The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle Short Guide

The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle by Hugh Lofting

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Overview

Sir Hugh Walpole, in his introduction to the tenth printing of The Story of Doctor Dolittle, praised Lofting as a "genius" for his understanding of what delights children, for his line drawings, for his creation of the character of Doctor Dolittle, and for giving life to animals.

In this latter area in particular, Walpole claims that Lofting is the true successor to Lewis Carroll.

Though Walpole's comments are often quoted, they are hyperbolic. Lofting has considerable imaginative talents as a storyteller and illustrator, but his work lacks the psychological depth of Carroll's. Though Carroll and Lofting share a love of fantasy and language, Lofting's work is more on a level with P. L. Traver's Mary Poppins series than with Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

The central charm of The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle lies in the character of the doctor himself and his caring and respectful treatment of animals. Other stories, such as The Wind in the Willows and Charlotte's Web, have animals who speak human language; Doctor Dolittle is one of the few human characters who cares enough about animals to communicate with them. Dolittle's concern for animals obviously is the author's concern; episodes like the Fidget's recreation of the miseries of aquarium life and the bullfight which Dolittle wins by not harming the bulls show Lofting's feelings about the humane treatment of animals.

Lofting also packs his novels with travel and adventure. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle begins at the Doctor's home in Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, England. But the Doctor quickly sets out on adventures. He rescues Luke the Hermit in a Mexican gold mine, sets out to sea in a stowaway adventure, settles in the Capa Blanca Islands for his bullfight adventure, moves on to Spidermonkey Island where there are warring native tribes, and finally goes to the bottom of the sea with a giant seasnail.

Another appealing quality of the Doctor Dolittle books is their simplicity; in this child's world, necessities are easily taken care of. In The Story of Doctor Dolittle Doctor Dolittle needs a ship and stores but is penniless. He conveniently remembers a sailor whose child he has saved. The sailor offers him a boat and even goes to the store to get supplies (the grocer has refused Dolittle any more credit). In The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle, Doctor Dolittle sets sail with nine-yearold Tommy Stubbins, and the African Prince Bumpo and his animals, none of whom knows how to sail. But none of them worries about sailing. Their catchword is "Doctor Dolittle does do everything wrong but he always gets there."

About the Author

Hugh John Lofting was born January 14, 1886, in Maidenhead, England, to parents of English and Irish heritage.

As a child, he developed a strong interest in animals and nature, which led him to keep a combination zoo and natural history museum in his mother's linen closet until it was discovered. He enjoyed telling stories to his brother and sister and, much like Tommy Stubbins at the beginning of The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle, dreamed of adventurous travel to unexplored lands.

At age eight Lofting was sent to a Jesuit boarding school in Derbyshire and from then on spent only short periods of time at home. In 1904 he came to America to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but returned to England in 1906 to complete his studies at London Polytechnic. After school he began working as an architect, but the desire to travel caused him to shift into civil engineering. His engineering work took him to Canada, West Africa, and the West Indies. Although he liked the travel, he stated that he hated every minute of his work on railway development.

In 1912 he married Flora Small and settled in New York, where he worked for the British Ministry of Information.

When World War I broke out, however, he joined the Irish Guards and served in Flanders and France. With his love for animals Lofting observed how animals were used in the war and how they were treated. He noticed that cats dared to stalk through ruins during heavy bombardment and that wounded horses were shot rather than nursed back to health. He decided that his children, Elizabeth and Colin, probably did not want to hear either dull or gruesome news from the front.

Instead, Lofting began to write story letters which his children begged him to illustrate. He invented an eccentric country physician, Doctor Dolittle, who had an interest in natural history and a great love of pets. Doctor Dolittle decides to give up his human practice for what to him seems a more difficult practice: treating animals. As Lofting speculated that good horse surgery in the war would require knowledge of horse language, so Doctor Dolittle believes it requires a much cleverer brain to become a good animal doctor {who must know animal language as well as animal physiology) "than it does to take care of the mere human hypochondriac."

