

The Unicorn Sonata Short Guide

The Unicorn Sonata by Peter S. Beagle

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Overview

Joey has the gift of music; at age thirteen she can create tunes that enchant listeners.

Perhaps this gift is why she can hear the music of Shei'rah, a land that borders on the earth but cannot be reached by more than a few people. A boy whose horn creates haunting music that entralls the heart is her clue to the mysteries of a world that always plays music and to the solution of a plague of blindness that has swept through the Eldest, the unicorns.

About the Author

Peter Soyer Beagle was born on April 29, 1939, in the Bronx, New York. He attended the University of Pittsburgh, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1959 at a somewhat earlier age than most. He then attended graduate school at Stanford University from 1960 to 1961. On May 8, 1964, he married Enid Elaine Nordeen, and they had three children. They divorced in July 1980. He has lived much of his life in California, and from 1968 to 1969 he was vice-chairman of the Santa Cruz chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. He is now married to the Indian author and photographer Padma Hajmadi, and they are well-known habitués of the environs of Davis, California.

Beagle declares that "I don't write sequels," and he resisted writing another novel about unicorns for many years after the publication of *The Last Unicorn* (1968), the novel that made him famous, even though his publisher urged him to write another.

According to Beagle, his publisher pointedly noted that Beagle had a balloon payment on his home mortgage coming up, and a unicorn book might sell well enough to cover it. Thus, Beagle acquiesced to his publisher's and fans' requests and wrote *The Unicorn Sonata*, but he insisted that it not be a continuation of *The Last Unicorn*, but a tale set in a new world with unicorns unlike those in his earlier novel.



Setting

John Papas's musical instrument repair shop introduces the themes of *The Unicorn Sonata*. John Papas works on instruments while Joey cleans and shelves the stock. She comes to Papas's shop partly out of affection for Papas and partly because he gives her a fatherly attention that she does not experience at home. Papas has recognized Joey's musical gift and takes time out from his labors to instruct her in the rules of musical notation and the complexities of musical composition.

A music shop is an obvious place to try to sell a musical instrument, and thus the strange boy Indigo tries to sell to Papas a horn that can produce mesmerizing, haunting music. Having heard and even composed some of the music, Joey cannot get it out of her mind, and it provides a transition between her earthly world and that of Shei'rah, whose music she follows until she finds its border and crosses into a land of bright colors, menacing animals, and amazing beings.

Shei'rah is an interesting place and a singular achievement in fiction: Beagle defines it in terms of music, in sounds described in words. Everywhere in Shei'rah, music, forests, meadows, and streams all have music, all singing to Joey. Shei'rah is in a dimension apart from that of earth, but it is forever attached to earth; it drifts so that its border with earth occasionally shifts but never parts from earth, perhaps because the Eldest, the unicorns, are linked to humans.

The Eldest can change form from unicorn to human being and back again, something they can do with no other species. This link may also explain why human beings can hear the music of Shei'rah even when outside of Shei'rah.

Social Sensitivity

Although most of Joey's adventures take place in a magical world apart from everyday earthly realities, Beagle does show some of the elements of despair in real life. Old John Papas is lonely, almost a lost soul as he toils in a small shop in a run-down neighborhood. Joey is neglected enough at home that she seeks adult attention elsewhere, at Papas's shop. To Indigo, Joey declares, "And you ought to be scared, because it's a really, really scary world where I live." In fact, one of the novel's most memorable scenes involves the homeless people whom Joey discovers when Indigo takes her to meet a unicorn who has chosen to remain human.

In this scene, a man provides the human/ unicorn with soda and a slice of pizza, puts his arm around her, and declares her to be his woman. Why would a magical unicorn forgo a life in wonderful, musical Shei'rah?

For that arm around her, for the caring and love represented by the slice of pizza. Beagle finds goodness and love in surprising places; amid the loneliness of human experience, as Joey learns, can be found interludes of compassion and comforting.

Joey's grandmother, Abuelita, who lives in a nursing home, is somewhat neglected by her family, even though Joey makes a point of visiting her regularly and often.

She is not abused in the nursing home; in fact, it seems like a nice place. Yet it does not assuage her loneliness. By having Abuelita journey to Shei'rah, Beagle has her personify the ability of music not only to comfort but to fill the spirit. Abuelita is a livelier, happier person while in Shei'rah, and her success in curing the Eldest of their blindness suggests how a person may interact with music—enlarging its scope by responding to it, as a musician brings music to life the way Joey does in Papas's shop, through a passion for the music and through interpretation of it. Thus, Abuelita not only is made whole by the music of Shei'rah but, like a musician, returns the favor by making the music whole again.

Literary Qualities

One of the hallmarks of Beagle's fiction is the strikingly beautiful imagery. "The bright field rang and shimmered under their [the young unicorns'] hooves," for instance, conveys action, a sense of place, and the music of Shei'rah. Note how Beagle combines the sound of "rang" with the visual image of "shimmered." His descriptions of Shei'rah frequently combine sound with picture, making the music of the place visual.

