabetical name. The "A" family owns the "A" restaurant, which specializes in American food; the "F" family manages the French restaurant, and so on. All have learned to enjoy their communal life without competing for wealth. Once a year one islander sells a diamond on the mainland to obtain enough money to pay for the necessities of the community without betraying the island's secret wealth.

Not only have the islanders developed an original form of government, but they also put their ample leisure time to enormously inventive uses. Some of their devices are wildly comical and absurd, while others are wistfully impractical. In addition to the bed-making machine, a wish fulfillment fantasy appealing to every reader, they have also invented electrified furniture that dashes about on wheels with outrageous, if not downright dangerous, results. The Twenty One Balloons stresses the themes of creativity, individuality, eccentricity, and cooperation as the Professor learns the ins and outs of Krakatoan society.

Topics for Discussion

1. What is your first impression of the Professor, who so rudely rebuffs all questions about his remarkable voyage?

Do you find your impression of him changing during the tale?

2. Is the Professor's account of the items he packs in the balloon realistic?

What seems excessive? Is there anything lacking?

3. Why is the Krakatoan who finds the Professor on the beach dressed in such formal clothing?

4. What is the literal and proverbial meaning of the motto (non nove sed nove) on the coat of arms of Krakatoa?

5. What is the purpose of giving everyone an alphabetical name rather than an individual name?

6. What problems might arise in implementing a Gourmet Government in any country?

7. Why does the Professor pretend to be ill enough to stay in bed while telling his story to the club?

8. Do you respect the Professor's decision at the end of the book? Do you think that he will really take another balloon trip around the world?

9. Which of the ingenious inventions of the Krakatoans do you find the most interesting? The most desirable?

10. The Krakatoans land in a variety of places with their parachutes. Is this a satisfactory ending for their part in the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Use an encyclopedia to research the actual volcanic destruction of Krakatoa and compare your findings with the Professor's account of the disaster.

2. Consider the various balloon inventions cited in the book. Which ones are scientifically plausible, and which ones are absurd? Are any of them worth attempting?

3. The children on Krakatoa have duties to perform as well as responsibilities to assume. Discuss the life style of the children on the island. Does it have advantages over that of the typical American child?

4. A substantial portion of the book is presented as the Professor's lecture to the club. How does the author make this lecture convincing and effective?

5. What do the Krakatoans lack? Is their life as complete as they seem to think it is? Are they better off than most people?

6. How does the Professor's long experience as an arithmetic teacher help him to get along in Krakatoa?

For Further Reference

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New York Times (May 4, 1947): 41.

This review emphasizes the deadpan humor that characterizes the novel's text and illustrations.

Du Bois, William Pene. "Newbery Acceptance Paper." Horn Book 24 (JulyAugust 1948): 235-244. Du Bois provides a delightful account of his childhood experiences in France.

Du Bois, Yvonne. "William Pene Du Bois, Boy and Artist." Horn Book 24 (July-August 1948): 245-250. The author's sister offers a remembrance of his boyhood.

Eaton, A. T. "The Twenty-One Balloons."

Christian Science Monitor (December 11, 1947): 6. Focused on the author's combination of science and imagination, this review also praises the distinctive illustrations that add authenticity to the narrative.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. Twentieth-Century Children's Writers. New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1983. A brief biography of du Bois includes listings of his publications for children and the books that he has illustrated.

"The Twenty-One Balloons." Saturday Review of Literature 30 (April 19, 1947). This review stresses the strength and originality of both the text and the author's accompanying drawings, recommending the book for all members of the family.

Related Titles

Several of du Bois's novels deal with lovable eccentrics like Professor Sherman. Peter Graves concerns an intrepid schoolboy who specializes in daring adventures, and his friend Houghton F. Furlong, whose preposterous inventions rival even those in the House of Marvels.

The Alligator Case and The Horse in the Camel Suit deal with an imaginative young would-be detective who encounters bizarrely comic villains. In two of the author's series concerning the seven deadly sins, comically exaggerated traits are the basis of the plot.

In Porko von Popbutton, the appropriately named protagonist is spoofed for his gastronomic excesses, but he actually emerges as a heroic goalie in an important school game. Call Me Bandicoot features a miserly youth whose ingenuity in avoiding spending money results in absurdly funny episodes.

These humorous and imaginative books address aspects of human nature in a sly, satiric vein.

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