

Notes for Podcast: "Sleight of Hand" by Peter Beagle

Peter Beagle, who is the editor of our story collection, is most famous for the novel *The Last Unicorn*, about a unicorn searching to find out what happened to the rest of her kind. She is captured by a woman who runs a traveling exhibition of magical creatures, all of which are fake except for the unicorn and the harpy Celaeno. She is helped to escape by a young magician, Schmendrick, who has magical power but little control. His spells usually go wrong. There is an animated version.

Apparently Beagle wrote his first novel, *A Fine and Private Place*, when he was only 19 years old. That novel is a love story between two ghosts. The title echoes Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," which says,

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

In Beagle's novel, they actually do. Marvell was wrong.

In "Sleight of Hand" we have another magician. Note that "sleight of hand" is what stage magicians do. They distract the audience with one hand, so that they don't see what the other hand is doing. This is not real magic. It is delightful trickery that requires much practice, skill and talent, but no actual magic.

(Tell story about magician in Japan.)

"Slight of Hand" is about love, grief, and sacrifice. It is about small decisions that sometimes have big consequences. It is also about "survivor's guilt."

A woman asks her husband to run an errand and their small daughter decides to go along. There is an automobile accident and they both perish. The woman is so overcome with grief that she drives aimlessly away in her husband's car. She drives and drives. She finally stops at a hotel and goes to a diner. At the diner there is a magic show. When she leaves the diner, she gets lost and can't find her hotel. She meets the magician, who is waiting for her. He produces a silver horse statue from her hair and she recognizes it as something she had and lost. He says they have met before, and triggers a memory of when she wandered away in the park and got separated from her family.

(Read 281-82)

The puzzle of this story is "Who is this magician?" This is a difficult puzzle, though there are many clues. If you didn't find an answer, do not feel bad. I have read a number of reviews of this story, and not one reviewer provided a definitive answer, and Beagle himself, when asked indirectly, says he does not want to give too much away.

The magician gives us a riddle:

(Read riddle on 280)

And he says that her father loved her and that he and her father "dealt in the same currency."

(Read on 286)

The woman asks him directly if he is Death. He says “Not at all.” (287)

She asks if he can make time run backward. He says no.

(Read on bottom of 287)

And he says that Death is efficient, punctual, but not very bright.

On the last page, she says, “I don’t know who you are, but I know what you are. You’re something good.”

1. So that’s the first question. Who or what is the magician who can’t change what is already ordained, but can fool Death a little by shuffling the cards? What does he represent?
2. The woman (the reader too) is surprised by the way in which the trick works. Is this consistent with all of the conditions that the magician has stated for the trick to work?
3. In your view, has the woman made the right choice?
4. Then there is the silver horse, which the magician gives the girl when she is small, returns it to her at their second meeting (actually the third), after she lost it in college, and then takes back again at the very end. What is that about? Is this re-looping of time with a slight difference fore-ordained from the start?