In 1917 Lofting was wounded and released from the army. He returned to America and settled with his family in Madison, Connecticut. His wife persuaded him to show a manuscript of Doctor Dolittle stories to a publisher, who immediately accepted them. The Story of Doctor Dolittle met with immediate success and went into twenty-three printings in ten years. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle, published the following year, won the Newbery Medal. A quick succession of Dolittle sequels followed.

The books were popular worldwide and were translated into twelve languages.

Lofting's first wife died in 1927; his second wife, Katherine Harrower, died of influenza shortly after their marriage in 1928. He married Josephine Flicker in 1935 and had a son Christopher, who later became his sole literary heir. In 1942 Lofting wrote his only book for adults, Victory for the Slain, an anti-war poem. In 1945 he became ill but still continued to work. He was working on another book when he died September 26, 1947, in Topanga, California.

Lofting once cited three points of primary importance in writing for children. First, children's books should be genuinely entertaining, not "preachment" in the guise of entertainment.

Second, children should be written "up to," not "down to." He believed that children wanted promotion into the adult world and that "no idea is too subtle, no picture too difficult to be conveyed to a child's mind, if the author will but find the proper language to put it in."

Third, a book that is successful with children should also be successful with adults, for "practically all children want to be grown up and practically all grownups want to be children."

Setting

The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle has a variety of settings, both common and exotic. Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, where Doctor Dolittle resides, is an ordinary small English port town in 1839. In contrast to the town's ordinariness, is Doctor Dolittle's cozy home and its fantastic Garden of Dreams, an Edenic place where snakes stand on their tails listening to flute music and all the animals live in houses without locks.

In the more realistic exotic locations, Lofting tries to give a simplified but accurate picture of how the people might live. In the Spanish Capa Blanca Is lands, for example, Doctor Dolittle and friends eat fried bananas and foods cooked in olive oil. They see cafes with merry tables and people who never seem to go to bed, and they listen to guitar music.

On the imaginary Spidermonkey Island, however, Lofting allows his imagination full play. The inside of the island is hollow and filled with air so that it continually floats. When it drifts too near the South Pole and cold weather threatens the inhabitants, Dolittle calls on the whales to push the island back towards Brazil. The inhabitants of the island—the Popsipetels and the Bag-jagderags—have not discovered fire, a problem which allows Lofting to speculate on the life of very primitive humans.

They eat raw fish and have keen eyesight for seeing in the dark. When Dolittle strikes a match, they worship the fire and try to pick it up with their bare hands to play with it. On the island is one of the most fantastic of Lofting's imagined places: the amphitheater of the whispering rocks where even the slightest whisper echoes. It is here that Dolittle is crowned, and the noise at his coronation upsets a teetering rock which fills the hollow in the island and cements it in place.

Social Sensitivity

In the 1960s as social consciousness about black Americans arose, so did criticism of the racism in the Doctor Dolittle books, particularly in the portrayal of Prince Bumpo. Bumpo is a friend of Doctor Dolittle's but also a figure of ridicule. The most offensive episode with Prince Bumpo occurs in The Story of Doctor Dolittle when Bumpo dreams of becoming white after a woman he believed to be Sleeping Beauty rejects him as being too dark. Doctor Dolittle puts a zinc ointment compound on Bumpo's face, which turns white for a time, and his eyes turn a "manly grey."

Words such as "coon" and "nigeress" were also used.

Treatment of Bumpo in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle were similarly offensive.

In the 1970s critics accused Dolittle of being a racist figure of British colonialism. Lofting was denounced for portraying blacks as comic and childlike figures with ridiculous customs. His illustrations of Africans were decried as grotesque and insulting.

Though Bumpo is supposed to be an African prince and Oxford scholar, he is characterized as a man of brawn but little brain. His malapropisms—Spidermonkey Island is a "pecurious phenometer"—may have been meant by Lofting to be humorous (he seems to have great affection for the character) but can also be interpreted as a caricature of a simple-minded African trying unsuccessfully to imitate white men.

