White Shark Short Guide

White Shark by Peter Benchley

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Simon Chase is a marine biologist who has not quite completed his degree from the University of Rhode Island. He has been fascinated by sharks all of his life, very much like Benchley himself. He plans to do his dissertation on their patterns of migration. Above everything else, he has that love of the sea shared by all of Benchley's heroes. What is unique in the situation facing this seaman and conservationist is the nature of the problem he will have to solve. Der Weisse Hai, German for white shark, as its creator has called it, may also be something of a problem for the reader. It is the least plausible of all Benchley's monsters. As usual the monster is referred to as "it," and its behavior is much like that of predators in Jaws (1974) and Beast (1991). Belatedly, we learn that "it" once had human identity as Heinrich Guenther, a huge blond SS soldier whose criminal acts even the Nazis could not tolerate. He preyed on German victims as well as on those people considered enemies of the state.

Dr. Amanda Macy has made a name for herself as an authority on gray whales. She has trained four sea lions, all females (although they are named for the Marx Brothers) to approach whales, and since they have photographic equipment fastened to their backs, take pictures which human divers would have difficulty doing.

The whales accept the sea lions as normal parts of their surroundings and behave naturally when approached by them. Amanda also provides the love interest in the novel.

A number of minor characters are featured. Tall Man is a huge Pequot Indian who is both Chase's closest friend and his assistant. He shares Simon's devotion to the sea and its life.

During the climax of the novel he tries unsuccessfully to kill the der Weisse Hai in hand-to-hand combat. Max Chase, Simon's son, in his early teens, has already learned a great deal about sea creatures. He adapts quickly to his father's way of life and will probably become a marine biologist himself. The appearance late in the novel of Joseph Franks is necessary to help Chase and his friends realize just what they are up against. Ernst Kruger had used Franks in some of his experiments.

Franks still has the scars dating from that time. Franks also assisted Kruger when the scientist was creating der Weisse Hai, and Chase and Tall Man discover that the monster they must destroy is at least partly human. Photographer David Webber, who is on an assignment off the Azores, is on the submersible which discovers the sunken submarine on which Ernst Kruger and his creation were escaping to South America. Back on the expedition ship, Webber opens the heavy brass box which they had found in the wreck. This costs him his life, and so in 1996, fifty-one years after Kruger's experiment had been completed, the monster is released.

Social Concerns

No book with the ocean as its background can ignore what is happening to the seas and its creatures. Simon Chase is no longer an environmentalist firebrand. All that intense emotion exhausted him without accomplishing much for the ocean. He now contents himself with trying to preserve what life he can with the small means at his disposal. As the book begins, he is protecting a pregnant female white shark from those who would kill her.

He cooperates with the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, and the agency at Hartford as well, but no longer feels that he can single-handedly reverse the trend of destruction.

Techniques

The Jaws formula is followed in White Shark, but it is wearing very thin.

Seemingly having exhausted the monsters he could find in the ocean, Benchley has resorted to one of his own invention. Only a few inadequate hints are given as to how Kruger assembled this semihuman beast. Monsters created in laboratories with recombinant DNA have become commonplace in science fiction, and Nazi Germany doubtlessly had some brilliantly inventive scientists. Some of them were close, apparently, to making atomic weapons. But to suggest that one of them succeeded in combining human traits with those of sea dwelling creatures to make an amphibious warrior really strains credibility.

The creature, having killed Webber, returns to the sea with its brass box where it continued to live. It had spent a half century in suspended animation — shades of Buck Rogers. Chase's assistant is a very rugged Indian and they make up a Lone Ranger-Tonto team. There are too many timeworn devices in this plot.

This is the least successful attempt by Benchley to use the formula he devised for Jaws. As in Jaws, the sheriff and business leaders of the fishing port, Waterboro, try to suppress news of the threat facing them for fear that it will keep tourists away from the annual blessing of the fishing fleet by the bishop. At least, the book this time does not end with a three-day chase at sea. Der Weisse Hai loses its ability to live under water and has to confine its activities to land. After taking a number of victims in and around Waterboro, it invades Chase's island. Max Chase hits upon the idea of luring it into a decompression chamber where it finally explodes form the excessive nitrogen forced into its bloodstream by the pressure in the room. The ending of the book is novel, but Benchley needs to develop new ideas for future adventure tales.

