

Urn Burial Short Guide

Urn Burial by Robert Westall

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Urn Burial Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

Urn Burial is a fast-paced sciencefiction novel with a strong sense of place and interesting characters, not all of them human. It features several exciting action sequences (ray gun battles in the dark and underground) and a couple of genuinely scary bits (humans forced to serve as experimental animals). The book also deals with a number of topics likely to appeal to young adult readers. The most important of these is the possibility that extraterrestrials may have periodically visited the Earth for centuries, leaving behind artifacts like the burial urn that triggers the story's action, and unwittingly generates such figures out of myth as werewolves and devils, not to mention the Book of Revelations.

The novel also features what might be called limited pacifism. Unlike other Quaker science fiction writers such as Joan Slonczewski and Judith Moffett, who appear to argue that it is never proper to take the life of another intelligent being, Westall limits his prohibition against killing to doing so within ones own species. The catlike Fefethil who guard the Earth from harm by the doglike Wawaka, absolutely prohibit the killing of their own kind, and the single greatest reason why they look down on apes (as they call us) is that we do kill our own species. The Fefethil, however, although we are told that they value all life, will grudgingly kill representatives of other intelligent races when they deem it necessary to their interests or those of Merethon's children, "the highest race in the universe," whom they apparently serve. In the distant past, for example, they apparently wiped out virtually an entire intelligent species, the demonic Attock, who are, we are told, almost the personification of all that is evil in the universe.

Although the Fefethil have protected Earth from attack by both the Wawaka and the few remaining Attock, they are hardly our allies. They look down on us apes, both because of our record of self-slaughter and because we have badly polluted our planet. To them we are, at best, semi-intelligent. It is obvious that they would be entirely willing to wipe us out too if our species ever became a threat to other, more civilized lifeforms.

About the Author

Born in Tynemouth, Northumberland in the north of England, on October 7, 1929, Robert Westall had a happy, secure childhood. His father, the foreman-engineer of a gasworks and an enormously competent human being, was the major formative influence on his life and Westall wrote *Urn Burial* 4197 about him with affection in his first novel, *The Machine-Gunners* and its sequel *Fathom Five*. Graduating from Durham University with honors and a degree in fine art in 1953, Westall spent two years in the military before entering Slade School, University of London, and receiving a diploma in fine art in 1957. That same year he took his first teaching position, as Art Master, with Erdington Hall Secondary Modern School in Birmingham. In 1958 he married Jean Underhill. Their only child, a son, died in a motorbike accident at age eighteen and Westall regards this as the single great unhappiness of his life.

Between 1960 and 1985 Westall served as Head of Art at Sir John Deane's College, Northwich, Cheshire and between 1970 and 1985 he was also Head of Careers. A long-time art critic for the *Chester Chronicle* and other newspapers, he also sold antiques.

Westall's first novel, *The Machine-Gunners*, won the American Library Association Carnegie Medal in 1975 and was a runner-up for the Guardian Award in 1976. It won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction in 1977, the same year his *The Wind Eye* was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. *The Devil on the Road* was a runner up for the Carnegie Medal and was named an ALA Notable Book for 1979. Westall received a Carnegie Medal in 1982 for *The Scarecrows*.

In 1989 *Blitzcat* won the Smarties Prize for Children's Books.

Both in his recounting of his own life and in his novels, Westall emphasized competence, the ability to succeed at a difficult task, and making correct moral decisions. In an autobiographical sketch which appeared in the *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* (1983), he wrote in glowing terms of his father's talent for getting the job done, both as a hands-on engineer and as a leader of men, and he took obvious pride in his own similar accomplishments, as a teacher, as a writer, and as a designer and builder of model ships, a hobby he inherited from his father. A Quaker by religious belief, he distrusted large political and religious organizations that emphasize obedience to a party line, and he placed great emphasis on individualism. Westall, like so many other writers, was a cat lover, and he specifically praised them for their independence and selfpossession. This love of the feline virtues shows itself in several of his novels, including *The Cats of Seroster*, *Blitzcat*, and *Urn Burial*. Westall died on April 15, 1993, in Cheshire, England of respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia.