The problem with using such a character as Bumpo for humor is that there are no counterbalancing portraits of intelligent, heroic blacks. Critics and educators began asking whether Lofting's technical competence and his characters were worth submitting a child to its implied racism.

The Doctor Dolittle books were not alone in being attacked for racism: the Mary Poppins, Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew books, as well as the story Little Black Sambo, came under similar fire. Later editions of the Dolittle books changed some of the most offensive language, but the books declined in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s and went out of print in the United States.

Lofting's son Christopher ha s defended his father and the books. He claims his father was not a racist. Hugh Lofting has been quoted as saying, "If we make children see that all races, given equal physical and mental chances for development, have about the same batting averages of good and bad, we shall have laid another very substantial foundation stone in the edifice of peace and internationalism." Christopher Lofting accuses those who demand changes in the books of censorship and meddling with classics.

For the centenary of Lofting's birth, Dell Publishing decided to reissue the Dolittle books in hardcover. The editors convinced Christopher Lofting that alterations should be made in the texts and some original illustrations deleted.

The Bumpo-Sleeping Beauty story was eliminated from The Story of Doctor Dolittle, and the description of Bumpo's fantastic costume disappeared from The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle. In an afterword printed in the new versions, Christopher Lofting writes, "Hugh Lofting would have been appalled at the suggestion that any part of his work could give offense and would have been the first to have made the changes himself.... The message that Hugh Lofting conveyed throughout his work was one of respect for life and the rights of all who share the common destiny of our world."

The most offensive passages are gone, though Dolittle as hero is still a great white father figure and Bumpo is still a humorous character who uses malapropisms. The Dolittle books have also been condemned as sexist—Dolittle's sister is negatively portrayed in The Story of Doctor Dolittle, and the mothers of sick babies (both human and animal) are the chief encroachers on Dolittle's time in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle.

Given that the books are a product of a different age with different social views, making them completely inoffensive would probably make them unreadable.

The editors of the Doctor Dolittle books have worked hard to preserve the characters of the kindly Doctor and his animals.

Literary Qualities

Lofting's talents lie in storytelling, in portraying swift action with multiple settings and crises. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle is richer in literary techniques than The Story of Doctor Dolittle. For example, Dolittle himself does not appear until the third chapter of the story.

The reader's curiosity about him is aroused and heightened by the cat's meat's man's stories about him and by Tommy Stubbins's descriptions of the outside of the Doctor's home. The Doctor's character is skillfully delineated by Lofting's use of a foil character, the Colonel, who treats Tommy so condescendingly. Lofting even develops a more complex point of view, telling his story through Tommy's eyes rather than an omniscient narrator's.

Though Lofting's prose is usually plain and simple, he occasionally tries for evocative descriptions. In speaking of caged lions, Doctor Dolittle passionately asks, "What are they given in exchange for the glory of an African sunrise, for the twilight breeze whispering through the palms, for the green shade of matted, tangled vines, for the cool, big-starred nights of the desert, for the patter of the waterfall after a hard day's hunt?"

Lofting's poetry, however, is not especially successful. The natives' hymn in praise of Doctor Dolittle, for example, has irregular rhythmic patterns and commonplace sentiments.

The strength of Lofting's prose lies in its appeal to the senses. In the fidget's few words of English picked up while it was imprisoned in the aquarium, Lofting swiftly recreates the atmosphere of a child-crowded Saturday afternoon: "No smoking. Popcorn and picture postcards here. This way out. Don't spit." At the end of the story, Lofting does an impressive job of recreating what it might be like to travel the ocean bottom inside a giant snail—peering through the translucent pearl shell at monstrous fish, shipwrecks, and changing landscapes; removing one's hobnail boots so as not to hurt the snail; breathing the hot stuffy air inside the snail; feeling the clammy snail covering; and listening to the sucking sound as the snail resumes its place in the shell. A good part of the enjoyment of the Doctor Dolittle books comes when Lofting links his imagination with sensually evocative prose.

