The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff Short Guide

The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff by Theodore Sturgeon

Contents

Overview

The premise of The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff is that all sentient species have a trait called Synapse Beta sub Sixteen, which in moments of extreme crisis allows members of these thinking species to step outside of time and space and observe their situations, allowing them to either take appropriate action to save themselves or to act for the greater good by saving others. Without this trait a species is doomed to extinction. Sturgeon uses this idea to explore the internal lives of his characters; his human characters are representative of hopes and ambitions common to many people, from wanting to fit in to being a movie star, from wanting to satisfy oneself to wanting to satisfy others.

The disorienting stress of the experiment that they undergo and the revelations brought on by the activation of their Synapse Beta sub Sixteens reveal the essential emptiness of some of their dreams as well as strong moral foundations on which they can build happy lives. Sue Martin is of special significance; it is she who is least affected by the experiment because she already knows her self-worth and what is essential for her happiness.

About the Author

Theodore Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo on February 26, 1918, in St. George on Staten Island, New York. His parents—Edward Waldo, a paint salesman, and Christine Waldo, a teacher—separated in 1923, with his father leaving home; they eventually divorced. His mother married William D. Sturgeon in 1935, and the young man legally changed his name to Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon. There are varied accounts of how he came to be a writer that range from the fantastic (he tried writing only after giving up on becoming a circus acrobat) to the mundane (he needed money), but he first tried his hand at seamanship, attending Pennsylvania State nautical School for one term in 1935 and working as a seaman from 1935-1938.

Sturgeon sold his first published story to the McClure newspaper syndicate in 1937, and then he sold forty stories from 1937-1939, mostly to the McClure newspaper syndicate. Sturgeon entered mainstream science fiction publication in 1939 with stories appearing in the noted magazine Astounding Science Fiction. His marriage to Dorothy Fillingame in 1940 may have increased his need to earn money, probably persuaded him to find a job that kept him in one place, and likely accounted for why he left his career as a seaman and worked from 1940 to 1941 as a hotel manager. After serving in the U.S. Army in 1941, he took a job as a bulldozer operator in Puerto Rico. His restlessness seems to have strained this marriage; his wife took their two daughters and left him.

Sturgeon worked as a literary agent from 1946 to 1947, and then he spent two years on the circulation staff of Fortune and Time magazines, meanwhile marrying and soon divorcing Mary Mair. Sturgeon, who had been winning loyal fans throughout the 1940s with short stories like the minor classic "It" (1940), now saw his reputation and popularity begin to climb fast. With the publication of his short story collection Without Sorcery in 1948, Sturgeon broke into a larger and more profitable market than the one magazines provided. He worked as a fiction editor in 1950 for Tales of Tomorrow, and he married his third wife the following year, with whom he eventually had four children. The 1950 novel The Dreaming Jewels (also published as The Synthetic Man) won him even more attention from science fiction fans and established his reputation as a daring analyzer of human frailties and proscribed subjects such as aberrant sexual behavior. Even though Sturgeon won the 1954 International Fantasy Award for More Than Human, it was still very difficult for him to make a living as a professional writer, even a now famous one, and in 1961 he became feature editor for the magazine If, retaining the job to 1964. He also became in 1961 the science fiction reviewer for the magazine National Review, a position which he held to 1973.

Sturgeon's stature was such by this time that he was made the guest of honor at the 1962 World Science Fiction Convention, and the magazine Fantasy and Science Fiction devoted an issue to him. He entered the lucrative market of writing television screenplays in 1966, and he continued writing and selling them until 1975. Despite his ascendent writing career, his personal life remained fraught with difficulties as his third marriage ended in divorce. He married Wina Golden in 1969, and they had one child. Sturgeon had by now become far more than an accomplished author in his field; he had

formed over years a large number of affectionate friendships with other writers, and his reputation now fully reflected the role of judicious mentor he had served to so many writers. By the time of his death on May 8, 1985, in Eugene, Oregon, Sturgeon was a beloved father-figure The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff 4963 among science fiction writers. This imposing stature has made it difficult to objectively assess Sturgeon's fiction, to separate the literary merits of his work from the praise extended by writers whose warm friendships with him cannot help but color their views of his writings.

Sturgeon received the 1970 Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America and the 1971 Science Fiction Achievement Award (also known as the Hugo award, given by a vote of attendees at the annual World Science Fiction convention), both for "Slow Sculpture." Attendees of the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy Convention voted his short story "the Silken Swift" into the Fantasy Hall of Fame.

