

Peter S. Beagle Finds Magic In 'Calabria' by Tasha Robinson

Peter Beagle owes much of his career to a unicorn — specifically, the protagonist of his 1968 novel *The Last Unicorn*, the lyrical, tragic, wryly funny bestseller that inspired a cult-hit animated movie and earned him a permanent spot on virtually every knowledgeably curated best-fantasy-of-all-time list. Over more than 55 years of writing fantasy, non-fiction, autobiography, and humor, he's returned to unicorns many times in smaller ways, from the *Last Unicorn* sequel novella "Two Hearts" to the young-adult novel *The Unicorn Sonata* to short stories like "Julie's Unicorn" and "Professor Gottesman And The Indian Rhinoceros."

Unicorns are a long-term preoccupation of Beagle's, possibly because the way he conceives them is so emblematic of the kind of fantasy he writes. In his work, unicorns aren't just animals with magic tacked on. They're avatars of ineffable, unearthly wonder. When people in Beagle stories interact with unicorns, they always come away stupefied and enthralled at having touched something much older, richer, and vaster than anything humanity has to offer. But they generally come away more human, as well.

The trend continues with *In Calabria*, a short novel about a stubborn middle-aged Italian farmer who finds a pregnant unicorn investigating his land. In private, Claudio Bianchi is a poet and a secret romantic. Around other people, like pushy mailman Romano Muscari and his no-nonsense sister Giovanna, Bianchi is gruff and dismissive. He enjoys his privacy, his independence and his isolation. And when the unicorn arrives, he enjoys her too, in a secret, private, almost religious way.

The unicorn does not speak, and gives no clear indication that she understands his florid speeches of companionship. But Bianchi regards her as a hallowed mystery, as welcome and alien to him as the other beloved animals on his farm. Inevitably, though, word about the unicorn spreads. Bianchi's farm is invaded by hunters and tourists, protestors and fanatics, and eventually dangerous criminals who want to force him off his family's land and seize the unicorn and her colt for themselves.

The Last Unicorn is florid and flowery. Every other sentence contains an elaborate metaphor or a magnificently strange turn of phrase. But Beagle's writing style has slowly trended away from *Last Unicorn*'s loopy whimsy over the past five decades. *In Calabria* feels worlds away from his first unicorn story: It's punchy and frank, with a simple, direct style that mirrors Bianchi's straightforward inner life. The plot gently recalls James Thurber's "The Unicorn In The Garden," another minimalist story about a man who takes profound joy in a visitor on his property, then encounters resistance from the rest of the world. And the comparison feels clearer than it might be with a more elaborately realized book, because Beagle's prose here is so lean, so focused on bare dialogue and action.

In Calabria is exactly like Bianchi himself: practical on the surface, but harboring an inner warmth and sentiment that informs every step. Like so much of Beagle's work, it's about jaded adults experiencing childlike awe again, for better and worse. Bianchi's tragic history has led to isolation, and meeting something wondrous eases him back into parts of the world he considered closed to him. This is how Beagle has always dealt with magic: At his best, he combines earthy practicality with delight and bewildered joy, and his work usually nestles folklore and modern concerns side-by-side. *In Calabria* upholds that pattern, putting unicorns in the same world as gangsters and news helicopters, and exploring how they'd all interact. But the real pleasure of the book is in seeing how cranky, withdrawn Bianchi flowers once something really extraordinary enters his life.

It's been a hard decade or so for Beagle, who is currently suing his former manager for fraud and physical abuse, only a few years after finally resolving the longstanding legal battle over his contractual rights to the film version of *The Last Unicorn*. But he's been undergoing a minor renaissance lately, with *In Calabria* and his 2016 book *Summerlong* marking his first novels since 1999's *Tamsin*. As absorbing and well-realized as his short fiction is, it's still exciting to have him involved in longer work again, particularly when he's returning to his favorite theme, and finding new ways to revitalize it.

Peter Beagle will always be associated with unicorns. It's fortunate, then, that he's turned them into such a potent metaphor, suitable for any era, and any kind of troubled hero in need of a little magic.

Memory And Loss Haunt The Stories In 'The Refugees' by Michael Schaub

Even if you've read the news reports or seen the horrifying photographs, it's hard to fathom the terrible extent of the Syrian refugee crisis. The United States has accepted more than 10,000 Syrians fleeing the country's civil war, but that's a drop in the bucket — millions of Syrians have been forced out of their home country, hoping other nations will take them in. Some have, some have since closed the door.

In his first short story collection, writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 for his novel *The Sympathizer*, takes a look at how it feels and what it means to be a refugee. The characters in his stories are mainly Vietnamese citizens and their families, forced out of their country at the end of the Vietnam War, trying to make a home in a strange new land. It's a beautiful collection that deftly illustrates the experiences of the kinds of people our country has, until recently, welcomed with open arms.

