

Reader's Guide to *There's Something in the Back Yard*

Summary

There's Something in the Back Yard tells the story of George Binns, an English professor at an unnamed university in Flagstaff, Arizona, who wakes up one morning to find a Hopi kachina, the Aholi, standing in his back yard. Is it real? Is it human? Is it a spirit? Unfamiliar with Native American traditions, and curious about this silent yet sentient being that seems more benevolent than threatening, George begins to research the matter and seeks answers among the local Hopi population. His wife, the sharp-witted Mary Olive, shares neither his curiosity nor his serious, earnest way of approaching the apparently otherworldly visitor. George's scholarly neighbor Don doesn't want anything to do with the kachina and insists that his own wife, Sally, a naive but passionate enthusiast of all things Native American, be kept in the dark about the kachina's presence. Over the course of four days, as the Aholi remains a shadowy figure in the yard, emotional undercurrents in the couples' relationships come into sharp focus, and George and Don both realize they have to make important choices. This beautifully written novel, woven throughout with the tantalizing thread of the unknown, offers both wisdom and humor while gently illuminating, as one character puts it, "the terror and glory of ever having lived."

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Who—or what—is the kachina that appears in George's back yard? Does the author answer this question at the end of the book?
2. George, Mary Olive, Don, and Sally perceive the Hopi, and Native Americans in general, through four different lenses. How do their perceptions differ? Which viewpoint would you say is the most accurate?
3. *There's Something in the Back Yard* follows in the literary tradition of "The Bear," *The Mountain Lion*, and other stories insofar as it involves humans confronting a creature symbolic of an aspect of the natural world. What does the kachina symbolize in *There's Something in the Back Yard*?
4. What does Don's unpublished manuscript, *Retold Tales of the Hopi*, tell us about Hopi legends? How should one show respect for cultural and ethnic traditions other than our own?
5. Despite his inability to take action in certain situations, what compels George to take action when he sees the kachina? Why did the author choose to put George at the center of the story—as opposed to Mary Olive, Don, or Sally?
6. How does the author use humor in the story? Does the humor lighten dramatic moments or heighten them?

7. Snodgrass is one of a number of authors who have written about Native American themes, including Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and N. Scott Momaday. How does Snodgrass's approach to these themes differ from those of these other writers?

8. Early in the book, Don recalls a passage from the writings of Carlos Castaneda: "When it's time to die, Death comes and takes you to a place that has been special to you in your lifetime, a place that has been a place of power for you." What does this passage mean to you, and where else do you see Castaneda's influence in *There's Something in the Back Yard*?

9. Mary Olive and Don seem to share the same outlook on life, whereas Sally and George share a different outlook. Yet each is paired in marriage with his or her opposite. What holds the couples together?

10. At the end of *There's Something in the Back Yard*, George says, "A man's work has value in itself, whatever the work is." This provokes a heated discussion with Don. Do you agree with George's statement and its implications for the artifacts we leave behind?

About the Author

Richard Snodgrass's short stories and essays have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Bread Loaf Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, *California Review*, *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and other publications. He is the recipient of a fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and has been artist in residence at Light Work, in Syracuse, New York, and at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, in Taos, New Mexico. His other books include *An Uncommon Field: The Flight 93 Temporary Memorial*, published in September of 2011 by Carnegie Mellon University Press, and *Kitchen Things: An Album of Vintage Utensils and Farm Kitchen Recipes*, published in 2013 by Skyhorse and named one of the year's "best books to get you thinking about food" by the Associated Press.

For more information about *There's Something in the Back Yard*, go to www.TheresSomethingInTheBackYard.com