Setting

Westall has set *Urn Burial* in the Pennine chain of northern England, near the Scottish border. The fell country is an isolated land of rain, prehistoric ruins, and heather. The sheep that run loose on the steep hills are still a major source of income, and shepherding is a respected profession. Life remains rather primitive on the fells, but the homes have electricity and running water and the shepherds reach their flocks on motorbikes. Ralph Edwards, the book's seventeen-year-old protagonist, may live a life full of sheep dipping, herding, and hard work, but he has seen the movie *Star Wars*. Westall does not dwell overlong on the magnificent landscape in which his story takes place, but his deft use of just the right detail—lonely cairns on the felltops, thick hedges along the roads—conveys a strong sense of a world at once familiar and mysterious, at once contemporary and ancient.

Also effective are *Urn Burial*'s more otherworldly settings. The decrepit, but menacing spaceship of the Wawaka, with its ghastly closetlike cages full of human remains and mold add to the horror of Ralph's realization that the aliens regard him as little more than an experimental animal. The enormous underground tomb of the dead Fefethil hero, on the other hand, with its giant statues, star-fretted dome, working space fleet, and preserved remains of the hideous Attock, give Ralph and the reader real insight into the true magnificence and power of the galactic culture the Fefethil represent.

Social Sensitivity

Although set in contemporary times, *Urn Burial* takes place in a very conservative locale and the book's gender roles are fairly traditional. Ralph's mother, however, is a hard working woman. Despite her poverty and lack of learning, she demands the respect due a competent, if somewhat overbearing single parent. Ralph's girlfriend, Ruby, although traditionally feminine in some ways, also works for a living and is actually more sexually aggressive than is Ralph. In keeping with Westall's strong emphasis on individualism and his distrust of large organizations and their representatives, various governmental institutions, most notably the postal authorities, the police, and the military, are not always shown in a positive light. *Urn Burial*'s environmental theme, although not obtrusive, emphasizes the need for individual, small-scale action. The novel's science fictional treatment of the devil and the Book of Revelations may be disturbing to readers coming from a fundamentalist Christian background.

Literary Qualities

The fell country of northern England, like most of that nation, is steeped in tradition and folklore and Westall makes good use of them. His detailed description of a shepherd at work, his strong characterization, and his careful use of dialect, make his fell country seem very real. When strange events begin to occur and the country lane outside Ralph's door takes on a menacing quality, we too feel his shock and discomfort. The book also features a dry but satisfying sense of humor. After his discovery of the alien burial urn on the felltop, Ralph is traced by the Wawaka through the radiation he has accidentally brought home on his body and clothes. Apparently they intend to kill him. Unfortunately for them, he takes a bath and his mother does the laundry, so the Wawaka end up tracking the dirty water through the sewer and blowing up the local sewage treatment facility instead. Later, when they are captured by the Fefethil, one of the doglike Wawaka insists that he will commit suicide rather than accept imprisonment, but is told that he will not be allowed to, that the Fefethil "will Urn Burial 4201 train us to be good. Wag our tails and beg for food."



Themes and Characters

As one would expect, considering his views on competence and individualism, Westall presents his teen-aged protagonist as an enormously capable young man who has grown up a very hard worker. His father having died at an early age, Ralph works virtually full time as a shepherd for the lazy and not particularly competent Jack Norton.

The boy's days are spent herding sheep, running a highly competent pair of sheepdogs, and taking care of whatever other chores he is left with by the often half-soused Norton. When working on the fells, Ralph carries a container of foul-smelling Stockholm tar with him which he puts on the various cuts and injuries of the sheep in order to protect his charges from infection and parasites. He does this unpleasant task on a regular basis, not because he has been told to, but because he sees it as necessary. On several occasions Ralph repeats to himself, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and am known of them." This Bible verse seems to typify his responsible, mature attitude toward his job. Even when relaxing at the pub after work, Ralph feels more comfortable sitting with the adult shepherds and farmers than he does with the other teen-agers.