Setting

focuses on a boarding house in a town that is not quite big enough to be a city: "The town was old enough to have slums, large enough to have no specific 'tracks' with a right and a wrong side." The town itself is an issue only for Philip Halvorsen, who while walking home becomes deeply disturbed by looking at guns in a pawnshop window and by the signs in the red-light district that urge him to take a sexual interest in matters that do not interest him, sexually or otherwise. These experiences suggest to him that he may be a deviant human being—someone who does not have the urges that average people do.

The boarding house itself "was big and warm and full of friends"; it is also a laboratory for two alien beings from a distant planet who have come to earth to conduct field studies on human beings. Their primary interest is in Synapse Beta sub Sixteen and why humans have it but do not use it, making the species a special puzzle for them. According to their scientific dogma, no sentient species can long survive without Synapse Beta sub Sixteen, and they are mystified that "this species possesses the Synapse but to all intents and purposes does not use it." There is nothing special about the boarding house itself, and its owners Sam and Bitty Bittelman are, on the surface, an unremarkable older couple.

Social Sensitivity

This issue of experimenting on unsuspecting people is very troublesome. Sturgeon explains that the aliens who experiment with the inmates of a boarding house are not much different in their intentions than human scientists: Living in our midst, here and now, is a man who occupies himself with the weight-gain of amebae from their natal instant to the moment they fission. There is a man, who, having produced neurosis in cats, turns them into alcoholics for study. Someone has at long last settled the matter of the camel's capacity for, and retention of, water. People like these are innocent of designs on the destines of all amoebae, cats, camels and cultures; there are simply certain things they want to know.

Studies like these are routine aspects of the biological sciences, but they acquire a profound perspective when the subjects are human beings. Is it acceptable to turn cats into alcoholics?

One answer would be that it is acceptable when the goal is to help human alcoholics. Another answer would be it is unacceptable to inflict great misery on an individual animal that has never done any human being any harm, especially an animal like a cat or camel that may trust the goodwill of the human scientist who is about to cause it suffering. Sam and Bitty are trusted and liked by the inmates of the boarding house; yet Sam and Bitty, as the alien scientists Boff and Googie, inflict physical pain and mental anguish on their subjects, even risking burning them alive for the sake of their pursuit of knowledge. They want to know even if it torches their human subjects. That they wish no harm to humanity as a whole does not mean that Boff and Googie's conduct is moral. Most people think it very immoral to experiment on unwitting human beings, even in the service of a disinterested quest for knowledge that may later benefit all of mankind. Yet, if what Boff and Googie do is immoral, then what about the scientist experimenting on the cats? Where is the line between immoral and moral experimentation on people or animals? And just how comforted are we to be that the aliens may regard us as a scientist regards an amoeba? Sturgeon does not answer these nettlesome questions that inevitably arise from the story, save to assure us that the aliens mean no harm to humanity as a species and that they find our "young" to be "delightful."

Halvorsen acts as a spokesman for Sturgeon by explaining the meaning of events. He also represents a signifi cant social issue, one that bothers some adults but especially concerns many young adults. He is worried because he discovers that he is not an average person, that he is not like other people. He has spent his life trying to fit in, pretending to take an interest in matters that he is sure other men take an interest in. This strategy of accommodation is directly attacked when Boff and Googie put him under the testing stress of the revelation that he truly is abnormal, that he really is not interested in all the things the advertisements around him say that he should be interested in. He realizes, when looking at guns, that he would rather kill himself than continue being warped. His epiphany comes when he realizes that "those who obey the gospel of Average Man are, in their efforts to be like the mass of humanity, obeying the

dictates of one of the smallest minorities of all." He finally realizes that there is no such thing as an average man. Those who on a graph would be in the middle of the variations among men would be a small group because personal traits would be spread all over the graph. Halvorsen would appear near one end of the graph, but he would be surrounded by many other men who would vary just as much as he from the average. "He'd never known that! The magazine covers, the advertisements, the dirty jokes—they hadn't let him know it." If most men were average, then magazines, radio, television, and motion pictures would not need to spend as much time as they do defining what the "average" man is like—because men would already know what they should be like. This may not be a particularly original point, but in the context of this well-wrought tale it is made with the conviction that it is very worthwhile to remind young readers that trying to be like everyone else, to try to fit in at every level of life, is artificial and achieves little besides heartache.

Literary Qualities

Sturgeon interweaves the alien's report with the narrative of The [Widget], the Wadget, and Boff, even including a translator's note on why some words are in brackets—because the translations would be long, complex, and tiresome. Thus the two machines used to manipulate the minds of the test subjects are called Widget and Wadget. The report by the alien protests unethical conduct by [Smith] that may imperil the lives of the test subjects and is used primarily to create suspense. An interesting aspect of the alien's report is the thinness of its analysis until the end of the novel.

