Animal Stories Study Guide

Animal Stories by Jason Brown

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Introduction

"Animal Stories," Jason Brown's story of a young man grappling with his mother's imminent death from a brain tumor, has received widespread acclaim as the work of a strong and up-and-coming author. In *25 and Under/Fiction,* an anthology containing "Animal Stories," Brown notes that he wrote this story when he was twenty-two and his mother was in the hospital for a successful operation. "My relationship with her was bad enough that I had not gone to visit her. The guilt drove this story on," he remembers.

The story is told by the character Jamie as a recollection of his mother's recent stay in the hospital after she is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Memories from further in the past blend in and out of the moments that Jamie spends in the hospital room with his mother. These memories provide critical background information on his family life and on the state of his adult life, including his failures in school, at work, and in his love life. The memories serve as a distraction to the fact that Jamie's mother, whose hold on reality is tenuous at best, is dying a horrible death and refuses to allow the doctors to treat her. Also serving as a distraction, as well as a prompt to his reminiscing, are the nature and animal videos playing almost nonstop on the television in his mother's hospital room.

Author Biography

Jason Brown, born in 1969, grew up in Portland, Maine, and received his Master of Fine Arts degree from Cornell University. Later he attended Stanford University as a Wallace Stegner Fellow and a Truman Capote Fellow.

"Animal Stories" appears in Jason Brown's debut collection of thirteen short stories entitled *Driving the Heart and Other Stories,* as well as in an anthology entitled *25 and Under/Fiction.* The *Georgia Review* first published "Animal Stories" in its Summer 1994 issue.

In *25 and Under/Fiction,* Brown notes that he was so confused at the time he wrote "Animal Stories" "that I could barely make a sandwich." He was twenty-two, and his mother had been in the hospital for a successful operation, but he failed to visit her because they did not have a good relationship.

Currently, Brown teaches writing at Stanford. In addition to the *Georgia Review* and *25 and Under/Fiction,* Brown's stories have appeared in the 1996 edition *of Best American Short Stories* and in *Mississippi Review, Story, Epoch, TriQuarterly,* and *Indiana Review.*

Plot Summary

"Animal Stories" opens with Jamie rushing to the hospital because he has just found out that his mother has been diagnosed with a brain tumor. He notes that he drives recklessly, which he gets from his mother. "Any man's mother is a source of grief until she dies," he says.

Jamie arrives at the hospital and helps his mother operate a television remote control. She is bald and tries to wear the remote control as a hat. A doctor comes in to see how much Jamie's mother has forgotten since the previous day. His mother is sharing a room with another patient, Sharon, who is hospitalized because she overdosed on drugs.

His mother's situation moves Jamie into a reverie about his life, his lack of friends and a job, and the fact that he used to have a girlfriend who wanted him to change. He notes that by the time his mother has the tumor, "it is too late for me," indicating that his life has already reached its fullest point. From his description of himself, he is overweight, and the few friends he has are crazy. In lieu of a job, he has developed an interest in nature. He compares himself to a tree that is shedding its leaves at the end of summer, much as he is shedding jobs, cars, and possessions.

The doctor, after examining his mother, states that the tumor is "fulminate," indicating that it is growing rapidly and a biopsy is needed to gauge the extent of its malignancy. The doctor notices the nature show on the hospital room's television.

Jamie relates two things his mother did within the past year that indicated something was amiss with her health: she walked in on her ex-husband and his new wife at their house and demanded to know the identity of the wife; and, soon afterwards, she flew to London suddenly, leaving her boyfriend while he was taking a nap during their vacation in Nova Scotia. She called Jamie while she was in London and suggested to him that she was thinking about getting a divorce because she thought her husband was seeing another woman.

Jamie then remembers the summer of 1977, when he and his family lived in Waterville and his father had just moved out of the house. During the previous winter, Jamie's mother had made a habit of wandering around the town placing one-word notes in neighbors' mailboxes. After his father left, Jamie's girlfriend Alice and his friend Tom, moved in with Jamie and his mother. "Mom spent the summer teaching us how to drink gin," he recalls.

Back at the hospital, his mother asks Jamie to tell the doctor that she does not want to undergo a biopsy. He urges her to reconsider, but she claims she doesn't want to know about the tumor and doesn't want to take the time for the procedure. A nature show about pygmy shrews plays on the television. Jamie remembers that his mother has written a book (or perhaps she has only started one; the story isn't clear) about how

animals remember. In 1979, his mother developed an interest in animals and changed her name to Meadow Star.

Jamie comments that he has been trying to forget his past and the things he has done, but it is difficult. Before entering the hospital, his mother had been teaching him how to do this. "To have forgotten and not know one has forgotten, Mom tells me, is the happiness of an animal," Jamie says.

At the hospital, Sharon complains about the nature show, and Jamie's mother changes it to a show called *Animal Imposters.* Jamie's mother asks where the bathroom is, and while Jamie helps her find it, he remembers when his schoolteachers tried to diagnose in him what they thought was a learning disability. "I was born with serious intent and not without means, but somewhere along the line I failed to acquire an adequate degree of clarity," he muses, adding that he stopped worrying about improving himself in 1982 and soon thereafter "stopped caring so much."

Jamie begins to remember more about the summer of 1977. He and Alice made love three times a day, "to stay within commuting distance of her sanity;" and Tom made salads to eat along with all the gin they drank, while Jamie's mother talked about how she was leaving her husband and not the other way around. Jamie's father, David, came by the house several times during that summer to work in the garden. His mother, by then, was "unrecognizable"; she had colored her hair red and was wearing brightly colored clothes from Goodwill. She also was drunk most of the time. She, Jamie, Alice, and Tom spent most of the summer in the basement during the day, due to the extreme heat. Jamie remembers that his mother often blames the tumor on that summer.

At the hospital, Jamie muses as to whether his mother has this tumor because she "can't forget" and, as a psychic friend believes, her soul is "older than the rocks in China, which means she has a lot to forget." A show about the three-toed sloth is on the television. The doctor comes in to tell Jamie and his mother that if she does not agree to the biopsy and subsequent treatment, she should expect "a total loss of self-awareness, followed by a painful sinking into idiocy and death." She does not seem to care. Sharon's drug dealers come into the room to give her pills, as a show on the tree creeper plays on the television.

Jamie remembers August 27, 1977, when his father came to the house to work in the garden for the last time; he mowed down all of the flowers he had been tending that summer. David advised Jamie that "it doesn't matter how you feel about things" and that he should not listen to his mother unless he wanted to end up like her. David's actions plunged the household into deep sadness, and Jamie thinks that the house, to someone from the outside, must have looked abandoned. He never speaks of that summer with his mother.

A bit later the doctor comes back to the room to advise Jamie and his mother that if she does not agree to the biopsy, she must leave the hospital.

Jamie thinks more about the summer of 1977 and how sad they all were. Alice and Tom ate almost nothing but celery in order to lose weight, and his mother forbade the eating of chicken because she started believing in reincarnation. Jamie remembers learning that Tom's mother unsuccessfully tried four different ways of committing suicide and that they all used to go to the Goodwill store to buy clothes, becoming "collages of other people's lives."

At the hospital Jamie's mother confuses time, thinking that Jamie has just taken a biology test— something he has not done since 1983. The doctor comes in as the nature video ends, and Jamie's mother assures him that she will be out of the room very soon. She steals the hospital's bedside lamp and offers her clothes to Sharon, who picks through them. Later, in the car, Jamie is not sure that his mother understands where she is going, but he is certain that she is glad to be out of the hospital. Jamie comments, "What doesn't pass out of our lives, even if it is good, ends up killing us. Finally there is something that won't pass like a disease or a tumor that takes us out of life."