Westall has also provided a serviceable cast of supporting characters.

Ralph's "Mam" is a huge, hardworking woman who loves her son fiercely and is just a shade overprotective. Norton, although not actively evil, has a touch of the sadist about him, perhaps because deep down he is aware that he owes most of his success to Ralph's hard work rather than his own. Ruby Todd, Ralph's girl friend is a touch outspoken, and has an uncanny talent for wearing the wrong footwear when walking on the fells.

The nonhuman characters, Fefethil and Wawaka, are both suitably alien, although they also lie at the center of *Urn Burial's* one major weakness. The Fefethil Theloc tells Ralph that any number of planets harbor life, but that parallel evolution is virtually universal. Thus some variation on apes, cats, dogs, bears, sheep, and so on can be found wherever life exists, with a different species attaining intelligence on each world. Presumably there were lower ape and dog species on the lost planet of the Fefethil and nonsentient apes and cats on the home world of the Wawaka, just as there are dogs and cats on Earth. Other science fiction writers have used catlike or doglike aliens before. The more sophisticated writers, however, are careful to either state that the similarities are accidental or provide some scientific explanation for the existence of such genetic parallels. Ursula K. Le Guin did something like this in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). As found in *Urn Burial*, however, without scientific rationale, the device feels too much like allegory, an 4200 *Urn Burial* unexpected shift into Madeleine L'Engle country perhaps. Although Westall uses his idea of parallel evolution to buttress several underlying themes, including limited pacifism and a strong environmental stance, the device is not entirely successful.

The necessity for competence, responsibility, and independent thinking are undoubtedly Westall's most important themes. Ralph is a very good shepherd, hard working, never



shirking the difficult task at hand. He cares deeply about his sheep, and, when fate puts him in a situation where his actions can determine the future of humanity as a whole, he responds heroically.

Although treated with disdain by the Fefethil, he examines their ideas, accepts the validity of some of their criticism of the human race, and sets out to disprove the rest of it. On the other hand, Ralph also recognizes the limits of both his ability and his responsibility. When his actions accidentally lead to the death of the village postman, he accepts his role in that tragedy, but does not torture himself with guilt.

When a mind-control device he has discovered in the underground Fefethil tomb tempts him to take over the ancient war fleet and use it against Earth's enemies, he resists the impulse, recognizing that such an action would be wrong.

Although recognizing that the Fefethil are wrong to see human beings as mere apes, Ralph essentially agrees with their attitudes towards human violence and destructiveness. As a Quaker, Westall believes very strongly in the importance of living in balance with the natural world and *Urn Burial* includes a strong environmental message. Connected with both this environmental theme and Westall's emphasis on physical competence is the author's continuing insistence on the importance of having a healthy mind in a healthy body. The Fefethil, for example, are magnificent physical specimens. They make a number of disdainful comments about the ways in which human beings poison themselves and eventually give Ralph and Ruby virtually superhuman powers simply by curing all their bodily ills. Jack Norton's weight problem, hypochondria, and alcohol-induced poor health are mentioned several times and are clearly seen as signs of moral weakness.



Topics for Discussion

1. Readers of *Urn Burial* have complained that it seems unlikely that the burial urn on the fell would have remained undiscovered for so long or that the Fefethil would have left it in such an exposed position. What do you think?
2. What did you think of the idea that past visits of the Wawaka to Earth might have given rise to the concept of werewolves?
3. Westall provides a great deal of detail in describing Ralph's job as a shepherd, particularly some of the more gross duties, like the sheeppicking. Why does he do this? What does all this detail add to the book?
4. The Fefethil tell Ralph that cats, dogs, apes, sheep, and other animals are found on virtually all planets that harbor life, with a different species developing intelligence on each planet.

How did you react to this idea when you read the book?

5. Do you find Westall's aliens believable? To what extent does he succeed in describing intelligent creatures who are still either cat or doglike?
6. Although Westall wants us to see the Wawaka as dangerous enemies, he also spends a fair amount of time undercutting their competence as well.