Themes

The problem facing Chase is part of the evil legacy of Nazi Germany. A Nazi scientist, Ernst Kruger, was ordered by Hitler on the day before Hitler's suicide to fulfill the mission of creating the ultimate warrior. Kruger has done this and eagerly waits for his reunion in South America with Dr.

Josef Mengele, his old friend. Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death, had ridiculed Kruger's work, but now Kruger can prove that he was capable of doing just what he had promised.

Chase has his son Max for the summer. His ex-wife in their divorce settlement had offered to provide generously for him. She is wealthy and can easily afford to do this, but Chase refuses to accept her money. He has set up a marine laboratory on an island off the south coast of New England but operates on a very low budget. He faces the problem familiar to divorced fathers of getting to know a son whom he sees only occasionally during the year. Will the boy adjust to a lifestyle much more frugal than the one his mother provides?

Key Questions

Readers at our local library were not much put off by the stereotypes and shopworn ideas in Benchley's latest books. "I could not put it down," they typically remarked about Beast and White Shark. "Excellent" — Great story" — many others said. Do aesthetic standards and the qualities that make popular reading have to be diametrically opposed? Not really. Dickens was a great novelist despite his sentimentality and despite many characters that are almost caricatures.

A fruitful discussion might involve a comparison of popular writers today and how they keep their readers. Many are competent writers in their fields, those who write mystery stories, P. D. James or Ed McBain for example, or science fiction, such as Michael Crichton or Isaac Asimov. These people prove that popular writing can satisfy most literary standards and still gain a wide audience. Benchley at his best is potentially a good writer. Possibly he has yet to find the best ways of realizing himself as an author.

1. Benchley does extensive research into everything pertaining to the ocean.

He presents the photographer, Davis Webber, as part of an expedition investigating the theory of chemosynthesis, the generation of life without light in the dark depths of the ocean. How feasible is this theory?

2. The possibilities of recombinant DNA have already produced a number of popular books, Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park (1990), for example, or another best-seller by Dean Koontz, Watchers (1987), which has both a highly intelligent dog, who learns to read, and a monster which, like de Weisse Hai, was designed to be a super warrior and has escaped (from a California lab). How does Benchley's monster compare to him?

3. Is Tall Man like other American Indians in fiction, such as Uncas or Tonto?

4. White Shark deals with the problems of a divorced father separated from his son. Has Benchley made effective use of this theme?

5. How significant is the role of Brendan Finnegan, the real estate salesman, in this book?

6. How does Dr. Amanda Macy compare to the other women in Benchley's novels? Only one of his books has a woman in the principal role, Paloma in The Girl of the Sea of Cortez (1982).

7. Did Benchley make the right choice when he made the monster in this novel the creation of a Nazi scientist? Have the Nazis in the half century since Germany fell in 1945 been overused as the source of evil in fiction and film?

8. A critic reviewing Beast said the Jaws rewrite was "so calculated that like a top-10 radio ballad it becomes interesting for its variations." White Shark is also a Jaws rewrite. Does the same judgment apply?

9. Which is the more interesting character, Simon Chase or his son Max?

Max proves very adept at adapting himself to the life Chase and Tall Man lead, and it is he who hits upon a way to destroy der Weisse Hai.

10. Benchley will probably write more sea adventures. Can you think of any terrifying creature he can use next time?

Literary Precedents

Ernst Kruger's experiment recalls that of the scientist in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus (1818). Frankenstein forms his creature from the bones and flesh of dead people and then gives it life. The result is a lonely, miserable being not originally savage, but one which becomes a killer after humans reject it. Kruger's de Weisse Hai is made savage from the outset because it is intended to be an unconquerable warrior. While neither story is believable, Mary Shelley does a better job of creating an atmosphere which enables the reader to more easily accept her premises. She had the advantage of introducing a new idea into fiction, the prototype for many novels, including White Shark.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994