Halvorsen, one of the test subjects, is more often used to explain the progress of the experiment than is the alien scientist. This may be done in order to retain a reader's interest—Halvorsen is in the thick of events and his analysis means life or death for all the test subjects—whereas an analysis from an observer might be dry and of much less immediate interest.

Themes and Characters

tells of a small group of characters coming face-to-face with the essential meanings of their lives. The character who explains much of what happens is Philip Halvorsen, a counselor who helps people find jobs that suit them.

He is a linear, rational thinker who serves his clients by logically working out exactly what career best matches their talents and personalities. The alien scientists come close to killing him because he nearly figures out who they are and what they are up to.

Through Halvorsen, Sturgeon explores the issue of being an average person. Halvorsen assumes that being average is good; he wants to have the same interests and desires as every other man, and he believes himself to be average until Boff and Googie begin experimenting on him. They first disorient him while he gazes in the window of a pawn shop where old guns are displayed. He admires equipment that is elegantly designed and streamlined to the point that only the functional is left. Thus he is drawn to guns with clean shapes, good hand grips, and unadorned barrels. His mind, forever trying to be logical, then plays with the concept of a gun, which he concludes would be most elegant if it were designed to be used only once.

Why a one-shot gun? The answer is based on impeccable logic: if one were intending to kill oneself, one shot would be the most elegant number, since one would have no more use for the gun once dead.

This is an example of how dangerous the experiment has become.

Halvorsen finds that he is serious about suicide. He explains that "there's a part of me that's dead, and wants the rest of me dead. There's a part of me that's alive, and wants all of me alive." Until his epiphany—that moment of revelatory insight into the true nature of things—near the end of the novel, Halvorsen is obsessed with why any part of him should want to die. He suspects that the death wish stems from his failure to be average.

He realizes while walking through a red light district that he is unmoved by the signs urging him to become sexually excited (this passage in the novel is not graphic or offensive). He realizes that he has spent much of his life pretending to be aroused by the same stimuli as other men. When a coworker whistles at a passing woman and then winks at him, he winks back just so that he may seem to fit in. He learns eventually that like other men he can love a woman, and that he likely will fall in love, but his spirit simply does not respond to the sex-forsale culture that he encounters in advertisements and entertainment media.

Does not being average make him an outcast, a pervert? While still under this great stress, he reasons that Sam and Bitty Bittelman are the source of his disquiet. They

rarely make statements, instead responding to Halvorsen and the other boarders with a barrage of questions. The questions are very disturbing, cutting to the heart of each person's insecurities, and Halvorsen, ever trying to be logical, sees in Sam and Bitty a sinister source of his suicidal urges. He almost resolves to kill Bitty but then makes a moral decision not to do so, perhaps in order to cling to some sort of average morality or because he senses some good coming out of his realization that he is incapable of being an average man.

Tony O'Banion—a lawyer, a snob, and a fool—carries, like Mary Haunt, the burden of other people's expectations for him. He has been raised by his mother to think of himself as gentry who must not marry below his class. He regards the social station he feels himself part of to be the owners of property and business, the people who by birth and pedigree are best suited to run the world. These qualities would make him seem a boor, but Sturgeon has first cleverly established his good qualities by introducing him as Robin's friend. Robin lives with his mother at the boarding house and generally seems like an ordinary little boy. O'Banion's work often takes him past a small children's amusement park, and he ends up taking Robin there often. However, when Robin's mother Sue Martin asks if she may come along, he says that the outings are stag affairs; she accepts this, but O'Banion seems very much a fool.

The experiment on O'Banion takes a powerfully dangerous turn while he is at the restaurant where Sue Martin works. Sam joins him and through a long interrogation forces O'Banion into questioning the most fundamental assumptions he has made about his existence, and "a churning pit yawned under his feet." A man who is willing to let a charming little boy call him Tonio should be someone worth saving, but his certitude about his superiority through ancestry makes him seem irredeemable. He may never get it through his thick skull that Sue Martin, without pedigree, is more valuable to him than any exalted lineage could be. He sways on the brink of self-destruction, like Halvorsen, and only desperate circumstances may save him.

Mary Haunt surprises Halvorsen by the kind office of making him a sandwich. At the point in the novel when this happens the focus is on Halvorsen, so the full import of her action is unrevealed. Only later, as she is led into questioning her obsession with becoming a movie star does the incident gather meaning. One may be tempted to backtrack through the novel to find other such hints about characters; it turns out nothing happens in the novel without a larger purpose than may at first appear.