The book begins with the haunting "Black-Eyed Women," about a ghostwriter who lives with her mother; both were refugees from Vietnam. When the writer's mother mentions that she was visited by the ghost of her son, killed by pirates on the boat voyage to America, the writer wonders whether she might be on the verge of senility.

But then she herself gets a visit from her brother's ghost, and realizes her lifelong struggle to forget him has always been doomed to fail. "More often ... I go hunting for the ghosts, something I can do without ever leaving home," she muses. "As they haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs. They are pallid creatures, more frightened of us than we are of them. That is why we see these shades so rarely, and why we must seek them out."

Remembrance is a common theme in Nguyen's stories, particularly the kind of unwelcome memories that haunt the pasts of those who have endured trauma. In "The Americans," a married couple visit their daughter, who works as an English teacher in Saigon. The father has never been to Vietnam, apart from flying it as an American pilot in the war.

And he feels ill at ease on Vietnamese soil, finding it hard to forget his actions during the war: "The tonnage fell far behind his B-52 after its release, and so he had never seen his own payload explode or even drop, although he watched other planes of his squadron scattering their black seed into the wind, leaving him to imagine what he would later see on film, the bombs exploding, footfalls of an invisible giant stomping the earth." It's a beautiful story about love, fear and loss, rendered perfectly by Nguyen.

Every story in *The Refugees* succeeds on its own terms, but the most affecting one, perhaps, is "The Other Man," about an 18-year-old man named Liem who seeks refuge in America in 1975, after the fall of Saigon. He's taken in by a gay couple, immigrants themselves, one from England and one from Hong Kong.

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Even as he makes a new life for himself in California, he finds himself beset by memories of his narrow escape from Vietnam. "As he lay on his cot and listened to children playing hide-and-seek in the alleys between the tents, he tried to forget the people who had clutched at the air as they fell into the river, some knocked down in the scramble, others shot in the back by desperate soldiers clearing a way for their own escape," Nguyen writes. "He tried to forget what he'd discovered, how little other lives mattered to him when his own was at stake."

The Refugees comes at a time when Americans are being forced to reckon with what our country is becoming, what values we truly hold dear. It's hard not to feel for Nguyen's characters, many of whom have been dealt an unfathomably bad hand. But Nguyen never asks the reader to pity them; he wants us only to see them as human beings. And because of his wonderful writing, it's impossible not to do so.

It's an urgent, wonderful collection that proves that fiction can be more than mere storytelling — it can bear witness to the lives of people who we can't afford to forget. As one of Nguyen's character reflects, "Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts."

'Caraval' Is A Dark Circus Where The Clowns Don't Like You by Caitlyn Paxson

The world of *Caraval* is one part amusement park, one part Venice, and one part game show, painted in all the colors of a gothic circus. Girls in gowns rustle their way down dark hallways, searching for clues that will win them a wish — but some girls have more need of wishes than others.

Scarlett has led a life made small by abuse. She and her sister Tella dwell in constant fear of their cruel and violent father. Tella beats against the bars of their golden cage, but Scarlett keeps the peace as best she can, desperate to protect them both. She has given up on her childhood dream of attending Caraval, a magical performance that blends theatre with an adventure game, resigning herself to an arranged marriage that will offer her — and Tella — a true escape from their father.

When an invitation arrives from Legend himself, the mastermind creator of Caraval, beckoning the sisters to a mysterious island and offering them a place in the game, Tella forces Scarlett to abandon her plans of calculated safety in favor of an adventure. But it soon becomes clear that Legend has other ideas. He steals Tella away and makes her the prize of Caraval, leaving Scarlett no choice but to win the game.

Scarlett knows that everything she experiences in Caraval is a part of the performance, but the line between fantasy and reality starts to blur, especially when it comes to Julian, a sailor boy who has joined the game. Like everyone she encounters in Caraval, he isn't what he seems — and she can't resist his help or his company. As the nights of the game progress, she sinks deeper and deeper into a story that grows ever darker, and gets further and further from the safe future that was almost within her grasp.

Scarlett is an unusual heroine for this sort of YA quasi-historical fantasy. Tella is the more obvious choice, with her rebellious spirit and freewheeling ways. Scarlett's abuse has bowed her, making her doubt every choice and play by every rule. At times she seems prudish, prim, and even resentful of her love for Tella. Instead of saying, "yes, and," to each scenario, she says a determined, "no, thanks." I love seeing this kind of character at the forefront of an adventure story. Her attitude takes her in unusual directions as she explores the layers of Caraval, and I found myself rooting for her to grow into someone who could make confident decisions to shape her own future.

