August Short Guide

August by Judith Rossner

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

In August the two heroines must be viewed as a unit, for together they illustrate Rossner's major theme, the power of friendship and understanding in combating loneliness. Both Dawn and Lulu have a tremendous need for love. At first, the relationship is onesided and professional only, but as Dawn matures and recovers, Lulu becomes an equal recipient in the exchange. Together, the two of them demonstrate the power of friendship, and both benefit from it. For both, reality seems to exist only in Lulu's office.

When Rossner depicts Lulu with her friends and family, her private life seems drab and unreal and the reader, too, wants to hurry back to the couch.

Lulu's own life shows many parallels to Dawn's. Her mother was an unfulfilled artist-type, her father an alcoholic. She too has suffered loss, with her mother committing suicide, her first husband finding another woman even before their daughter Sascha's birth, and her daughter running from home in search of her birth father during her teen years, breaking her stepfather's heart and breaking up Lulu's second marriage. Sascha is still estranged from Lulu as the story opens, although at the end she has returned and the reader can see hopeful signs that she will help replace Dawn in Lulu's life. Lulu's two "daughters" pass each other in Lulu's waiting room, in fact, on Dawn's last day of analysis, making the transfer of roles complete.

Sascha is jealous of Dawn's beauty and her apparent closeness with Lulu, and when she confesses her feelings to her mother, Lulu and Sascha cry together.

Lulu tells Sascha how beautiful she is and together they go out to lunch, and, by implication, on through life.

Social Concerns

In August, Rossner again argues, as she did in Attachments (1977), the need for a woman to have a meaningful life of her own through Dr. Lulu Shinefield, a Manhattan psychiatrist, whose professional life works smoothly but whose private life is filled with "attachment" problems. She is not, despite her career, the "New Woman," the terrific career type she both admires and fears. Lulu, by carrying her training to her own home, manages to make serious mistakes in dealing with her daughter, her husbands, and her lover.

The book also focuses on psychiatry itself through the developing relationship between Lulu and her analytic daughter Dawn Henley. The title August highlights the tremendous dependence that develops between a patient and her analyst. During the month of August, when New York analysts all take their vacations, patients must survive on their own, and insecurity mounts. Each successive August in Dawn's five-year analysis is less traumatic, though, as she grows more and more healthy mentally. Dawn's problems are the ones Rossner has developed in other books — a loneliness and fear of loss caused by abandonment by her parents in her infancy, and the recent "divorce" of the two women who raised her — but here a solution is offered through psychiatry. The doctor's office is reality to Dawn and becomes her "home." She tells Lulu, "You're the person who turned my life into a life."

Dawn's recovery and the closeness that develops between her and Dr. Lulu Shinefield come to rehabilitate the doctor as well, bringing satisfaction and love to her troubled life.

Another social concern developed at some length in August is sexuality, including homosexuality and lesbianism.

Dawn's adoptive "parents" are a lesbian couple and her father, Dawn discovers, was a homosexual. The relationships are explored frankly and nonjudgmentally. The book also deals with the attitude differences between men and women. Dawn tends to equate being a woman with "being sick and messed up" and sees it as a sign of weakness, but through analysis she comes to accept that women are not really sicker, only more likely to seek help when they need it. Dawn generalizes that "men are always looking on the outside to solve problems and women are always looking into our own ... our own heads." Rossner's conviction that friendships between two women are deeper than between men and women because women put things into words is demonstrated by the relationships in this book. None of the male-female relationships really satisfies here, while close female bonds are the main source of strength.

Techniques

August is told in a subdued manner, almost entirely dialogue. All of the action of Dawn's life is reported secondhand, from the couch in Lulu's office. The alternate chapters, in which Lulu emerges from the office into her private life, are not nearly so interesting, heightening the impression that reality in this book lies in the talking.

The pace is extremely slow, with all the hesitations and even redundancies of analysis sessions written in. Occasionally the dialogue bogs down as it belabors a point, and the reader might wish for a change in setting or tone, but the illusion that he is overhearing real psychoanalysis is well maintained and accomplishes Rossner's purposes.