Themes and Characters

The major theme of all the Dolittle books is the concern for life and living creatures, especially animals. Dolittle is a doctor, concerned about health and life. Though he treats animals, he is also kind to people and during the course of his adventures rescues a number of them. In contrast to the Colonel, who treats Tommy rudely because he is a child and a member of the working class, Dolittle treats Tommy "as a grown-up friend" and enjoys his visit with Tommy's parents. Dolittle's concern for the hermit Luke leads him to translate dog language at Luke's trial in order to save him. To save the Long Arrow and his co-workers buried in a cave on Spidermonkey Island, Dolittle enlists the help of the Jabrizi bug and works until the natives are freed.

Allied with Dolittle's concern for human life is his hatred of war. When the Bag-jagderags attack the Popsipetels, Dolittle is enraged and calls war "at best a stupid wasteful business." He believes in self-defense, however, and fights passionately in the battle. The war ends when sixty to seventy million black parrots nip the ears of the Bag-jagderags. After the war Dolittle lambastes the Bag-jagderags for what he feels caused the war: laziness. The Bag-jagderags were too lazy to till the land themselves, so they attack the Popsipetels to rob them of their corn. Though this view of war is very simplified, Lofting does point to serious causes of war— battle over resources and greed. Dolittle makes the natives promise not to fight any more and to help each other in famine and distress.

The need for animals to be free is another of Lofting's themes in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle. Dolittle keeps no captive lions or tigers in his garden, and he even allows animals to stay with him who have escaped from circuses and sideshows. In the episode of the fidget, Lofting describes the horror of a fish condemned to swim before crowds in a public aquarium. Lofting likewise sees limitations on the freedom of human beings. As Dolittle becomes king of the Popsipetels, he becomes increasingly entangled in caring for babies with colic and building theaters. He has less and less time for what he really enjoys— natural history. Adult responsibility and the feeling of being needed weigh him down. Dolittle, like a child, can escape from his duties through Polynesia's plotting; adults in the real world are not so fortunate.

Dolittle, of course, is the main character in the book, and he is a strange mixture of hero and anti-hero. His name is significant—he is a man who does much but takes little credit. He is the great warrior who hates war; the king who would rather be hunting butterflies; an accomplished musician, chef, acrobat, linguist—a universal genius— who is somehow unable to sail a boat and often depends upon a parrot's trickery to get out of uncomfortable situations. Though he cares for people, he really much prefers animals and solitude. He is also an eccentric; not a handsome, muscular, charismatic hero but a round, dumpy figure wearing a beat-up top hat and carrying a well-used medical bag.

In addition, although the Doctor Dolittle books are obviously comic, there is an underlying level of melancholy and despair. Dolittle works hard to upgrade the living conditions of the natives, but he despairs of what will happen if he leaves. He thinks

they will go back to war and superstition, and, in fact, be worse off because they will use the new things they have learned improperly. Yet their needs have caused him to lose himself.

Polynesia tells him that the natives will manage all right without him and that his work treating animals is more important. She presents the pessimistic view that humankind cannot much be changed and that the masses of men are unimportant in the long run. Dolittle, torn by ties of responsibility and affection, weeps when he leaves yet chooses his own needs over the needs of the many.

Aside from Dolittle, the most interesting character in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle is Polynesia the parrot. She first proposes to Dolittle that he learn to talk to the animals and become an animal doctor, and she engineers Dolittle's escape from the African prison in The Story of Doctor Dolittle and from Spidermonkey Island in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle.

Almost a mother figure, she is very protective of Dolittle, her "wayward child," and complains how the animals in England and the mothers on Spidermonkey Island take advantage of Dolittle.