He stops the car in front of his mother's house, the one in which they spent the summer of 1977, and notices that it is in disrepair. His mother asks about a trip to Vienna that he knows they did not take, but he answers her as if the trip really did take place. "Her own past has been replaced by the most pleasant memories from other people's lives," he thinks. He means to touch her face, because he knows she is dying, but she jumps out of the car before he has a chance and disappears into the house. From the back of the house he can see a small light come on.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens with the narrator, Jamie, describing his reaction to the news that his mother has a brain tumor. He hopped in his car and drove recklessly, presumably toward the hospital, though he does not say. Already we sense his ambivalence toward his mother, as he tells us that his self-destructiveness and lapses of concentration are traits he got from her—"any man's mother is a source of grief until she dies"—yet he does not seem to regard these as faults, simply as parts of his personality.

At the hospital, Jamie's mother plays with the remote for the television, seeming not to know its purpose until Jamie uses it to turn on a nature video. A doctor arrives to ask how much his mother has forgotten since the day before. This launches Jamie into reviewing some memories of his own, as he describes himself as an overweight eccentric who attracts "nuts," and who has "interests," particularly in nature, in lieu of a job; he sees it as a choice of thinking over working. Now that his mother is losing her memories, he says, he has begun shedding things of his own, such as cars and clothes, to better "think" about what's important in life.

The doctor announces that the tumor is growing fast, and that he wishes to perform a biopsy to determine the extent of the malignancy. He seems grateful to be distracted by the nature video and identifies the birds as plovers, to which Jamie's mother responds, cryptically, "not exactly."

Jamie tells us that his mother began acting strangely in 1977, when God told her to watch out for doctors. Her ex-husband, David, Jamie's father, is a doctor. It was not until just a year before the story opens, however, that Jamie's father began noticing that she was, as he put it, "losing little things," a bit of an understatement considering that one of the things she has lost is the fact that she and David have been divorced for years. She also, while vacationing in Nova Scotia, abruptly left the bed and breakfast while her unsuspecting boyfriend lay napping, and flew to London for no reason at all except that, as she later told Jamie, she thought she might like to meet the Queen. Jamie recalls the precise dates during which his mother believed in God—the year she left one-word messages from Him in people's mailboxes; that same year, David moved out, and Jamie's girlfriend and his friend Tom moved in, and the four of them spent the summer drinking gin until "what happened would not be remembered the next day."

Jamie's mother does not want the biopsy. She has decided that since her time left is limited, she should write a book on how animals remember. Jamie says his mother loves animals because they cannot remember in the same way we do, except for dogs, which she says learn from people. The two watch a video about "disoriented and irresponsible" shrews that have become narcotized by industrial fallout. Later, during a video about animals that use disguise, camouflage or trickery to survive, Jamie's mother asks where the bathroom can be found, and Jamie escorts her, guiding her warily

through a hospital that he imagines not as a place of healing but as a dangerous place teeming with danger and disease. Animals are happy because they have forgotten, and do not even know it, says Jamie's mother. She has been aiding Jamie in his attempt to forget things, teaching him little tricks that will go into her animal book. He admits that he frequently lives not by "being himself," as his mother had counseled before her illness, but by pretending to be someone else entirely, sometimes living as a character from a book he has read. He has given up trying to define himself by what he has done in the past, later saying, "nothing is less like him" than the things he has done.

Jamie explains himself as someone who simply does not see things clearly enough. He says that even in grade school the teachers were concerned that he might have some sort of disability or medical condition, something that seemed both fleeting and variable and thus impossible to diagnose. He likens himself to a broken car waiting for a part and implies that, but for that one missing component, he might be a genius. Since it remains missing, he has given up trying to improve his life, or even caring about it. Reminiscing about the summer of 1977, Jamie tells us that his girlfriend, Alice, whose IQ apparently qualifies her as a genius, demanded sex three times a day to stay sane.

Frightened by Jamie's mother's seemingly "desperate" urge to cook during that year, the others banished her from the kitchen. Tom the roommate took up meal duty, making salads to go with the gin they all drank while Jamie's mother talked about the divorce. David has told Jamie that there is no point in worrying about what he is not, saying "You can either be you or someone else," a piece of advice that Jamie derides, despite having just told us that in fact that *is* how he lives his life—as someone else. He says his mother and her family are the real thinkers, not his father or his family. The mother and David interact as if they are two friendly strangers, with David stopping by to work in the garden while the mother watches him from upstairs, and occasionally joining them in the basement where they spent most of their time to escape the summer heat. Jamie's mother blames her brain tumor on the events of that summer, and Jamie finds that logical. By then, however, she had already begun losing her memory, not recognizing the people she lived with—even Jamie—and enjoying them all as "new friends."

Jamie's mother also blames the tumor on her inability to forget. The doctor comes into her hospital room and warns her that without the biopsy and following operation, she will end up losing her awareness, losing herself: "a fate worse than death." She watches a video about the symbiotic relationship between sloths and the insects that live in their fur, and then covers her face with a magazine until the doctor leaves. Afterwards, a pair of drug dealers visit the other patient in the room, leaving her a paper bag and commenting on the valuable drugs to be found in the room. The video has moved on to discussing a bird that is hampered by the fact that it can only move in one direction.

In August of that gin-soaked summer in the basement, David mowed down all the flowers he had cultivated during the summer and never again visited the house. Jamie's mother says David is cruel, but Jamie sees it as an act of self-recrimination, and he is impressed to learn that you can undo so much hard work in an instant and walk away as if nothing had happened, and start over. David warns Jamie not to listen to his mother's ideas, or he will end up like her. Jamie describes the house and its decaying

abandoned-looking condition as a place where the inhabitants are blanketed by a heavy sadness.

According to Jamie, people who know each other too well end up talking about nothing, merely exchanging facts and common knowledge. When the doctor warns Jamie's mother that she must leave the hospital if she continues to refuse treatment, Jamie thinks about animals, and how they are only sad when caged or too much exposed to people, and that animals seem better at adapting and surviving since they seem to know that "whatever we lose is returned to us in time."

He recalls, that during the summer of 1977, his mother taught them all to savor sadness as sweetness, something unavoidable that should be treated as a friend. They all gave up meat when his mother started believing in reincarnation, and spent their time revealing bits of their lives to each other, such as learning about Tom's mother's four unsuccessful suicide attempts. Occasionally they traveled to the Goodwill store for clothes or trinkets to amuse themselves, turning themselves into "walking collages of other people's lives" and laughing at themselves.

Jamie's mother tells the frustrated doctor that she is packing to leave. She fills her suitcase with not with her own clothes, which she gives to her fellow patient, but with things belonging to the hospital, while in the background a video describes the mating habits of the cormorant and some of the stranger creatures of Madagascar. She is happy to leave, although the doctor predicts that she will soon return when the pain becomes unbearable, at which point she will probably be beyond treatment. Jamie thinks about "the good kind of sadness"—the kind his mother taught him—as a shooting star, and is grateful for all that he has forgotten, since these things are now like possibilities for the future. Things that do not pass out of our lives, he says, such as memories, end up killing us. When he and his mother pull up in front of her decaying house, she begins recalling a trip they took together to Vienna and all they did and saw there. Although no such trip ever took place, Jamie plays along without hesitation, happy that "her own past has been replaced by the most pleasant memories of other people's lives." When she disappears into her house, he says that his story has been a retelling of his entire life, everything he can remember, and that we are what we do not know, and what we do know makes us sad, like the small missed chances in our lives.

Analysis

Jamie's "lapses in concentration" help his story flow from different points in his past to the present tense, as he interrupts his own dreamlike reminiscences to tell the story in the present tense. Like the narcotized shrews, he seems "disoriented and irresponsible," switching mid-thought from year to year, and emphasizing his lack of direction and focus in life. Running like a soundtrack or subtitles behind his narrative are the nature videos his mother watches throughout her stay at the hospital, with each topic subtly and slyly adding a new shade of meaning to the ambivalent and complex relationship Jamie has with his mother. These are the eponymous *Animal Stories*. The layering begins right away with the his mother's cryptic "not exactly" response to the

doctor's identification of a bird in a video entitled, *The Nesting Habits of the Semipulvinated Plover,* the meaning of which depends on how much intention and knowledge we assume of both the author, Jason Brown, and his protagonist, Jamie. Taken strictly at face value, assuming no knowledge of these birds, we can at minimum infer that the mother knows—or thinks she knows—something that the doctor does not. Metaphorically this foreshadows for us the mother's eventual dismissal of the doctor's demand that she undergo a biopsy and surgery or else leave the hospital, since it says to us that even in her altered state she knows more about herself and what she needs than does even the most authoritative and learned specialists.

