

Asylum for Nightface Short Guide

Asylum for Nightface by Bruce Brooks

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Overview

Asylum for Nightface is a psychological study that features long narrative passages punctuated only occasionally with action. This storytelling approach demands close and attentive reading accompanied by careful thought about the issues raised in the narrative. The communicative success of *Asylum for Nightface* by Penelope Winlow Brooks depends largely on the intelligent and expressive voice of Zimmerman, the first-person narrator, who is beset by feelings of alienation and confusion. Many young adult readers will have similar emotions, and these shared feelings should make him a character who compels the readers' attention. How he manifests his rebellious nature and copes with his anxieties is unusual, and that in itself makes the book attractive and stimulating.

About the Author

Bruce Brooks was born in Washington, D.C. in 1950. He had a difficult childhood living both in Washington and North Carolina until he finally ran away from home to stay with his grandmother in Washington.

The protagonists of his novels frequently share experiences and living conditions similar to the one Brooks had as a youngster, including broken families and an alcoholic mother.

Brooks's difficult youth is not as prominent in *Asylum for Nightface* as it is in early works such as *The Moves Make the Man* (1984) and *Midnight Hour Encores* (1986; see separate entry, Vol.

7), but it is echoed in Zimmerman's efforts to cope with his drug-abusing parents and to seek a sanctuary from a life full of misery.

Brooks's first novel, *The Moves Make the Man*, was intended for adults, but the young protagonist featured in it led people to regard it as a daring book for young adults. It was a Newbery Honor Book and won the Boston Globe-Horn Book award for fiction.

These awards brought Brooks to the attention of a large audience that continues to warmly greet each subsequent novel. For his part, Brooks insists that he does not write for young adults, that he just goes where his story leads him. The difficult concepts and experimental structures of his novels would seem to bear him out, although *Everywhere* (1990) seems plainly intended for a pre-teenage audience.

Brooks attended the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and he has worked as a journalist, printer, and teacher. Although he has married and settled down in Washington, D.C., his imagination stills wanders unfettered, engaged in writing nature books in addition to his more widely known fiction.



Setting

The novel immediately establishes the kitchen in Zimmerman's home as his asylum. No cooking is ever done there and his parents never use it. This makes it an ideal place for Zimmerman to pray. To escape his parents' immature lunacy, he seeks solace in being able to find God through prayer.

He has taken to heart the biblical injunction against public prayer and believes it imperative that he find the fittest private place for these devotions. His bedroom is too public; his parents know when he is in it and when he is praying, but they never suspect that the kitchen could become his chapel. Zimmerman is determined throughout his narrative to sound like a down-to-earth, matter-of-fact person, and thus he ironically misses the symbolism of having chosen a kitchen as a place for worship. He may not be feeding his body in that room but he is feeding his hungry soul, and throughout the novel his soul hungrily seeks fulfillment.

No other room in Zimmerman's house is as important as the kitchen, though the living room becomes very significant because it was first the scene of parental self-indulgence and drug abuse, then the place where they repeatedly apologize for sins against their son, and then finally the site where they host other members of their newly formed Faith of Faiths. It is important to note that Zimmerman is never happy with events in the living room. He remembers his parents' drug parties in the room and a time when guests held him down and tried to force drugs on him. When his parents stop their self-indulgence in drugs and parties, they slip into another kind of self-indulgence in which they spend hours apologizing for their sins. They have replaced their lust for thrills with a lust for their religion that seems to Zimmerman to be unlike a real faith in God. His parents have jumped from one obsession to another, and they try to force their religion into Zimmerman just as they had tried to force drugs into him before.

A third setting is also important: the street that is home to Kollektible Kards. The street is essential to the novel's suspense. The narrator studies it carefully, noting the exact time shop owners arrive in the morning and the times of their daily activities. Zimmerman has a head for numbers, and he remembers even trivial details of behavior. Why is he watching the street with such care? Brief chapters serve to remind us of the street and Kollektible Kards, and when Zimmerman's mother is remembered to have urged Zimmerman to steal a collectible card in order to "loosen up," the solution to the mystery of Zimmerman's interest in the street seems clear. He has not made his precise observations in order to steal but in order to be caught.



Social Sensitivity

Religious experience is at the heart of *Asylum for Nightface*, and the many references to Jesus will be uncomfortable for some readers. Brooks has a knack for targeting issues of great importance to his readership, and religion and faith are surely among them. Zimmerman says that to him finding God is simple; He is manifested everywhere and people merely need to look to see Him. Zimmerman is especially convinced of the existence of God by what he calls the "design"; to him, the natural world is too well organized to be accidental. In its individual creatures and in their relationships are the signs of God's work.

This is an old argument dating back at least to the Enlightenment when Isaac Newton and many others professed to see God's hand in how the natural world is organized, and it echoes Albert Einstein's view that by studying nature one saw the mind of God.

