After All These Years Short Guide

After All These Years by Susan Isaacs

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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".

Contents

Characters

R osie Meyers bears more than a little resemblance to Isaacs's other heroines. Like them, she is a keen observer with a buoyant charm, seeing the humor in situations where others might find only despair. And of course she shares some details of identity with them: ethnicity (Jewish), residence (Long Island), and class (upper- middle professional).

Beyond these similarities, there are also some differences. Perhaps because of her position as role model to high school students, she is not so inclined to spout offhand comments; she usually thinks before she speaks. And perhaps because she has negotiated more of life's passages, with reasonable success, she lacks Judith Singer's restlessness or Marcia Green's uncertainty about her own achievements. She is not poised on an invisible brink, ready for events that will change her own selfimage as well as her life. Indeed, if Richie's murder had not occurred, she would still be leading a full and interesting life, albeit a quieter one.

With all this, Rosie is not nearly as bland as she sounds. Her early-morning running and her addiction to detective lore come in handy during her week as a fugitive. In stream of consciousness style, she worries about her grown sons, admires her green eyes and clear skin, and then bemoans the triumph of gravity over exercise on her figure. Almost every woman can identify with this engaging heroine.

The other characters serve either as foils to or aids in Rosie's quest for the real murderer. For the most part the helpful characters are more unusual than the roadblockers such as Sgt. Gevinski, who is the stereotypical dense cop. At least this is how Rosie perceives him, and with his minor role we do not get to see him in another light.

Her friends, however, are unique and fascinating people. Among the most memorable are Cass and Theodore Higbee. Cass, Rosie's nominal boss, has a gift for organizing everything from amateur theatrics to amateur sting operations. She does the latter late in the novel, stuffing a willing Rosie into her BMW's trunk to gain access to the suspect's house. Her husband Higbee is proud of being a black conservative; he named their dog Ronnie in honor of his favorite president and threatens to write a column on Rosie's "fine libertarian spirit" after she solves the kill ing. Cass and Theodore have the best marriage of any couple in the book, despite their political differences.

Danny Reese, Rosie's former student who buys her a "clean" new ID, is another notable character. When she seeks shelter in his dingy apartment, Rosie gets more than she bargains for: referral to a good criminal lawyer, a surprisingly sharp analysis of the possible suspects, and a delightful sexual encounter. Danny's street smarts are just what Rosie needs to counter her naivete at this point. In contrast, Rosie's old boyfriend, Tom Driscoll, who comes back into her life, stays a bit hazy. He is helpful and likable enough, but like many Prince Charmings, more memorable for what he represents than who he is.

Social Concerns

There is an obvious similarity between After All These Years and Isaacs's first novel, Compromising Positions (1978). In both books, the protagonist is a bright Jewish woman whose comfortable suburban life is jarred by murder. And in both, the heroine must face not only danger, but uncomfortable truths about her own life, as she works to solve the mystery.

Rosie Meyers's situation, however, is much grimmer than that of Judith Singer, the heroine of Compromising Positions. After Rosie stumbles over her ex-husband's body on her kitchen floor, she herself becomes the chief suspect.

She eludes a police watch just minutes before arrest and sets out to discover the real killer in order to clear herself.

Rosie's predicament, and her growing desperation as the traps of circumstantial evidence and police apathy close in on her, are hardly accidental.

The economic and social uncertainties of the late 1980s and the 1990s have shaken American middle-class lives like no event since the Great Depression. While becoming a murder suspect is not yet a typical experience, the other traumatic events that happen to the characters of this novel are all too common in real life. Rosie's wealthy and seemingly loving husband demanded a divorce the morning after their lavish silver anniversary party.

The husband's friend, who helped build their Data Associates partnership from a dining-room table operation to a hugely successful company, ends up "downsized" and broke, living in a grimy, boarded-up apartment building.

Other characters also have blighted careers or exploding marriages. Almost no one is immune to sudden reversals of fortune: loyalty, genius, hard work, and "playing by the rules" provide no protection.

Likewise, Rosie reflects much else in the lives of postfeminist middle-class women. She has negotiated the shoals of marriage-versus-career successfully: She has fulfilling work as a high school English teacher, two talented and competent young adult sons, and a supportive circle of friends. All these connections provide a reasonably satisfactory life even with her impending divorce. Unlike many women of the previous generations, she is not devastated by her husband's departure. Yet further challenges — and dangers — await her. As baby-boom women traverse middle age, Rosie's adventures provide both a warning of danger ahead and reassuring proof that an eventful life — as well as sexual fulfillment and a new love — can still be found at forty-five, fifty, or beyond.

Finally, Rosie's troubles would have stayed minor if the police investigator had been competent and her ex-husband's associates not so well-guarded by their wealth and social position.

Incompetent police detectives and lying suspects are standard features in mysteries, if only to place the burden of solution in the amateur sleuth's hands. Yet the intransigence of these particular characters — Sergeant Gevinski's unshakable belief in Rosie's guilt, her first lawyer's dilatory attitude, the corporate elite's use of doormen, secretaries, and computer codes to avoid confrontations — show a profound distrust of authority and position.

Techniques

After All These Years is told from the first-person point of view. This is a common method in many novels of mystery and suspense, enabling the reader to follow along, seeing clues and experiencing dangers as the sleuth encounters them. Unlike some toughguy heroes of the detective genre, Rosie tells us about her feelings right out: "I couldn't stand being in a dead man's trench coat another minute."