If we assume that Jamie, as a student of his mother's animal stories, and Jason Brown, as the creator of the characters, do know at least something about plovers, we can add another layer of meaning to this video's purpose. The majority of plovers are shorebirds, currently endangered by the encroachment of humans into the world's coastline, the development of which threatens both the birds themselves and their ability to reproduce since they nest essentially in relatively exposed areas of beaches. No doubt, the birds in the video are "exactly" plovers, so one could assume that she is referring in a metaphorical sense to herself and Jamie, in which case she is recognizing that he and his medical advancements are unwelcome encroachments in her life. As an aside, there is no such thing as a semipulvinated plover; the correct name is semipalmated plover. Presumably, Jamie's mother would know this, as would Jamie from the video's real title, even if the majority of readers do not. If this misnaming is intentional, it serves to remind us that Jamie's narration, which relies heavily on his own memory, is by his own admission rather likely to be biased, inaccurate, and colored by outside events.

Like *The Threatened Pygmy Shrews*, the characters in the story have all become "disoriented and irresponsible" by most societal standards. They have no jobs, they allow the house to fall into disrepair, they drink until they forget parts of their past, and they have no goals with the exception of the mother's improbable intention to write a book that glorifies the absence of memory: "To have forgotten and not know one has forgotten is the happiness of animals."

The other videos focus on various survival strategies, and have clear parallels to the characters in the story: camouflage and disguise describe Jamie's tendency to pretend he is someone else entirely, such as a fictional character, as well as the housemate's enjoyment of wearing used clothing from Goodwill. The summer Jamie, his mother, Tom, and Alice spent drinking in the dark basement is very like "playing dead." The symbiotic relationship between the Columbian sloth and its moth companion reminds us not only of the housemates' existence but particularly of the relationship between Jamie and his mother, with each supplying some vital component in the other's life. Jamie learns his life lessons from his mother, and in return grounds her, however tenuously, on earth so that she is free to live with ever fewer faculties—and memories.

The minor recurring themes of the story are used mainly to strengthen the central theme. One important though secondary theme is family relationships, particularly the connection between Jamie and his mother. David, the father, is part of Jamie's past, a lost connection whose purpose in the story is largely to serve as a pragmatic

counterpoint to Jamie's mother's somewhat mystical personality. His leaving the household, perhaps more so than the actual divorce itself, removes Jamie's last real grounding influence and sets him off on his quest to free himself from memories that weigh him down. The relationship among Jamie, his mother, Tom and Alice is that of a family by circumstance, a parody of a family right down to the family meals (salads and gin.) We are given no reason for its dissolution other than the side note that Jamie once had a girlfriend who would have married him if only he had agree to change who he was, a request that he considers impossible, even though he tells us that he tries to do that almost literally, but adopting roles. The relationship between Jamie and his mother, however, is the key to the story. More complex than a classic "love/hate" relationship, it places Jamie in a role very much like a disciple to his mother's teachings, and makes her a modern-day Aesop without her really being aware of it. She believes she is teaching one lesson, which is that he should learn to be himself, and he learns something entirely different since it is not the animal stories he learns from but *her* story. Jamie seems unaware that he has internalized her most important life lesson: when you lose a memory, you lose a part of your identity.

Memory is, of course, the central theme of the story. The most telling lines are near the end, when Jamie tells us that he is aware that in telling his story he may be hiding things. They are also at the climax, when he has dropped his mother at her falling down house and she has immediately returned to the basement that figured so prominently in the summer of 1977: "It seems that what we know makes us sad, and what we do not know is who we are." Having told us that this story represents everything he remembers about his entire life, we understand that his life so far has been about sadness. It may be the "good" kind of sadness his mother taught him about, which is the sadness that one remembers almost fondly, an inevitable but oddly reaffirming sadness. It is sadness, nonetheless; Jamie has tried to learn his mother's lessons well and we know that she equates the ability to forget and not remember that we have forgotten with happiness. He has not forgotten—he is telling his story, regardless of whether he has hidden parts of it or not—so by her measure he cannot be completely happy. If it is the things we do not know that best define who we are, as he says, then it is the bits of happiness he has inadvertently or deliberately forgotten that define him as human. He personifies sadness as an unnamable physical entity capable of growing weary and forgetting itself, which is in many ways what has happened to his mother—the only prominent character in the story who name we do not know, as though Jamie as narrator has forgotten even this happy identifying word. The one glimmer of hope for Jamie can be found in the opening of the story, in words he has perhaps already forgotten himself—"any man's mother is a source of grief until she dies"—since it suggests that perhaps after his mother dies, Jamie might even forget his sadness, and move on to a happier life.

Interestingly, the author describes this story as having been inspired by his own mother's hospitalization, although she was successfully treated, and his complicated and not particularly good relationship with her. It is not a true story; however, it contains autobiographical elements, such as he was in college and held a job at the time he wrote it.

Characters

Alice

Alice is a former girlfriend of Jamie's, who once agreed to marry him if he would change. During the summer of 1977, Alice moves in with Jamie, Jamie's mother, and Tom. According to Jamie, she has an IQ of 165 and, while they lived together in his mother's house, she needed to have sex with Jamie at least three times a day to stay sane. At the time of Jamie's recounting the story, she is no longer his girlfriend.

David

David is Jamie's father, a physician who is divorced from Jamie's mother. His reason for having left her is never spelled out, but Jamie's mother's strange behavior in 1976 and 1977 was most likely a contributing cause. He has remarried. Jamie says that his father is "a man of inaction" and seems to have been deeply unhappy while living with his family. However, even after leaving his family, he came over repeatedly during the summer of 1977 to tend the garden while Jamie's mother watched him. At the end of the summer, he mowed down the flowers he had worked on and never returned.

The Doctor

The doctor comes a number of times to see Jamie's mother in her hospital room but seems more interested in the nature videos playing on the room's television than in his patient. He tells her that she must agree to a biopsy or leave the hospital.

Jamie

When the story opens, Jamie is at his mother's bedside, distraught because she has been diagnosed with a brain tumor. He is an overweight young man, the only child of his parents, most likely in his thirties when he recounts the story. He has few friends. He states, "I'm like a nut magnet" because most of the people he knows are crazy or "look like they just escaped from somewhere."

Jamie is unemployed but does not appear to be terribly worried about this, claiming that this gives him time to think and to have a number of interests, including nature. He is disconnected from his surroundings and claims to spend time trying to "forget things" and discover, as he says, "who I was." When he was in school, teachers attempted to diagnose what learning disorder he had, but it was almost impossible because the symptoms continuously shifted from stuttering to the inability to tie his own shoelaces to other problems. Jamie notes that in 1982 he decided to stop trying to improve his life, and soon afterwards, "I stopped caring so much." Based on a comment he makes to his

mother, he apparently stopped attending school in 1983, which was the last time he took a test.

In 1977, after Jamie's father had left the family, Jamie's girlfriend Alice and another friend, Tom, moved in with Jamie and his mother. Jamie and his mother never talk about how unhappy everyone was that summer, instead they talk about nature and politics. He remembers, though, that the household was drunk most of the time, and, because the weather was so hot, they rarely left the basement.

Meadow Star

See Mom

Mom

Mom is Jamie's mother, and when the story opens she is in the hospital, having been diagnosed with a brain tumor. She refuses to allow the doctors to operate on her, and as a result, she is dying. She is also having trouble remembering such things as how to use a television remote control and what year it is.

Since 1977, when her husband left her, she has not had a very strong grip on reality, and she is most likely suffering from some kind of mental illness. She refuses to move out of her house that is falling down around her. According to Jamie, she has forgotten most of her own life, replacing her past with "the most pleasant memories from other peoples' lives."