I went into this book expecting it to be a story primarily about the relationship between two sisters, but it's more invested in this challenge of taking charge of your own story when you are the victim of terrible abuse. Scarlett begins as a vessel buoyed along on other people's currents, and at first it seems as though she is beginning to chart her own course. But disappointingly, she succumbs to a series of choices made by other people, and her willingness to forgive and forget makes her seem like a doormat.

Ultimately, the message of *Caraval* ends up muddled, and Scarlett's acceptance of its final revelations left me uncomfortable. I wish in some ways that we had also gotten the story from Tella's point of view — seen from Scarlett's, she becomes quite monstrous. It would have been interesting to see their divergent paths unfurl at the same time.

Despite this, there is plenty here to enjoy, especially for fans of the very niche romantic carnival sub-genre. The greatest strength of *Caraval* is the world of the game, which feels like a journey into a dark branch of Disneyland, where the animatronics have feelings and don't like you very much, and the expensive cupcakes may have poison in them. It's a place where I could gladly return, in hope of a story with a more satisfying emotional arc to match the splendid trappings.

But sadly for me, *Caraval* the book very closely resembles Caraval the game: A beautiful setting for a hollow stone.

Margaret Atwood Plays With The Superhero Genre In 'Angel Catbird' by Etelka Lehoczky

As you open *Angel Catbird*, Margaret Atwood's new comic book, your mind may wander through her previous works in search of comparisons and common themes. In her case, that's quite a trip. Though best-known for more than 40 books of fiction, poetry and essays, she's also a creator of comics.

"In the seventies I drew a sort-of-political strip called *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* for a magazine called, puzzlingly, *This Magazine*," she writes in *Catbird*'s introduction. "It's no great coincidence that the narrator of my 1972 novel, *Surfacing*, is an illustrator, and that the narrator of my 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye*, is a figurative painter."

Actually, though, the most revelatory predecessor to *Angel Catbird* is a lesser-known work, 1976's *Lady Oracle*. Its protagonist writes gothic romances and keeps trying to live like she's in one, with boisterous results. (She gets into the romance business after discovering that her larger-than-life lover, a Polish count, supports himself by writing nurse novels.) Atwood has always delighted in subverting genres, and *Lady Oracle* shows her at her mischievous best.

Well, until now. *Angel Catbird* is a triumph of genre play, a superhero comic book that looks like a superhero comic book, reads like a superhero comic book, but gleefully capsizes all the usual notions of what a superhero comic book should be. The main character is a twisted version of the typical animalesque hero. Following the inevitable accident with DNA-altering chemicals, bespectacled scientist Strig Feleedus winds up with the characteristics of not one creature, but two. He's got a cat's head and ears, a magnificent pair of wings and a mix of cat and bird powers. This leads to some confusion. Happening upon a baby bird that's fallen from its nest and is being menaced by a stray cat, he wonders, "Do I rescue it, or eat it?"

Just as weird is the way his powers change his life. Instead of isolating him in the usual way, his cat identity is the passport into an exciting new subculture. It turns out that there are lots of half-cat people around. Even his love interest, Cate Leone, is half-cat. She immediately detects his feline nature via scent.

"Ummm. What a great whiff! He's all tomcat. Or almost all. What's that feather aroma?" she muses. "He's so cute! Maybe next time I'm in heat ..." For Strig, meanwhile, Cate's scent creates another point of confusion. "I'd love it if you had my kittens. Or laid my egg. Whatever," he thinks.

Keeping up the polymorphous perversity, half-cats aren't the only animal-human mixtures around. Upon visiting the feline club The Catastrophe, Strig learns the cats hang out with a half-bat. And the bad guy, Dr. Muroid, is half-rat. (You can tell he's bad because, instead of welcoming diverse animal-human identities, he wants to obliterate the cats with a bioengineered rat army.) The whole milieu seems devised to mirror current discourses around the nature of gender: Instead of being defined primarily as male or female, the characters' identities are expressed through the infinite variety of human-animal hybrids. And for those characters who claim their hybrid identity is fixed and easily delineated, *Angel Catbird* seems intended to serve as a comeuppance. He doesn't fit into any one category, so his existence exposes how dubious all the categories are.

Angel Catbird looks a lot like a mainstream superhero comic, which is to say the art has the hard, computer-designed sheen that's usual nowadays. Artist Johnnie Christmas is capable, if not inspired. Dr. Muroid has a wonderfully twisted face, *Angel Catbird*'s body is sculpted and Cate has strangely appealing hair that seems to move by itself. *Angel Catbird*'s feet are particularly beautiful, with feathery fur swirling around humongous claws.

The art serves an intriguing function: It keeps the story grounded in its genre, making it feel like a real superhero tale. In fact, *Angel Catbird* is more dreamlike than action-packed. For one thing, Atwood so busy exploring the possibilities of her interspecies world, she neglects to have her hero fight crime. But that's no shortcoming; actually, it may be the smartest way to deal with her themes. Here, the big dramas all take place in the mind.