Zimmerman is highly opinionated, and his opinions are not always going to sit well with his audience. For instance, he believes the biblical injunction against public prayer and protestations of faith means that prayer should be private, between God and the person praying and no one else.

Many people would agree with him that silent prayer is proper, but *Asylum for Nightface* beres of churches where faith is expressed loudly and prayers are meant to be public may think Zimmerman is attacking them—which he is. The key to understanding how religion is expressed in *Asylum for Nightface* is to remember that Zimmerman is a fictional character. If he is to be fully fleshed out as a credible human being he must have his own opinions, and as a willful young man he is likely to hold rebellious views on the subjects that matter most to him—and nothing matters more to him than God. Even his father knows this and tells Zimmerman that he wishes he were loved by Zimmerman more than Zimmerman loves God.

With that understood, Zimmerman can be seen as someone who is growing as best he can without a sense of direction; his elders are too lost in themselves to provide him with guidance. This means that he has only one guide left to him—the Bible. He is bound to be confused by some passages, and he is bound to interpret others based on his personal experiences. What is crucial to his faith is that he is searching for spiritual answers; the search is really an answer in itself, possibly even more important than any answers he has not yet found.

The ending of the novel may seem contradictory to some readers. Zimmerman has chosen to live as close to biblical teachings as his circumstances allow, and stealing is an act that he knows is against the Christian faith.

Even so, at the end he tries to find asylum by stealing something. He makes sure that he will be caught, but does this make the theft okay? This is a tough question to answer—Brooks is a demanding writer and his work often requires long thought to understand. Perhaps Marcos's remark that "In prison there is nothing else to do but worship God" is

the key to unlocking Zimmerman's actions of the end of the novel. It may be that all Zimmerman has wanted from the beginning is just the chance to concentrate on worshipping God.



Literary Qualities

The structure and manner of narration in *Asylum for Nightface* make for challenging reading. Brooks experiments with narrative in most of his fiction, and in *Asylum for Nightface* he offers an interesting approach to a spiritual quest by placing nearly all the action in Zimmerman's mind. The plot is developed through memories culled from memories while he contemplates his dramatic act to find asylum. Much of the novel's suspense is generated by the scenes of Zimmerman watching *Kollektible Kards*, scenes in which nothing happens until the end of the novel. Usually, to create suspense a storyteller will conjure conflict out of action; a main character confronts and defeats antagonists in encounters such as battles or chases for which the outcome is uncertain. In *Asylum for Nightface*, Brooks creates suspense by the tension between his scenes at *Kollektible Kards* and the events in what seems to be the main narrative, the story of how Zimmerman comes to be a careful observer of a street and its stores. This tension generates mystery—"But it's okay to be a little mystified sometimes," asserts his father—because what he plans to do is unclear. Has he become obsessed with *Nightface* to the point of prowling the night and dawn, as his watching the sunrise on shop windows suggests? Is he going to loosen up, as his mother once urged him to do? Has he surrendered to the morally ambiguous world around him and chosen to be like his parents? There is no telling until the ending, even though the ending makes sense; the main narrative drops hints as it progresses, suggesting Zimmerman's state of mind and his growth towards self-knowledge. The overall effect of Brooks's alternating between Zimmerman's memories and his observations of *Kollektible Kards* is to keep the focus on Zimmerman's fluctuating thoughts.

Zimmerman's mind is all important, and as Luke Mark John ironically asserts, "Tomorrow . . . his life changes forever."



Themes and Characters

The narrator Zimmerman takes pains to draw parallels among Jesus, Drake Jones, Nightface, and himself.

He is most explicitly drawn to the portrait of Nightface on a collectible card; Nightface, depicted as watching a person far away, is perched on a precariously tilting rock; he has a face that expands into the night. Zimmerman is also an observer, a watcher of people, his existence balanced on a precarious rock while his parents try to push him off, and in the end the people around him seem to be drawing his life from him, as if he were expanding into them the way Nightface expands into the sky.

Zimmerman views Jesus and Drake Jones as versions of himself, relating his personal experiences to theirs. This is self-centered of him, but he is a smart person who has stimulating ideas about how Jesus and the artist may relate to his life. First, he sees Jesus and Drake Jones as similar people. Both were child prodigies who amazed their elders with their precocious brilliance, and Zimmerman sees this as akin to what happens to musical prodigies who inspire wonder with their mastery of musical instruments.

He sees in them clues that may relate to himself. After they amaze their audiences, prodigies expand into the world—musical prodigies by traveling to concert halls around the world and Drake Jones by reaching a huge audience with his comic books and cards.

It is significant that Zimmerman is reading a book that has forty different accounts of Jesus's young adult life, a period missing from the Gospels.