Mom does various things in the story that show her fragile mental state. Years after her divorce from David, she walks in on him and his wife and asks, "Who is this woman?" Later, while on vacation, she suddenly leaves her boyfriend and flies to London. From there, she calls Jamie and tells him that she is considering divorcing David, noting that she believes he is seeing another woman.

During the summer of 1977, after Jamie's father leaves the family, Alice and Tom move in with Jamie and Mom, and Mom teaches the household how to drink gin. She dyes her hair red, wears brightly colored blouses from Goodwill, and is often drunk. According to Jamie, that summer she taught the household to believe that sadness was their "only friend."

In 1979, she begins to go by the name of Meadow Star. It is also around 1979 that she develops a love for and an interest in animals, according to Jamie, "because they can't remember in the same way we do." As well, Jamie claims that this is when she considers writing a book about animal memory, and he refers to it in his retelling of her story— although, it is not clear whether the book was actually ever finished or published.

Sharon

Sharon is the woman in the hospital bed next to Jamie's mother's bed, who has been admitted after a drug overdose. She is often very nasty and cynical.

Tom

Tom is Jamie's overweight friend, who moves into the house during the summer of 1977. No one trusts Jamie's mother with the cooking that summer, so Tom takes over, making mostly salads. Tom has a sad background, including a mother who has tried to commit suicide in four different ways, failing at all of them.

Themes

Memory and Forgetting

Both Jamie and his mother wrestle with their memories of the past in a way that almost minimizes present time. Although the scenes in the hospital are told in present tense, Jamie frames the story of his mother's stay in the hospital as if it were being told as a memory. Near the story's beginning, Jamie refers to the day he found out about his mother's brain tumor as being in the past when he remarks, "By the time this happens, it is too late for me," and when he closes the story he ends with, "This is my entire life, everything that I remember." Woven through the memory of his mother and her brain tumor are other memories of Jamie's life, including the time when his father left the family, Jamie's failures in school and at work, and what happened during the summer of 1977.

Memories are delicate and untrustworthy things in "Animal Stories." At the story's beginning, the issue of Jamie's mother's ability to remember events is raised, even those things that have happened just since the previous day. Jamie refers to his mother's brain tumor as "eating her memories." Ironically, while Jamie claims to be working on "trying to forget things," even to the point of enlisting his mother's help in teaching him "little tricks about forgetting," the entire story he tells is of past events. Part of the summer of 1977 is spent learning how to drink gin so that he, his friends, and his mother can wake up the next day having forgotten the previous day, but Jamie still remembers much of the sadness of that summer.

Jamie connects his mother's brain tumor with the increasingly odd behavior she began exhibiting around 1976 and 1977, when she would place small, one-word notes in their neighbors' mailboxes. More recently she has forgotten that she and Jamie's father are divorced. Jamie remarks that in his mother's book about animal memory she argues, "Tumors may grow because people can't forget," as if getting rid of memories would help one prevent tumors. But his mother has a lot of memories to forget, he says, noting, "A psychic friend of the family once said that my mother's soul is older than the rocks in China."

Family Life

Jamie's family consists of him and his parents, but it is not a picture of happiness and harmony. In fact, he notes, "There is nothing to replace the failure of our parents." In 1977, Jamie's physician father, David, left the family for reasons that are not explicitly stated, but his departure probably had something to do with his wife's increasingly bizarre behavior. For example, according to Jamie, "Sometime in 1977 God had told Mom: watch out for doctors, they just want to touch you."

After David leaves, Jamie's mother is unable to serve as the head of the household, and the family disintegrates into a pattern of self-destruction. Jamie's girlfriend Alice moves in, as does his friend Tom, and the four of them create a sad pseudo-family that falls into excessive drinking and depression. Even though David comes by on occasion to work in the garden, the household is hardly able to function. Jamie's mother cannot be trusted to cook, so Tom takes up the job but not with much success. Eventually Alice and Tom primarily eat only celery, and the four members of the household spend most of their days in the basement of the deteriorating house, away from the heat of the day, coming up into the rest of the house only after dark. They rarely leave the house. When they do go out, they sometimes visit Goodwill, emerging from the store as "walking collages of other people's lives." Eventually Jamie's parents are divorced.

Despite all of the sadness in his relationship with his family, Jamie is attached to his mother in a tender, yet painful, way. Though he remarks, "Any man's mother is a source of grief until she dies," he obviously cares for her. He stays with her in the hospital, helping her to the bathroom and with the television's remote control. When she creates a memory of having visited Vienna, Jamie plays along with her, not wanting to bother her with unnecessary facts. He starts to gently touch the side of his mother's face, "because," he says, "I know she is dying," but she quickly jumps out of the car when she sees her house.

Disease and Sickness

The story is focused on Jamie's mother's brain tumor and on how it has affected their lives. Most of the present time frame of the story takes place in a hospital, where, Jamie notes, "people lose themselves." The atmosphere of the hospital is not very warm: there are "humming contraptions with beeping lights," and Jamie is afraid that "around each corner might lurk a cluster of diseases waiting to bore under our skin." In addition, the doctor, who sees Jamie's mother, acts distant and distracted, sometimes paying as much, or even more, attention to the nature videos running on the room's television than to his patient. He eventually forces her to leave the hospital because she will not cooperate with his treatment.

Sharon, the woman sharing the hospital room with Jamie's mother, is recovering from a drug overdose. Even though the hospital is supposed to be a place where people come to heal, Sharon is visited by strange people, probably her drug dealers, who slip her pills and comment on how much various medicines in the room are worth.

Jamie's father is a doctor, but he is nowhere to be found during his ex-wife's illness. In fact, one of first signs of Jamie's mother's illness comes when she believes that God has told her to avoid doctors. Soon after, Jamie's father leaves his family.

Depression and Sadness

Jamie displays many signs of deep sadness and even depression throughout the story. Though he describes himself as "a happy man," he reports that he is "shedding things,

like jobs, cars, and old clothes," and he no longer sees his girlfriend Alice. During the summer of 1977, he, along with Alice, his mother, and his friend Tom, drank heavily and rarely left the house. The house eventually fell into disrepair and became the house that the neighbors wondered about. During that summer, he and the others seemed to work on being sad, as taught by his mother, who encouraged them to "savor" their sadness. "It was, she assured us, our only real friend, and we believed her." He also reports that by 1982, he had quit trying to improve his life and that "shortly afterwards I stopped caring so much."

Nature and the Environment

While in the hospital, Jamie's mother constantly watches nature videos and documentaries. Many are about animals that are endangered, that are being damaged by environmental pollutants, or that are simply unusual. In 1979, according to Jamie, his mother changed her name to Meadow Star, developed an interest in animals, and decided to write a book on how animals remember things. "Mom loves animals because they can't remember in the same way we do," says Jamie, and she believes that this forgetting is the reason animals are happy. He also notes that in 1984 he developed an interest in nature. He often compares human behavior with that of animals, usually concluding that animals are better fit for their environment than are humans.

Style

Use of Time

Brown freely switches back and forth between different years in the story, even within the same section. For example, one section begins with Jamie referring to the summer of 1977, when "we stayed inside and drew the shades." A few paragraphs later, but still in the same section, he is back in the recent past, and his mother's doctor is demanding that she either accept the biopsy procedure or leave the hospital. While Jamie speaks of his mother's stay at the hospital using the present tense, a few paragraphs into the story he makes it clear that this episode is in the past; he notes, "By the time this happens"—that is, finding out about his mother's brain tumor—"it is too late for me." As well, he closes the story by stating, "This is my entire life, everything that I remember."

The main point of reference in the past is the summer of 1977, when Jamie's father left the family, and Jamie's girlfriend and a friend moved into the house with him and his mother. Jamie also mentions that his mother believed in God from "the 7th of February, 1976, to the 10th of September, 1977," adding, "That winter we had the biggest snowstorm in twenty years," but he is not clear whether he means the winter of 1976 or 1977.