They make many mistakes. Their spaceship is a filthy mess. Why this emphasis on their failures?
7. The Wawaka treat human beings as laboratory animals, carrying out scientific experiments that they know will be deadly. They see nothing wrong with this and it is suggested that there is no difference between their practice and what human beings do with laboratory animals on Earth. How do you feel about this?
8. One obvious difference between human beings and laboratory animals would seem to be that human beings are sentient, while dogs, cats, and laboratory rats are not. Recent research has suggested, however, that the great apes—particularly chimpanzees and gorillas—may be sentient. How does this knowledge affect your response to question 7?
9. When Ralph discovers the body of the dead Attock in the underground tomb, he worries that somehow, even in death, they may be infecting mankind with their evil. Basically he is looking for a way to shift responsibility for humanity's various crimes to the Attock. How do you react to this?

10. The idea of powerful aliens secretly watching humanity is enormously popular, the subject of hundreds of novels, movies, and reputed works of nonfiction. Why is the idea so popular?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Summarize the various criticisms that the Fefethil make of humanity.

Discuss the extent to which those criticisms are legitimate or illegitimate. To what extent does Ralph convince the Fefethil that human beings are better than they had previously thought?

2. Find another science fiction novel in which people are abducted by aliens and compare it to *Urn Burial*. What similarities do you see in the books' themes? What differences? Judith Moffett's *The Ragged World* (1991) would be a good choice. Frank Asch's *Journey to Terezor* (1989) is another possibility.

3. In Chapter 17 of *Urn Burial* Ralph discovers an intact war fleet which gives him the power, if he chooses to exercise it, to destroy the Wawaka, the Fefethil, and anyone else who endangers humanity. He chooses not to exercise that power. Examine the scene and discuss the various reasons why Ralph should or should not make use of his power. Why, finally, does he decide not to? Is this the correct choice?

4. Although his primary purpose is to tell a good-story, Westall also has a number of important thematic points to make about competence, responsibility, the environment, big government, and so on. He has chosen to make these points within the context of a science fiction novel. Why did he choose this genre? Besides the obvious (i.e. aliens invasions, spaceships), what does science fiction allow him to do that would have been difficult or impossible within the context of realistic fiction?

5. Does Ralph change and mature over the course of the novel? If so, how? You might want to concentrate on his relationship with Ruby.

6. Read one or more of Westall's other novels. Which themes do they share with *Urn Burial*? How important are these themes to understanding Westall's literary achievement?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Robert (Atkinson) Westall." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 23. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981: 235-236. The entry is dated, but contains a variety of interesting quotations from Westall.

Hadley, Eric. "Robert (Atkinson) Westall." In *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. Edited by Tracy Chevalier.

3d ed. Chicago: St. James, 1989: 10271028. Features a complete bibliographic listing of Westall's published work through 1989 but does not mention *Urn Burial*.

Hemesath, James B. Review. In *Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Annual*, 1989. Edited by Robert A. Collins and Robert Latham. Westport, CT: Meckler, 1990: 486-487.

"Robert Westall." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 322-324. Contains an interview with Westall.

Related Titles

Westall's decision to use folklore to give depth to this story of secret alien visitors is not entirely original. Any number of other science fiction writers have done it before *Urn Burial*—for example, Keith Laumer in *A Trace of Memory* (1963)—and others have done it since— for example, Judith Moffett in *The Ragged World* (1991). The idea that humanity's concept of the devil may be some distorted memory of an alien lifeform probably originated in Arthur C. Clarke's classic *Childhood's End* (1953) and was also used with success in the BBC television serial *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958). The concept of the long-buried alien artifact stumbled upon by accident is also common in science fiction. Stephen King's *The Tommyknockers* (1987) is a notable recent example. And the bestseller racks have been full of supposedly nonfictional accounts of ancient astronauts and abduction by flying saucers for several decades.

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 Baziotès 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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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