Zimmerman infers that Jesus's precocity meant that he was a child prodigy, and if this was true, then Jesus may have spent his late adolescence and early adult life exploring the world. Then he came home and was murdered. In the case of Drake Jones, the artist ran away and hid from his public. Zimmerman may see in these figures two alternatives for himself: Go the way of Faith of Faiths and be murdered, or run away and hide. In this sense, his stealing a card in such a way as to be spotted doing so becomes a form of running away. "There is simply nothing bad about you, Zimmerman. You do nothing bad," Luke Mark John has said to him. Thus he commits a bad act for release from his Christlike future in which he is envisioned preaching to millions and converting many to his faith. This also shows that the troubled Zimmerman is not crazy; he is not Christ and he knows it.

On the back of Nightface's card is printed, "Nightface seeks asylum in the highest of places." The phrase probably applies to Nightface's perch high above a scene that he is watching, but it is symbolic, as well. Zimmerman has sought asylum in his faith in God, a faith that has kept him from falling apart under the stresses of his household. His searching for religious faith is a search for peace, solace, and safety: "Asylum means: a safe place to be.



Especially when one is pressed." Central to his problems is that asylum on high seems out of reach; he tries making the kitchen a chapel, an asylum, but that no longer works once his parents convert to the Faith of Faiths.

Friendship offers no safety; the world snatches his one friend away in a moment. Other believers are no help because they want him to be just like them, they will take away his individuality. Where is the asylum of God to be found? Brooks offers no easy answer to this; his novel's theme may be the search for asylum, but where it may be found is a complicated matter that he renders in its full complexity—there are no simple answers for Zimmerman. Even at the novel's end, when he has taken dramatic action there is no certainty that he will find his asylum. "Doesn't someone whose quest is for asylum deserve a chance to find it . . . ?" he asks. His answer would seem to be "yes," but other characters might say "no"; the ultimate answer is not revealed.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Zimmerman let himself be caught stealing the card of Nightface?
2. What does Nightface symbolize? 3. Is it credible that Zimmerman's parents would be silly but Zimmerman would be serious?
4. What does Zimmerman's father mean when he says, "But it's okay to be a little mystified sometimes." What are some examples of when it would be okay to be mystified?
5. Zimmerman's friend Marcos writes, "In prison there is nothing else to do but worship God." What does this mean? Are there other characters in Asylum for Nightface who are imprisoned in some way?
6. Why would Zimmerman's parents try to trick him into drinking alcohol and try to force him to smoke marijuana? Are these the actions of loving parents?
7. The friendship between Marcos, a drug dealer, and Zimmerman, who is very straightlaced, seems unlikely.

What about Zimmerman attracts Marcos? What about Marcos attracts Zimmerman?

8. Zimmerman believes God can be discovered in His "design." What does Zimmerman mean by "design"?
9. What does Zimmerman mean by "there is a difference between respect and deference"? Is there a difference?

Which does Zimmerman prefer?

10. Why does Zimmerman need to search for asylum?
11. Zimmerman says that when Christ returned home, he was murdered, a reference to Jesus's crucifixion. Is it possible that the same thing would happen to Zimmerman if he does what his parents and Luke Mark John want him to? Could this be why Drake Jones ran away and hid?
12. Zimmerman says that "when it comes to my own love of God I dislike symbol, metaphor, and most of all, surrender." What does he mean by this?
13. What is the significance of the name "Mark Luke John"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In Chapter Eight, Marcos and Zimmerman discuss Jesus's attacking the tables of the money lenders in the temple. Why did Jesus do this? Does Marcos or Zimmerman have the better interpretation of what Jesus's actions mean?
2. Were what Zimmerman's parents did to him forms of child abuse? What is child abuse? Should his parents be punished?
3. What are the effects on a young adult who becomes his parents' parent? Does Zimmerman exhibit any of these effects?
4. What is card collecting? How important are cards of comic book characters to card collectors? Are any such cards worth \$10,000?
5. What are underground comic books? How are they produced? Give examples of underground comic books that have become popular favorites like the ones Drake Jones did in *Asylum for Nightface*?
6. The narrative of *Asylum for Nightface* suggests that Drake Jones and Zimmerman are Christ figures—that is, that aspects of their lives parallel aspects of Jesus's life. What are the parallels? What do these parallels tell us about Drake Jones and Zimmerman? How does recognizing these parallels motivate Zimmerman's actions?

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Related Titles

As is the case in Brooks's previous novels, *Asylum for Nightface* focuses on a young person who must endure great stress, mostly because the adults in his life refuse to take responsibility for themselves. Alcohol abuse is a common theme in his fiction, and in *Asylum for Nightface*, it helps shape the constricting world of Zimmerman's life. Frequently in Brooks's work, young people are trapped in situations created by grownups and are forced to assume responsibilities more appropriate to their elders than themselves.



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