Jamie mentions other dates, including 1979, when his mother developed an interest in animals and decided to take the name Meadow Star; 1982, when he claims to have "stopped being in such a hurry to improve my life"; and 1984, when he reports becoming interested in nature. There is no clear evidence as to when Jamie's mother was in the hospital, but it must have been sometime after 1984.

Irony

Brown uses irony in subtle ways. The story is essentially Jamie's memories of the past, but he claims, on a number of occasions, to be working toward forgetting the past. For example, during the summer of 1977, Jamie remembers that his mother taught everyone in the household to drink gin. "We drank until what happened would not be remembered the next day," he says, but obviously, in his telling of the events of the summer, he has failed to forget. He also believes that memories can be harmful, and that "when desperate, they will eat anything that we pretend to know." As well, he claims, "Lately, I've been trying to forget things. Mom has tried to teach me little tricks about forgetting," but he eventually discovers that this is impossible, "like trying not to get wet while you're swimming."

Furthermore, Brown sets the story in the town of Waterville, New York, a place Jamie says is without water. In fact, he claims that during the summer, residents visited friends and relatives in a neighboring town just to take baths. "The town was named Waterville," Jamie muses, "because whoever lived there thought constantly about water."

Nature Videos

Interspersed between the story of Jamie's mother in the hospital and memories of past events are breaks in the narrative where monologues from various nature videos are presented. These videos echo his mother's interest in animals as well as her admiration for the way animals remember events differently from humans. On a few occasions, Jamie compares the behavior of the animals with the behavior of humans, usually coming to the conclusion that animals are better equipped to deal with adversity and change.

Tone

The tone of the story, narrated in the first person by Jamie, comes across as flat and almost emotionless, even though the subject matter is full of sadness and suffering. Jamie appears the most emotional at the very beginning of the story, when he says that he "drove like a lunatic" to get to his mother's bedside and that he is known for "erratic bursts of self-destructiveness and unpredictable lapses in concentration." After that, he describes his rather painful life with a relatively unemotional quality. For example, when his mother displays evidence that her brain is not working correctly, his response is to calmly help her relearn how to use a television remote or to gently remind her that she has already divorced her husband.

Historical Context

Brown wrote this story in the early 1990s, a period of great social and political change in the United States. For example, personal computers and everyday use of the Internet were becoming more commonplace. By the early 1990s, the number of deaths from AIDS began increasing at an alarming rate, and calls became louder for more efforts to combat the disease.

In the international arena, in November 1989, thousands of East Germans stormed the Berlin Wall, a symbol of communist control and power for nearly thirty years. This launched a nearly worldwide rejection of communism as a state political philosophy; and throughout the early 1990s, numerous Soviet-controlled countries, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, began shedding their communist leaders and experimenting with democratic elections and increasingly capitalistic economies.

Concern for the environment grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in various pieces of legislation designed to clean up and protect water, air, and land resources. In 1990, U.S. President George Bush signed into law the Clean Air Act of 1990, which amended the Clean Air Act of 1970. Bush's approval of the legislation marked a radical departure from the environmental policies of his predecessor, Ronald Reagan.

In November 1992, President Bush lost to Bill Clinton, an Arkansas governor previously unknown on the national political scene. To many, the elections of Bush in 1988 and Clinton in 1992 signaled an era during which Americans selected presidents who were simply the least objectionable rather than choosing inspirational leaders. Clinton's election, though, marked the end of the Republican party's twelve-year hold on the office of president.

In January 1990, the television series *The Simpsons* began its hugely popular run. The Simpsons were a fictional suburban family overwhelmed by the world, whose patriarch, Homer, dispensed advice to his children on how to be mediocre. The show so horrified some sectors of society that many schools banned the wearing of Simpsons tee-shirts, especially the one that proclaimed "Underachiever and Proud of It." Some believed that the show was a clear sign of the dissolution of values in American society, prompting William Bennett, head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy in the Bush administration, to decry the series.

Critical Overview

Critical response to Brown's short stories has, on the whole, been very positive. John Elliot, writing a review in *The Daily Telegraph,* proclaims Brown's *Driving the Heart and Other Stories* a "consistently fine first collection of stories." Elliot praises Brown's deft hand at creating stories that are "intimate without falling into sentimentality." A review of Brown's collection in *Publishers Weekly* states that he "excels at portraying the life struggles of those with ravaged psychic resources, [and] unique people and their alienated offspring." The review also highlights "Animal Stories", admiring the skill with which Brown writes about mental illness, as well as his use of "bleak humor" to describe Jamie's dying mother.

While Brown's stories can be read as fatalistic and full of despair, Jenifer Berman, writing in the *New York Times,* argues that they are "linked by a generosity of spirit." In her review of Brown's collection, Berman points to Jamie in "Animal Stories," as well as to characters in other stories, as evidence that the author has created individuals who "act as custodians for one another—and in doing so attempt to save themselves." She considers Brown a "pure and accomplished talent."

In his review of *Driving the Heart and Other Stories* for the *Boston Book Review,* Brian Lennon' s praise for Brown's writing is a bit more reserved. While Lennon gives the collection's opening story, "Driving the Heart," very high marks, his response to the rest of the stories is less exuberant. He asserts, "if some of the other stories . . . dwell too passively within the (male, middle-class) narrator's anomie . . . they aren't necessarily less interesting."

Matthew Humphrey in *The Guardian* praises the appearance of "Animal Stories," as well as another of Brown's stories, "The Dog Lover," in the short story anthology *25 and Under/Fiction.* He notes that "The Dog Lover" includes a situation in which a parent passes along his own suffering to his son; this condition appears, as well, in "Animal Stories," when Jamie's mother attempts to teach him about sadness and encourages him to forget the past. Humphrey speaks to Jamie's sorrow, as well as to the collection's "intriguing weight of sadness," noting that much of the melancholy in *25 and Under/Fiction* comes from Brown's two stories.

In *Kirkus Reviews,* however, Brown's collection receives an unenthusiastic appraisal. According to the review, the stories are like "new wine that needs aging: overwritten, ponderous, and crammed with the sorts of platitudes . . . that only undergraduates could find profound." The example used to highlight these "platitudes" comes from the every end of "Animal Stories;" Jamie is looking over his life and says, "It seems that what we know makes us sad and what we don't know is who we are."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a masters of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines how Jason Brown uses the behavior of the animals in the nature videos, appearing in his short story, to explore the behavior of the story's characters.

One of the unique things about Jason Brown's "Animal Stories" is the inclusion of animal and nature videos, watched by Jamie's mother and others in her hospital room. The videos provide a bit of comic relief in the story of Jamie's mother's impending death, as well as something Mom can react to. She is continually fiddling with the remote, changing the videos, and responding to their content. The action in the videos gives the other characters—the doctor, Sharon, and Jamie—a moment's distraction from the oppressive atmosphere of the hospital. In fact, commenting on the story in *25 and Under/Fiction,* Brown remembers visiting his father's house during a particularly difficult period in his life to watch nature shows and says, "I thought they were the funniest things on earth," he remembers. "Everything seemed absurd to me at the time."

The videos in the story can also be seen as much more than a pause in the approach of death. Again remarking on the story in *25 and Under/ Fiction,* Brown notes that he was exceedingly careful in his construction of "Animal Stories." "I wrote the story one line at a time and set the order later. I would sit for hours at my job renting canoes and think of one line," he recalls, adding that the entire piece took three months to pull together, bit by bit. With such authorial vigilance, the placement of the videos in the story, as well as their content, cannot have been haphazard, and certainly deserves a closer look. Examining the videos reveals that the animals' activities and behaviors in the videos are reflected in the activities and behaviors of the humans in the story.

Both Jamie and his mother have expressed an interest in animals and in nature: his mother first in 1979, when she changed her name to Meadow Star; and Jamie, in 1984, after he had quit working and decided he had the time to think about things such as nature. In fact, he even likens himself to a tree in autumn, shedding jobs and possessions like a tree sheds its leaves. Jamie's mother loves animals because, according to her, "they don't remember in the same way we do." The animal videos running in her room, some brought to the hospital by Jamie, are a constant connection to a world she finds fascinating and a way to replace the memories she is losing because of her brain tumor.