Mary Haunt has been "haunted" by her father who died when she was six years old. He was obsessed with Shirley Temple, and he impressed on her, her mother, and everyone in her hometown that she would become a movie star. She grew up beautiful and pampered, the picture of a girl who will become a star; yet, sandwiches mean more to her. The one she fixes for Halvorsen is a work of art. Mary, seventeen but pretending to be twenty-two, works at a radio station where she is miserable, and her dedication to someone else's dreams has only served to isolate herself from others: "She took refuge in her furies."

She is angry, bitter, given to speaking as if contemptuous of others, and nearly to the point of ruining her life.

When the boarding house burns, her epiphany is yet to come, and Mary nearly dies trying to save some of the fancy clothes that she wears in hopes of catching the eye of a talent scout.

The other characters are less developed than these, although Sue Martin is significant. She seems to lack the anxieties the other characters have.

Sue does loves O'Banion but is not going to waste her time trying to win the affections of a snob. She works hard and does what she must to care for her son without fussing about life's unfairness. Although the narrative is not entirely clear on this point, it seems that she is an example of a human being who uses Synapse Beta sub Sixteen already, without the stress Boff and Googie create. Indeed, while other boarders seem to be falling into great depths of depression, Susan remains steadfast thanks to a strong will and capable mind. Her saving O'Banion and herself in the novel's fiery climax seems extraordinary to everyone but her; spotting the vent in the collapsing wall and calculating exactly where she and Tony must stand for the vent to fall around them seems unremarkable to her even though others think it amazing. She is an example of someone who sees herself without illusions and never tries to be other than who she is. Sue is clearly the happiest and most sensible character in the novel.

The central theme is reflected in O'Banion's self-deluding question, "Why examine something when you're content with the way it is?" Sturgeon develops the idea that we cannot avoid the responsibility of asking the searching questions— Are you happy with your life? Are you happy with yourself? Sturgeon's characters begin, often reluctantly, with these simple questions and end up probing deeply into their assumptions about themThe Widget, the Wadget, and Boff selves and their lives as each question leads to new questions. For O'Banion it begins with the answer "a way of life" and the realization that the answer is without meaning. Why be a lawyer if he is a gentleman? Well, there is still room for gentlemen in the practice of law—another pointless answer. "You never say anything! You only ask questions!" declares Halvorsen to Sam, which may well be Sturgeon's point. The questions addressed to the heart and spirit must come first before even provisional answers to the problems of self and life can be obtained. This slow, tedious, and often painful process of people questioning themselves for self-knowledge is dramatically accelerated in the novel by the intervention of aliens who begin questioning human nature through experiments conducted on a few unwitting individuals.

One of the aliens says in his report that "it appears that this culture possessed the synapse but did not use it.

[!!!]" The aliens try to discover whether or not humans can use the synapse and what happens if they do. An alien identified in the report as "[Smith]" decides to confront humans with a situation in which they may die if they do not use their Synapse Beta sub Sixteens. [Smith] sets fire to the boarding house to create extreme stress for the

humans facing the conflagration and to provide perhaps definitive answers to the questions that set the experiment in motion in the first place. The results are remarkable; "in this illuminated instant" characters suddenly see themselves apart from their situations and quotidian natures, each save Mary Haunt, who has an epiphany soon after the fire, and Sue Martin, already self-knowing, who has a revelation in which time itself becomes another dimension. Sturgeon refers to the experience of people drowning as an example: some see their entire existence laid out before them in visions of lives-in-totality. It is possible that The Widget, the [Wadget], and Boff is the result of questions that arose for Sturgeon during his work as a seaman, that it is an attempt to understand how some people have revelatory moments while under extreme life-or-death stress. The characters find through their epiphanies—as they see their lives in totality and recognize in their natures that which is false, base, and destructive—that they can change their personalities in wonderful ways. Synapse Beta sub Sixteen is supposed to be a life-saving device for sentient beings; for the boarders, revelation brings with it renewed desire for life. Characters who had been despondent, even suicidal, recognize what they must do to be happy and act reflexively to save themselves and others. In the anticlimax, O'Banion has discarded his foolish snobbery, shed the burden of family expectations, and married Sue.

Halvorsen has become comfortable with his sexuality; Mary Haunt, still likely to remain beautiful, will return to her hometown and become part of the life of the community; and Miss Schmidt, forever shy and frightened, has learned to relax and become Reta Schmidt, no longer a librarian but a schoolteacher who surrounds her students with knowledge.