Polynesia's sarcastic comments are the source of much of the humor in the book. For instance, as an African parrot, she detests the English climate: "Just see that mist rolling over those cabbages. It is enough to give you rheumatism to look at it. Beastly climate — Beastly! Really I don't know why anything but frogs ever stay in England."

When Bumpo proposes they eat a stowaway seaman, Polynesia snaps back that he would taste of tobacco.

Polynesia does not hesitate to use her sharp tongue to show how little she thinks of all human beings excepting the Doctor. She criticizes a neighbor girl for being a "conceited little minx" who squints. On meeting Tommy Stubbins for the first time she comments that it was a "terribly cold winter" the year he was born and that "You were a very ugly baby." Polynesia's humor, thus, has a spirit of meanness about it, humor with a bitter tinge.

Topics for Discussion

1. What is the Colonel's role in the story? How would the story be different without him?

2. What kind of relationship does Tommy Stubbins have with his parents?

3. How effective is the choice of point of view in the novel? How different would the story be if Polynesia told it?

4. Discuss the types of humor that you find in the book? Are there important differences in these types?

5. Why does Doctor Dolittle not appear until the third chapter of the story?

6. Find passages that appeal to the senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch.

7. Which adventure of Doctor Dolittle's —the saving of Luke, the bullfights, or the Spidermonkey Island war—did you like best? Why?

8. What is the function of the word definitions in the book? Do you find them a distraction from the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle was written by Hugh Lofting after he served in World War I. Based on Doctor Dolittle's comments about war and the war between the Popsipetels and Bagjagderags, how do you think Lofting felt about the war?

2. Though The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle is a book for children, it has only one major child character in it, Tommy Stubbins. How much is Doctor Dolittle like a child, and why does he appeal to children?

3. Create an imaginary land for Doctor Dolittle to visit. Describe the kind of animals, either real or fantastic, he might meet there.

4. Do the illustrations add to the story, or would it be just as good without them?

5. Compare one of the animals in The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle to at least one other famous animal character, such as Wilbur of Charlotte's Web, Toad of Wind in the Willows, or Miss Bianca of The Rescuers. How much do these characters seem like animals? Why are animals so popular in children's stories?

6. Discuss Lofting's satire on the criminal and legal system in the episode of Luke the hermit.

7. Explain the significance of the adventure to the Capa Bianca Islands.

What point is Lofting making about human treatment of animals?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle is the second Doctor Dolittle book. The first, The Story of Doctor Dolittle, describes Dolittle's becoming an animal doctor, learning to speak animal language, traveling to Africa to cure sick monkeys, fighting pirates, and saving a boy's uncle who was abandoned by the pirates on a rocky island. It establishes the pattern of a doctor who cares for animals and travels on fantastic voyages. The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle is a longer and more artistic work. It adds poetry and a more complex point of view. It also introduces the character Tommy Stubbins, who will narrate the rest of the books.

The popularity of the Doctor Dolittle books inspired Lofting to continue writing them until his death, his most prolific period being from 1920 to 1928.

Dolittle's adventures take him on caravans, to circuses, and even to the moon. All of the Dolittle books follow the basic multi-adventure pattern and express the need for humane treatment of animals and the elimination of war.

Each book also stands pretty much on its own and provides necessary background from previous books.

The success of Walt Disney's film Mary Poppins inspired other movie studios to attempt musicals based on popular children's books. One result was the filming of Doctor Dolittle, which has since become known as one of the great disasters of Hollywood. Starring Rex Harrison as the Doctor, it was released in 1967 and lost millions of dollars. The film itself was not exceptionally bad, but expensive (and unsuccessful) special effects forced the film to go way over its budget. Although one song from the movie —"Talk to the Animals"—won the Academy Award for best song of the year, the rest of the film was entirely forgettable. One interesting change from the book to the film was the addition of an important female character to add a love interest. The movie did cause a small resurgence of interest in the Doctor Dolittle books.

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