Most of the videos are about endangered or rare animals, but all are concerned with the tactics these animals have developed to survive, both successfully and unsuccessfully. The story of Jamie's family is one of survival; each member has developed ways to survive disappointment and sadness. For example, the story is not clear about why Jamie's physician father, David, left his family, but the timing of Jamie's mother's increasingly bizarre behavior may have had something to do with it. Between 1976 and 1977, his mother—strangely enough, the only character in the story without a proper name—hears messages from God about avoiding doctors and wanders the streets,

leaving obscure, one-word messages in neighbors' mailboxes. Soon thereafter, Jamie reports, his father moved out, possibly the only way he felt he could deal with his wife's diminished mental capacity.

In fact, Brown inserts a video with the telling title *The Threatened Pygmy Shrews* after he has given a brief synopsis of Jamie's mother's fall into apparent mental illness, her alcoholism, the eventual diagnosis of her brain tumor, and the family's dissolution. The video chronicles the environmental perils challenging the shrews' survival. It notes, "industrial fallout in the rain acts as a narcotic for the animals, causing them to become disoriented and irresponsible." Because of this, the shrews have lost their natural ability to protect themselves and have fallen prey to cars, dogs, and different kinds of predators.

In a similar way, Jamie's family falls prey to such "predators" as illness and melancholy. David eventually separates from and divorces Jamie's mother, and she, along with Jamie, creates a sort of pseudo-family with two of Jamie's friends for one summer. The four damaged people live together in a way not unlike the injured shrews: "disoriented and irresponsible." Jamie's mother teaches everyone how to drink gin, and they spend much of the summer "around the kitchen table drinking slowly, not saying much, sinking into a smaller life." Tom, Jamie's friend, must take over the task of cooking for the family because Jamie's mother cannot be trusted, "for fear that she would destroy the house." Their transformation into injured animals becomes complete when they end up living in the darkness of the basement during the daytime to escape the heat and the sunlight of summer. They emerge only at night. The paint on the house peels, and the grass in the front yard grows to five feet. Jamie imagines that the neighbors probably wonder, "What could have possibly happened to those people?"

Another video, entitled *Animal Imposters,* especially reflects how Jamie sees his life. Bracketed around the video's appearance in the story is Jamie's explanation about what kind of person he believes himself to be. The video gives examples of animals and plants that are not quite what they seem to be, such as the angler fish that looks like an old rock, a snake that can fake death, and a plant that looks like a tulip to lure insects but is actually carnivorous. Jamie feels that, like the creatures in the video, he is an imposter. "If you knew me," he says, "then you would know that nothing is less like me than the things I've done." For example, he states that anyone seeing him standing in line at the grocery store might think he is a successful college graduate. "But my past is pocked by sores, such as an inability to spell my own name," he says, referring to his traumatic school days. He also remembers his mother, before she became ill, telling him that he should only be himself. But he believes that he is more adept at being someone other than himself, "living out scenarios that I read about in books."

The nature show's imposter theme is also reflected in the behavior of Jamie's mother and the two friends who live with Jamie and his mother during the summer of 1977. That year saw the four housemates make changes in their appearances as well as in their behaviors: when they weren't drinking or hiding in the basement, they occasionally left the house to shop at Goodwill, emerging "laughing, dressed in stripes, checks, and dotted patterns . . . walking collages of other people's lives." Jamie also comments that

Alice and Tom ate mostly celery that summer, in an effort to lose weight. "Every day there was less of them," he recalls. As well, Jamie remembers that, at one point that summer when his father was still coming to the house to work in the garden, his mother was "unrecognizable with her hair dyed red and with one of her new orange or purple blouses bought from Goodwill." His father treated her as if they hadn' t yet been introduced, not like the woman to whom he had been married for years. Similar to an animal bent on survival, she had altered both her behavior and her looks. By the end of the story, she has even co-opted the "most pleasant memories" of another person.

Ultimately, though, Jamie believes that the way animals behave is preferable over the way humans behave. When compared with people, animals act in a near-rational manner, and they "seem to have a way of seeing what's necessary and acting on that vision," he says. Even given their failures and struggles, animals seem to "get better at surviving" than do humans. Humans look too much to the past, while animals are most concerned with the here-and-now, he argues. "We pretend we are anything else," as evidenced by people's interest in collecting antiques or in dressing up as characters from a by-gone era. "We don't eat, we grow thin and solemn, and we think about our lives," activities that only seem to bring grief, he asserts, and contribute nothing toward survival.

Survival is a primary focus of "Animal Stories," both in and out of the nature videos. The videos serve Jamie and his mother almost as guides through a particularly difficult phase of their lives, the different animal stories steering them through death as well as life. When Jamie drives his mother back to her house, nothing matters except that she is comfortable and happy. He does not argue with her about her false memory of Vienna, and he does not try to talk her out of living in her broken-down house because he knows that these things are what she needs right now, at the end of her life. Almost like an animal, "she has darted out of the car with her suitcase," thankful that she is out of the hospital and headed directly toward safety and her house.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "Animal Stories," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

France is a librarian and teaches history and interdisciplinary studies at University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan. In the following essay, France discusses the theme of toxicity in Brown's story.

Most of the characters in "Animal Stories" are physically and emotionally damaged. Jamie, the narrator, provides glimpses and examples of environmental poisoning and self-destructive human behavior. By contrasting these with anecdotes and observations about nonhuman animal behavior, he underscores the unique capacity of humans to realize that they are going to die, which makes people more aware of loss and therefore more likely to feel great sadness. Except when faced with environmental poisons inflicted on them by humans, the survival instincts of many animals give them more adaptability and resilience than most of the people introduced in the story. The changes in Jamie's mother, suffering for years from an undetected brain tumor that severely deranges her perceptions, and in Jamie himself, emphasize—by their deterioration and loss—the importance of memory and hope in human identity, consciousness, and motivation. In the end, what makes a person? What is truly important in one's life?

Jamie's mother's changes in circumstance and outlook also point to sadness, grief, and attempts to deal with pain and suffering through self-medicating coping patterns. Like Jamie's mother, most of the characters find life too complicated and painful to deal with in any way that can keep them functioning as productive members of society. Except for David, Jamie's father, they simply cannot adapt to change like many less self-aware animals. Their failure to adapt partly explains Jamie and his mother's particular fascination with the animal behavior stories they watch on videotapes or read about in books. A major underlying theme of the story emerges, highlighting the impact of human-produced toxins— those released into the environment and effecting all animal life (including human) and those, like alcohol and drugs, ingested or injected by people. These toxins induce major disorientation and destructive chemical reactions that erode or destroy memory, identity, and life itself

As the story unfolds, one quickly learns that Jamie's mother is dying from a brain tumor and has already lost many of her normal human memory functions. Many years before, she divorced Jamie's father, David, a doctor. David probably began having an affair soon after Jamie's mother's creeping dementia started in 1976. One discovers that Jamie suffers from "erratic bursts of self-destructiveness and unpredictable lapses in concentration," which make him a dangerous driver, among other things. He links these characteristics to his mother. If one carefully puts clues together, the theme of toxicity emerges as a direct cause for dysfunctional behavior. For instance, in one of the animal behavior anecdotes interspersed throughout "Animal Stories," Jamie informs the reader that "industrial fallout in the rain acts as a narcotic" for pygmy shrews, "causing them to become disoriented and irresponsible." Many of the shrews are killed by cars. This fact is a reminder that Jamie *drives* in a disoriented and irresponsible manner. In grade school, Jamie "had a kind of roaming retardation in degenerative form." If readers take

Jamie at his word, this "condition" may have been caused by birth defects—the kind of effects caused by atmospheric and groundwater chemical contamination.