Characters come alive in the descriptions in *The Unicorn Sonata*. For example, the Karkadaans "had a strong, wild smell about them, raw as the lion cages at the zoo." The Karkadaans are the unicorns of the earth, and they smell earthy. The simile "raw as the lion cages at the zoo" indicates that they are wilder than other kinds of unicorns, that there is something untamable about them, that like lions they may find civilization constricting.

Beagle's extraordinary descriptive powers are evident in this passage on the predatory perytons: The perytons looked like deer. They were no larger than household cats, borne on dark, tapering wings like the wings of seabirds, but their bodies were those of common deer, down to the dainty cloven hooves and the males' miniature antlers.

The only differences, apart from size, were that they smelled like rotting meat, and that their gentle, soft-lipped mouths were bulging with sharp teeth too big for them.

Beagle's abundantly rich imagination conjures up many such wondrous sights in *The Unicorn Sonata*.



Themes and Characters

Music powers the plot of *The Unicorn Sonata*. From "Papas Music—Sales and Repairs" to the lingering refrains of the music of Shei'rah, music affects, and sometimes transforms, the lives of the characters. At first, music is remote, hard to find. It runs through Joey's head, but she has difficulty expressing it.

Josephine Angelina Rivera is thirteen years old, a good-hearted person only beginning to understand what she might become as an adult. She and John Papas are drawn to each other by their loneliness and their love of music. Papas, who understands music, recognizes in Joey a talent he himself does not possess, even though Joey herself is unsure of her talent. Whereas Joey is at the beginning of her life, Papas has already had an eventful one, just hinted at by the references to his need in the past to move quickly from one place to another and by the box of gold coins and figures he keeps stashed away against the event that he should need to use the gold as currency when moving quickly again.

That two such people should find each other, even though they are separated by years of experience, is not unusual. That Joey should make herself useful by cleaning up the shop and that Papas should be tired and not able to keep his shop neat by himself is also not unusual; many teenagers are as helpful as Joey. What is unusual is her talent, with which she could capture an audience with her compositions. Also unusual is the clientele attracted to Papas Music: Indigo.

He was slightly made, hardly taller than Joey herself, and looking no older; but there was a fluidity to his movements that made her think of television documentaries about leopards and cheetahs. He wore a blue windbreaker, zipped up even in the Valley heat, drab chino pants, and dilapidated running shoes; and his eyes were the darkest blue she had ever seen—true indigo—set in a heart-shaped face whose skin looked almost transparent. He had a wide mouth, and small, pointed ears—not like Mr. Spock's on television, but definitely pointed all the same. Joey thought he was the most beautiful person she had ever seen, and she was afraid of him.

Here, in brilliantly descriptive language, Beagle presents one of the central mysteries of the novel, the true nature of Indigo. This mystery will grow and change as Indigo's identity becomes apparent and the question becomes one of why he wishes to sell his horn.

The music Joey hears from Indigo's horn lingers in her; when she hears it again, although faintly, she follows the sound until, with one step, she is abruptly off of earth and in a land of amazingly bright colors. Everywhere is "the wild, prankish, frightening, endlessly reassuring music of Shei'rah." The land of Shei'rah is well imagined, with carefully presented details that make it a lively place. The characters Joey meets are also well described. For example: [Ko's] brown, triangular face was human, except for the pointed ears—really pointed, much more so than Indigo's—and the yellow goat eyes with their slit horizontal pupils. His legs were a goat's split-foot legs, just as the book had



shown them, bending backward in a sharp hock where human knees would be. He was naked, his chest, belly, and legs alike covered with coarse dark hair, straight and matted with dirt; but the hair of his head curled so tightly that it all but hid the two small horns peeping through.

Ko is a tiruja, in the terminology of Shei'rah; he is a faun in the terminology of Outworlders (inhabitants of earth).

The leading figures of the musical world of Shei'rah are the Eldest, whose most important figures live in the Sundown Wood.

Entering the red forest felt: like a living thing to Joey from the moment she and Ko passed under the outermost trees. The lowest boughs towered high above her, their shadows warm against her face, and wherever she put her foot down, the forest floor seemed to throb in response. The music of Shei'rah seemed to be pulsing, not only everywhere she turned to look or listen, but in herself as well, speaking deeply to her in the secret place where she made up music of her own.

The Eldest are unicorns, and they fulfill Beagle's desire that they not be like those of The Last Unicorn. They come in three kinds, representing the sky, the sea, and the land.

Appropriately enough for musical beings whose most important qualities are spiritual, the Eldest communicate by thought. "We speak with our minds. You are hearing us in your mind," says Fireez, a unicorn. This way of communicating suits Joey, who seems to enjoy it. "To Joey the laughter of the Eldest always felt like a small warm breeze inside her mind."