Sturgeon attempts to leave readers of this novel of ideas with the encompassing conclusion that our capacity to understand ourselves is both our personal salvation and our salvation as a species. The alien report concludes that humanity "will not destroy itself and very probably cannot be destroyed by anything." This almost defiant confidence in the ability of man to endure and prevail reverberates with the tensions of the Cold War period in which the book was published (1955), a time when widespread fear of a nuclear holocaust contended with the belief that science and technology would continue to improve, even safeguard, human life. There are still many reasons in our world today to fear human self-destruction, either now or in the not too distant future, and the novel's conclusion therefore retains much of its edged ambiguity for the modern young reader; though this is muted to a degree since Sturgeon urges replacing fear with understanding of oneself and one's community. Humanity, as symbolized by Halvorsen and O'Banion, can achieve greater understanding of its huge foolishness and its potential for improvement by this unwavering look into the face of the fire of imminent self-annihilation. The fire burns, we stand on a ledge above it, but we can step back from the chasm and continue living.

Topics for Discussion

1. What are the characteristics of an average person? How are they reflected in Sturgeon's novel?

2. Have you ever responded to an emergency by doing unthinkingly what was right? What was the experience like? Do Sturgeon's descriptions of how his characters react come close to your experience?

3. What is "Synapse Beta sub Sixteen"? What is it supposed to do? Why would it be essential for the survival of a sentient species?

4. Why would Robin be able to see Boff and Googie? Did Boff and Googie use him as part of their experiment?

5. Is what Boff and Googie did to the human characters immoral?

6. Why would someone want to be average?

7. Why would Mary Haunt obsessively pursue a goal that was not her own but was created for her by someone else?

8. Why would Tony O'Banion reject the love of someone he loved because she did not have his breeding?

9. Reta Schmidt moves from being surrounded by knowledge to surrounding students with her knowledge. What is the difference? What in her experiences would inspire her to make the change?

10. When Mary Haunt makes Philip Halvorsen a beautiful sandwich, she foreshadows the revelation that she prefers cooking and small-town life to becoming a movie star. Are there other examples of foreshadowing in The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff?

11. Why does Sue Martin seem to be the least changed of the human characters (aside from Robin)?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are some published accounts of near-death experiences? Are they similar to what the characters in experience?

2. What is the my-whole-lifepassed-before-me phenomenon? Why does Sturgeon associate it with people who are drowning?

3. What are synapses and how are they associated with reflexes?

4. Is it possible for the mind to have reflexes the way the body does? What do scientists say?

5. What to scientific ethicists say about the morality of experimenting on human beings? What do they say about the morality of experimenting on animals?

The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff 6. What are some examples of currently "in" activities that advertisements and mass media say everyone who is normal should want to do?

How satisfying are these activities?

Which are worthwhile? Which hurt people or are foolish?

7. How would one go about creating an experiment in which one hoped to find out how well an aspect of the human mind worked? How would one maintain objectivity? What would be the ethical considerations? Who has the right to authorize such an experiment?

8. What aspects from his experiences does Sturgeon use in The [Widget], the Wadget, and Boff? (For example, he was an hotel manager, a similar job to running a boarding house.) How do the aspects drawn from his experience affect the verisimilitude of the narrative?

9. What is the function of a boarding house? Who typically lives in one?

Who typically owns one? Where are they most common? Have their functions changed since 1955, when The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff was published?

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Related Titles

The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff, in large measure a meditation upon what makes us human, can be seen as part of Sturgeon's lifelong fictional quest to explain the defining characteristics of human beings. In More Than Human, he investigates what makes a human community functional by bringing together children who are misfits as individuals but who become a powerful force when united. As with the characters in The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff, Sturgeon concerns himself with those who make up all of humanity. He does so by identifying the elemental human qualities in people who are social misfits, individuals estranged from the rest of humanity by the fact of having a surface that has scarcely anything in common with others. The situation of the children is more bizarre than that of Philip Halvorsen, although they share a common alienation from society. One of the human qualities that most interested Sturgeon was the capacity for love and how love manifested itself. In The Widget, the Wadget, and Boff, he presents love of self versus self-loathing; love for children (in the aliens Boff and Googie as well as in the humans); and romantic love. The aspects of love are examined in most of what he wrote, and Sturgeon was wrestling with the issues of love almost to the end of his life The posthumously published Godbody (1986) emphasizes religious love, but he seems to conclude that love of another human being, especially romantic love, holds the key to epiphany and the love that brings with it understanding and compassion.

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