The time and place setting of "Animal Stories" indicates a toxic setting. Jamie explains that he and his family lived in the town of Waterville, New York, "outside of Buffalo." The actual Waterville can be located on a map closer to Utica in the interior of the state. Brown's placement of the town near Buffalo suggests its proximity to a highly contaminated site called the Love Canal, situated, like the fictional Waterville, not far from Buffalo. Jamie notes that in the winter of 1976, "we had the biggest snowstorm in twenty years, and that spring all the cows died of a mysterious disease." At the same time, and like the pygmy shrews poisoned by unspecified chemical fallout carried by rain in England, his mother became disoriented and irresponsible. Instead of walking in front of cars like the pygmy shrews, Jamie's mother put messages "from God in people's mailboxes" and nearly burned her house down while trying to cook.

Not mentioned in the story, documented toxic contamination in fact became evident in the school and neighborhood adjacent to the Love Canal in the same year, 1976. The Niagara *Gazette,* an area newspaper, uncovered evidence of chemical seepage, at that time, into residential basements in Niagara, New York. This evidence eventually led to a number of government investigations that revealed a wide array of toxic contaminants that included dioxin, a deadly carcinogen or cancer-causing agent. By 1979, government officials closed the school and evacuated most residents from the area. Jimmy Carter, the president at the time, then proposed the federal Superfund Program to study, contain, and attempt to clean up toxic waste sites throughout the United States. In "Animal Stories," Jamie's mother, having begun, in 1977, to lose her memory and orientation (she could not even remember that Jimmy Carter was the president), changed her name, in 1979, to Meadow Star and developed a "preoccupation with animals." Jamie tells the reader that in the hot summer of 1977, "people outside were dying of heatstroke." His father left that summer. Jamie, his mother, his girlfriend Alice, and his friend Tom subsequently spent much of their time in Jamie's mother's kitchen drinking gin, "slowly, not saying much, sinking into a smaller life. We drank," Jamie narrates, "until what happened would not be remembered the next day." They also spent much time in the basement trying to keep cool: before David moved out, he would occasionally join his wife and Jamie for a drink and "talk about politics." The unhealthy intake of enough gin to blot out memory combined with spending so much time in Jamie's mother's basement suggests the contaminated basements near the Love Canal and points to the underlying theme of toxicity.

Brown further develops the theme through many of Jamie's other comments and ruminations about the story's principal characters. Jamie's father's family "came from a Pennsylvania mining town where they were all miners or miners' wives." This small fact evokes the kinds of diseases such as brown lung and black lung that infected mining towns and that may have motivated David to become a doctor. As for his mother's family, Jamie states that they "cannot be trusted—they are all in the business of killing themselves. Sometimes people in her family do get fatal diseases, but it is usually something so intangible as to arouse suspicion."

In 1977, Jamie narrates, "God had told Mom: watch out for doctors, they just want to touch you." This may be an allusion to her disinterest in sex or an echo of a troubled pregnancy and Jamie's early developmental problems. Later readers learn that she suspected that David had been seeing another woman; this was probably why she divorced him. In any event, David is perhaps the only character who adapted to the changes wrought in 1977 and moved on to a new life; he remarried and lives in a new house. The Love Canal, by its very name, provides a metaphor for the family divide between Jamie and his mother, who show little resilience in the face of change and who remain in their toxic setting, and David, who escapes. The actual Love Canal, by its traumatic history, evokes the terrible damage caused by human-made toxins.

The handling of the other characters reinforces the theme of both environmental and ingested toxins. One learns that Sharon, the patient who shares a hospital room with Jamie's mother, overdosed on drugs. Two drug dealers bring her a bag, and she soon "starts slipping little pills into her mouth." Jamie narrates that one of the dealers "fingers the tube leading into my mother's arm and comments that her body is worth about four hundred dollars in narcotics." In the summer of 1977, Tom tells his fellow gin-drinkers how his mother had tried but failed to kill herself four different ways. "What doesn't pass out of our lives," Jamie observes, "even if it is good, ends up killing us. Finally there is something that won't pass like a disease or tumor that takes us out of life."

David is more able to adapt to trauma than Jamie's mother is; Jamie, on the other hand, remains stuck in her mode. David has a stronger self-preservation instinct. He opted to flee for his life on August 27, 1977. He asked Jamie, "Do you want to end up like your mother?" Though Jamie said he did not want to, his links to his mother are too strong to break. Perhaps Jamie and his mother's bodies are frailer, already contaminated, less able to adapt physically. They are disoriented and damaged by the emotionally and physically toxic environment and cannot break free. Tellingly, Brown uses the word "narcotic" to connect the environmental toxins effecting both Jamie's mother and the pygmy shrews. Narcotic effects disorient, confuse, and ultimately hurl them on a course toward destruction. Using the metaphor of "what to do with sadness," Brown shows that Jamie and his mother keep their poisons in themselves, whereas David lets the toxicity of sadness pass "like a shooting star" and becomes healed. Like those fortunate animals that "seem to have a way of seeing what's necessary and acting on that vision," David saw and did what was necessary to survive.

Source: Erik France, Critical Essay on "Animal Stories," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses identity, introspection, self-improvement, and what's important in life, as presented in Brown's short story.

In Jason Brown's "Animal Stories," Jamie, the narrator, faced with the approaching death of his mother from a brain tumor, becomes introspective, attempting to assess and define who he is and what's important in life. Jamie explains very briefly how he came to be a person who does not have a clear sense of self and who makes no effort to improve his life. He states that, "I was born with serious intent and not without means, but somewhere along the line I failed to acquire an adequate degree of clarity." In other words, he lacks the vision, or insight, to formulate a clear sense of identity of what's important to him. He explains that, at some point, he "stopped being in a hurry to improve . . . [his] life." He then notes, "Shortly afterwards I stopped caring so much." Jamie is a man who has essentially avoided serious self-reflection, as a result of which he lacks a clear self-concept of what matters.

Jamie explains that since learning of his mother's illness, he has been "trying to think." But Jamie is not a person inclined to self-reflection. He comments, "Lots of strange things have happened that I don't understand. If I ever have any money, I'll hire someone to explain them to me." If he had the money, he would go to a psychiatrist or therapist to gain a clearer understanding of who he is and to delve into the deeper reasons for how he has chosen to lead his life. However, he has just stated that he "never will" have money, so the reader may conclude that he truly has no intention of ever going to a therapist to learn more about, or improve, himself. His tendency to avoid introspection resonates with the doctor's prognosis that his mother's tumor will eventually lead to "a total loss of self-awareness," by which she will "lose" herself. The doctor notes that this is "worse than death." Jamie himself seems to be fighting a total loss of self-awareness in regard to his own life and sense of identity. Jamie astutely observes that, by the time his mother's tumor has reached an advanced stage, "it is too late for me. I already have several chins, and if I were to die tomorrow, only about four people would notice and none of them, except my mother, would be women." When Jamie states that "it is too late for me," one can speculate that he has already resigned himself to not changing or improving.

Jamie's struggle with his sense of identity is indicated in part by his unspecified learning disability. This disability makes him incapable of spelling his own name. Being able to write your own name is symbolic of having a firm sense of who you are as an individual. Jamie has so little sense of his own identity that he is incapable of even articulating his own name. Not only does he have trouble getting a grip on his own identity, but his mother, too, has trouble identifying who he is. His unclear sense of identity resonates with her loss of ability to recognize him. He explains that, during the summer before the tumor was diagnosed, his mother seemed to regard him as a "new friend," and "sometimes she looked at me as if I were someone else's son."

Jamie also finds thinking about who he is to be problematic because he is not sure on what basis to define himself. He does not feel comfortable defining himself by his past or what he has done with his life. He explains, "One of the biggest mistakes I make is trying to think about who I am by remembering the things I have done." Later, he again states that "the things . . . [he has] done" do not represent an accurate picture of who he is; he claims, "If you knew me, then you would know that nothing is less like me than the things I've done."