"Oh, you should have been born in Shei'rah, Josephine Rivera. It would have spared both of us so much bother," complains Indigo. A sullen remark, but it touches on an important aspect of Joey and her connection to the musical theme. It is as if she had indeed been born in Shei'rah, as if she were one with it. This way, Shei'rah and its many wonders are symbolic, all representing the musical impulse inside of Joey.

Shei'rah is music, it is inspiration, it is the power of music to thrill and terrify, and it is part of Joey's imagination. This may be why Joey cannot make a map of Shei'rah—everything shifts and moves, just as her undisciplined imagination shifts and moves, never quite under control. Her exploration of Shei'rah is thus an exploration of her own creative abilities. In the Outworld, she tries to discipline her imagination, to learn how to give it rich complexity, to order it by writing her music down, and through that order make something others can hear, appreciate, and be enlarged by. Perhaps her efforts to give order to her imaginative experience in Shei'rah and in her mind are necessary precursors to curing the blindness of the Eldest; such an effort is part of Indigo's motivation in selling his horn to help with the cure, and his act is a crucial part of the cure. By the novel's end, music has been a great healer, bringing magic into the life of John Papas (the title "Unicorn Sonata" is his idea), enabling Joey to reach out of her loneliness to others through her compositions, and giving her grandmother a better life.



Topics for Discussion

1. What does Joey mean when she says: "That man under the freeway. The one who was taking care of your friend?"

Who brought her pizza? You were right, that's as good as we get. That's the best we have."

2. Why would a unicorn like Indigo prefer to be human?

3. Will Joey ever return to Shei'rah? 4. What makes the music of Shei'rah special, setting it apart from other kinds of music?

5. What are the three kinds of unicorn?

Why is it significant that they were not made "by the same hand"?

6. Why did Beagle choose Joey to be the main character of The Unicorn Sonata?

Why did he not choose someone like John Papas or Abuelita?

7. The forests and meadows of Shei'rah are very beautiful. Why does Joey sometimes retreat to a stony, desert area?

8. Why would Beagle include deadly, frightening creatures in the otherwise "reassuring" land of Shei'rah?

9. Why would the Eldest "spend more time thinking of humans and marveling at them than you will ever know"?

10. Why would Beagle choose to have a folk remedy cure the Eldest of their blindness?

11. Why would the Eldest tell Joey that unicorns do not die when in fact they do?

12. Why can John Papas not play Indigo's horn even though Joey can?

13. Why is Joey puzzled that anyone born in Shei'rah would want to leave Shei'rah?

14. Why would the denizens of Shei'rah know much more about our world than we know about theirs?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What musical instruments are considered "horns"? How are they played?
2. What is musical notation? How is it written? Where did it come from? How does it affect the composing and the playing of music?
3. Is the nursing home that Abuelita lives in typical of nursing homes? What services do such places typically offer?
4. The border of Shei'rah shifts from place to place, sometimes moving a great distance. Who might find the border and enter Shei'rah? What adventures might they have?
5. Music is a recurring aspect of Beagle's fiction. Trace it through his novels and stories and place its presence in *The Unicorn Sonata* in the context of its appearance in Beagle's other works.
6. John Papas is a mentor for Joey. What is a mentor? In music, what kinds of mentors are there? How are they important in passing on the traditions and skills of music?
7. What elements do C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950; please see separate entry) and *The Unicorn Sonata* have in common? How are these elements used to structure the narrative in each novel?

For Further Reference

Michalson, Karen. "Peter S. Beagle." In *Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction*.

Vol. 1 (Biography and Resources). Edited by Kirk H. Beetz. Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 111-13. Michalson summarizes Beagle's life and popular reception and provides an annotated listing of works about him.

"Peter S. Beagle." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981, pp. 49-54. Lists Beagle's publications and includes an interview with him.

"Peter S. Beagle." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography: 1980 Yearbook*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981, pp. 134-42. Summarizes Beagle's life and the role writing has played in it.

Zahorski, Kenneth J. *Peter Beagle*. Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1988. This introduction to Beagle's life and work includes close readings of *A Fine and Private Place*, *The Last Unicorn*, and *The Folk of the Air*.

Related Titles

The Unicorn Sonata is not directly linked to any of Beagle's other works, and Beagle has deliberately made it very different from *The Last Unicorn*. On the other hand, it is part of a remarkable maturation of his art, part of a period in which he has written works of transcendent beauty, such as *The Innkeeper's Song* (1993; please see separate entry) and *Giant Bones* (1997; please see separate entry). In particular, *The Last Song of Sirit Byar* (1997; please see separate entry) works on musical themes, though from a different angle than in *The Unicorn Sonata*.

Whereas in *The Unicorn Sonata* the music of a world finds its way into individual human hearts, in *The Last Song of Sirit Byar* a single man brings music to his world, transforming lives with it. In both *The Unicorn Sonata* and *The Last Song of Sirit Byar*, music is presented as a language that can speak directly to the soul, enriching it and deepening its understanding of life.



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