Along with her occasional reveries, this gives the reader more information about her (and about the background to events) than a flat, distant camera like point of view would.

Themes

The novel's concern with marital and economic vulnerability, and its distrust of authority figures, do not carry a negative charge, because justice is ultimately done. Rosie's own wit and daring, and the aid of a few good friends, help her discover the real murderer.

Along the way, on the lam, she confronts perils that test her inner self even more than they frighten her. The theme that emerges is one of qualified hope. A brave and resourceful person can overcome outrageous fate, but she has to be willing to take outrageous risks. It is a perennial American belief, still received eagerly by most readers.

A related theme, perhaps a more innovative one, relates to the nature of the risks Rosie is prepared to take. After All These Years shows a traditionally feminine heroine performing morally ambiguous acts. Breaking-and-entering and physical self-defense go with the territory for P.I.s like Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski and Tanya Huff's Victoria Nelson. But Rosie is not a hard-boiled detective, and the ladylike English teacher stealing cash from her son's buddy, or holding a gun to her neighbor's forehead, do not fit the detective genre. The overt theme here is that desperate circumstances call for desperate measures. But the more interesting subtext is that none of her victims finds such actions very surprising. Whether this reflects a societal breakdown in gender roles or in moral standards depends on the reader's own beliefs. In any event, Rosie surprises herself by her own pragmatism. The deeper theme — underlined when she learns the murderer's identity — is that no one knows what she is capable of doing until put to the test.

The book also contains minor themes found in Isaacs's other works as well: hidden lives, the equivocal blessings of wealth, amateur detection as self-discovery, women's friendships as a safety net, and exuberant female sexuality. To have loaded all this onto a simple mystery-and-suspense plot seems awkward. Yet the author does so very deftly. All these strands fit naturally into Rosie's life and quest as the story unfolds.

Key Questions

In her focus on ordinary people caught in extraordinary situations — and coming out ahead — Isaacs's novels present a generally optimistic view of life. She is a sharp observer of contemporary mores and typical problems of an era. For this reason the books hold up a provocative mirror to each of the decades that they're set in, as well as to concerns in some readers' lives.

1. Circumstantial evidence makes Rosie Meyers the logical suspect in her ex-husband's murder. Would better police investigation, or Rosie having had a good lawyer from the beginning, have cleared her without her own extraordinary efforts? Are bumbling official investigations like this one more common in fiction than in real life?

2. The main female characters in Magic Hour and After All These Years, both in their late forties, find new love.

The motif's appeal to the large audience of baby-boomer women readers seems obvious. Yet statistics show that most divorcees in this age group will not remarry. And survey research shows that many of them don't even want to remarry. How do you square or interpret these various facts?

3. What are other novels of the 1990s that feature job uncertainty and marital breakups as "normal" background to American life? How does their treatment of these motifs differ from, or parallel Issac's ideas.

4. Do you find the murderer's explanation of why she killed Richie plausible?

5. Susan Isaacs's success with her novels has not been repeated in her movie-related projects. Is she just the victim of bad luck on the latter? Or are there crucial elements in her fiction that do not translate well to the screen?

6. Isaacs's novels have been grand commercial successes. Critics tend to disparage Isaacs as just an author of popular tales with pretensions to being a serious writer. Does it matter where a novel falls on the continuum between "formula fiction" and "real literature"?

Where would you place Isaacs's works on this scale?

Literary Precedents

The mystery is one of the most venerable of modern fiction genres, tracing its lineage back to Edgar Alan Poe's tales of August Dupin. Contemporary mysteries still get solved by logic and observation, but detectives' other traits and modes of operation have become much more varied in the past two or three decades. There are now more women detectives than anyone can count. Some of their stories display further parallels to elements of After All These Years.

Ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands mean trouble for many female sleuths. Vicious lawyerly traps turn out to be placed by the P.I.'s ex-husband in Tunnel Vision (1994) by Sara Paretsky.

Lieutenant Molina's zeal to nail the vanished Mystifying Max brings constant police suspicion to his former lover Temple Barr, the heroine of Catnap (1992) and later mysteries by Carole Nelson Douglas. But it is left to Rosie Meyers to prove that a dead exhusband can cause infinitely more trouble than a live one! Nothing Personal (1994) by Eileen Dreyer contains another heroine from a traditionally women's profession, a nurse, who is forced into detection in order to clear herself.

Although its structure puts it within the mystery category, this book is also a woman's adventure tale. Susan Isaacs has said that she feels women have too few adventure stories for themselves; she wants to provide them with more.

In this effort, After All These Years echoes several of her previous novels.

Other notable recent women's adventure fiction is found in several genres, including Elizabeth Peters' Amelia Peabody mystery series set in turn-of-the century Egypt; Mercedes Lackey's By the Sword, a fantasy with a female mercenary captain as heroine; and even historical romances, such as Laura Kinsale's Flowers from the Storm.

Related Titles

Some of Isaacs's other titles also have a Long Island setting and a mystery format (Compromising Positions, [1978; see separate entry]; Magic Hour, 1991), and most of them have a likable Jewish woman as a major character. In "writing what she knows," the author has managed to give such settings and character identities a new twist each time.

The mystery-cum-love-story seems to be a particular favorite of Isaacs; it is a fair bet that both elements will also appear in future works of the author.

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