Jamie's mother had always told him "that being myself was the most important thing I could do." Jamie on the other hand does not feel that he is very good at being himself; he mentions that he has been better at living a fantasy life through other people, such as characters in books. He refers to a video show on *Animal Imposters,* which is about animals who make themselves appear to be something other than what they are—such as a predatory animal that disguises itself as a flower to catch insects, or a predatory fish that looks like a harmless rock to catch other fish for food. These disguises resonate with Jamie's sense of himself as someone who does not know how to be himself but is better at pretending to be someone else. The theme of being an imposter, or taking on the identity of others, is echoed in Jamie's description of the times he and his mother and friends went to Goodwill to buy used clothing, which they wore and became "walking collages of other people's lives." Jamie, who does not have a clear sense of his own identity, is more comfortable borrowing the identities of other people, through books, clothing, or fantasy. For his mother, likewise, once the tumor begins to affect her memory, "her own past has been replaced by the most pleasant memories from other people's lives."

Jamie's tendency to avoid self-reflection seems to have been learned from his father, whose impulse to avoid thinking is indicated in the statement that while working in the garden he would "bury his thoughts with the azaleas." Jamie has learned from his father not only to bury his thoughts but also to bury his feelings. At one point, his father tells him, "Jamie, it doesn't matter how you feel about things." Jamie's unclear sense of self and lack of motivation to strive for self-improvement is also learned from his father's example. He observes, "My father was a man of inaction; it is the most valuable thing I learned from him." While his mother told him to always be himself, his father, he says, "taught me not to worry about what I am not." While on the one hand, this may indicate a lesson in self-acceptance, in the case of this narrator, it seems to have taught him not to bother striving to improve himself or his life in any way. His father told him, "You can either be you or someone else," which is really a piece of non-advice since it's rather obvious and seems to carry no particular wisdom. His father added, "In the end it really doesn't matter." Jamie states, "I can't understand why he said things like that," but it seems that the lesson he derived from his father's statement was to acquire an attitude of behaving as if nothing really does matter.

His mother's imminent death also leads Jamie to think about what's important in life. He notes that "you can't blame most people for not thinking, because they work instead," but adds that since he has no job and his mother has a tumor, "it's time to think about what's important in life." In so doing, he considers his mother's various attempts to understand what's important. At one point, confused by the remote control device, his

mother dismantles and examines it "as if it were a mystery she is trying to get to the bottom of." Jamie, likewise, is trying to get to the bottom of the mystery, or meaning, of life. Religion is one avenue through which many people find meaning in life, and Jamie's mother believed in God for a brief period of a year or two. During this time, she wandered around the neighborhood "leaving notes from God in people's mailboxes about what was important in life." These notes listed things she felt were important: gloves, fresh milk, and heat. All three of these items refer to creature comforts, such as nourishment, protective clothing, and physical warmth. Jamie, however, does not seem to consider God or religion as a means of understanding what is needed or essential. He seems to be looking beyond mere physical needs as defined by his mother in her notes from God.

After the tumor is diagnosed, Jamie's mother seems to recognize as well that what is important is not just physical needs. She addresses these concerns in a book she writes about how animals remember. Jamie implies that his mother thinks animals understand what's important in life because "they can't remember in the same way we do." Jamie observes that animals, unencumbered by complex thought and memory, "seem to have a way of seeing what's necessary and acting on that vision." Regardless of what unexpected circumstance animals are faced with, they maintain a clear vision of what matters most. For animals, what matters may be just "pecking through bark for worms, or, in the case of the hermit crab, skittering across the ocean floor in search of an abandoned shell suitable for a new home." Animals, then, are able to stay focused on their needs and do what must be done to meet them. Jamie, by contrast, has no clear vision of what's necessary and little motivation to take any kind of action.

By the end of the story, Jamie seems to prefer his lack of self-awareness, or tendency not to think, to his attempt at self-reflection. He notes, "I have come to love the things I do not know about my past," because "they are like possibilities for the future, which, to any person, is just as important to survival as food." The suggestion here is that the things he remembers, which for him are mostly disappointments, only cause him to feel sad and hopeless. Jamie admits that he is probably "hiding certain things" about his past, by not remembering them, but, echoing the advice of his father, comments, "why should that matter?" Jamie's general attitude of passivity about his life is captured by his conclusion that life is defined by missed opportunities: "In the end it's all about little possibilities that vanish, like snow." This conclusion reads as a sort of statement against self-reflection and self-improvement—Jamie chooses to cling to the hope that the things he does not remember about himself and his life are somehow less sad and less disappointing than the things he does remember. Jamie concludes that what's important in life is forgetting the past to keep hope alive. Jamie's efforts to clarify his sense of identity and gain a clearer vision of the important things only result in his resignation to avoid introspection. In the end, he does not bother trying to improve himself and continues to live as if he doesn't care because he has come to truly believe that "in the end it really doesn't matter."

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "Animal Stories," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

This short story relates events from a number of years and dates. Create a timeline for the events of the story. Note the gaps in time and imagine what events might have taken place then. Write an additional scene for the story that takes place during one of these gaps.

Watch one or more animal documentaries, either on television or on video. List at least three animal behaviors that you think are similar to behaviors exhibited by humans and explain why they are similar and where you have seen humans act this way. List at least three animal behaviors that you think are unlike human behaviors and explain why you think they are dissimilar. If you have a pet, you may use this as your subject instead of animals found in a documentary.

Using the library or the Internet, do research on brain tumors. What are the different kinds of brain tumors and how are they treated? Do they always result in the patient losing memories and the ability to discern reality? Do medical experts understand what causes brain tumors?

Investigate divorce statistics for the United States from 1970 through today. Has the rate of divorces increased or decreased? How has the rate of divorce changed for your state or city?

What Do I Read Next?

Perry Klass's *Love and Modern Medicine: Stories,* published in 2001, is a collection of eleven short stories, some very funny, that feature characters struggling to cope with family crises. Many of the protagonists are highly capable women and mothers who find their home lives much more challenging than their work lives. Three stories were O. Henry Award winners.

25 and Under/Fiction, edited by Susan Ketchin and Neil Giordano, presents fifteen short stories—two by Jason Brown—written by new literary voices, all under the age of twenty-five. The 1997 anthology includes stories on belief and religion, heroin and alcoholism, families and madness, and more.

Like Jason Brown's first short-story collection, Ethan Canin's first story collection, *Emperor of the Air: Stories,* was widely applauded by critics. Canin was in his late twenties and attending medical school when this book was published in 1989.

In 1990, Maya Angelou published a book of poetry, I *Shall Not Be Moved,* covering a variety of subjects, including the relationship between mothers and sons.

Further Study

Gunther, John, *Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir,* Harper Perennial, 1998.

Gunther wrote this book, originally published in 1949, to document the valiant struggle his son waged against a brain tumor that ultimately killed him at age seventeen.

Levy, Alexander, *The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change after the Death of Our Parents,* Perseus Press, 1999.

Written by a psychologist in private practice for more than twenty years, this book examines what happens to adults when their parents die and how this event can facilitate the passage into true adulthood.

Roth, Philip, *Patrimony: A True Story,* Vintage Books, 1996.

Originally published in 1991, Roth's book about his father's life and his eventual death due to a brain tumor received that year's National Book Critics Award.

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Berman, Jenifer, Review of *"Driving the Heart" and Other Stories,* in *New York Times,* May 2, 1999.

Elliot, John, "Books: A Canter and a Gallop, John Elliot on Two American Collections," in *Daily Telegraph,* January 22, 2000.

Humphrey, Matthew, "Young Guns. Great Stories from the 25-and-Under Set," in the *Guardian,* June 25, 1997.

Ketchin, Susan, and Neil Giordano, eds., *25 and Under/ Fiction,* Center for Documentary Studies in association with W. W. Norton and Company, 1997, pp. 218-19.

Lennon, Brian, Review of *"Driving the Heart" and Other Stories,* in *Boston Book Review,* April 1, 1999.

Review of *"Driving the Heart" and Other Stories,* in *Kirkus Reviews,* February 15, 1999.

Review of *"Driving the Heart" and Other Stories,* in *Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 246, February 22, 1999, p. 64.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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