At first Dawn's and Lulu's lives are kept very separate, in self-contained chapters, but then overlaps begin to occur. By the middle of the book, Sascha and Dawn are in direct competition for Lulu. Leaving her August vacation to meet Dawn in the city, Lulu must answer to Sascha. "Was that your precious patient?" she asks. "I hope It's going to get what It wants, even if I'm not. Actually, I know it's a She." The alternation and intrusion of one life into the other become more and more frequent. There are parallel actions, too, as when Lulu goes in search of her own childhood and home as she realizes the end of her relationship with Charles is imminent. Lulu is the analyst but she too is constantly in need of analysis herself, as proven by her long treatment in her youth, her choice of analysts as husbands and lovers throughout her life, and her own rehabilitation from the other side of the couch in her treatment of Dawn. The meshing of the two stories is skillfully handled.

Themes

The need for love is once again a major theme. Dawn — abandoned by her mother, who committed suicide when Dawn was six months old, and her father, who went sailing with a friend a year later and drowned — is constantly searching for parents. Her loss is all the more traumatic since her father left her totally alone the day he died, so that she cried in terror in her crib for hours before a neighbor found and rescued her. Now her lesbian aunt Vera, who raised her and whom she called "daddy," has separated from her "mother," Tony, and she feels once again abandoned. To intensify the loss further, Tony is now married and has two stepdaughters, of whom Dawn is jealous, and has had a mastectomy.

Dawn so fears losing Tony that she will not even visit. Feeling both sets of parents unavailable, Dawn attaches to a series of men, including one old enough to be her father, and to her doctors, first Dr. Seaver, a male psychiatrist who saw her through her adolescence and recently declared her analysis completed, and now Lulu, to whom she feels she is a daughter. Her fear of loss is so great that she snaps pictures of Lulu on the street to have something to keep, leaves paintings behind in her office so Lulu will have something to remind her of Dawn, and is intensely jealous that Lulu has a daughter of her own.

Gradually, through analysis, Dawn rediscovers her birth parents and brings them to life. Through old letters and belongings in her aunt's attic, she finds her mother was a talented artist and that she wanted an abortion when she found she was pregnant with Dawn. Dawn feels terribly guilty about her death at first but comes to terms with that and other elements of the past through her analytic sessions. By the end, she is strong enough to re-establish relationships with both Vera and Tony and to voluntarily terminate her analysis, moving to Washington to start a new life. She wants something of Lulu to keep as proof that she exists but then realizes she herself is the proof, for Lulu has given birth to her.

Instead of taking something, Dawn gives Lulu something to keep, a painting of herself with a smaller Lulu inside of her, with Lulu's head "reach[ing] the place where the large one's heart might have been."

Key Questions

August is a book about parents and children and the needs of each for the other. Discussion might well explore different parental models — biological parents, adoptive parents, substitute parents, single parents, homosexual parents — in our society today. It might also consider psychoanalysis as a means of restoring mental health, looking into the process as it has evolved from its beginnings in Freud to its present merger of diverse theories and techniques.

1. Tremendous faith is placed on psychiatry by those in analysis. Based on the outcome of this book, is that faith justified?

2. Dawn tells Lulu during therapy that she never thought of doctors as "someone who could make a mistake."

Yet even analysts do make mistakes, especially in their own lives. What mistakes does Lulu make in dealing with her daughter and with the men in her life? Does professional knowledge (of psychiatry) seem to help or hinder her in her private life?

3. Lulu and Dawn, despite the difference in age and role, are much alike.

What are the similarities in their lives that make them kindred spirits?

4. Dawn has spent a lifetime thus far searching for the father who left her.

Who were the major father-substitutes in her life? Which were most satisfactory? Does she manage to fill the fatherless void by the end of the book?

5. Dawn has lost her mother as well.

How do her memories of her mother compare with those of her father? How does she seek to resolve the loss of her mother? Does she succeed?

6. Differences between men and women are a major focus of August.

What characteristics are ascribed to each? How do they relate differently to each other in male-female and samesex relationships? Do you detect any unfair bias in her portraits of either men or women?

7. Dawn's adoptive parents are a homosexual couple, and her own father, she discovers, was also homosexual. What effect does this have on Dawn? What attitude toward homosexuality is presented in this book?

8. Dawn's artwork reveals much about herself. Explore the implications of her paintings and lithographs, especially the lonely chair, the dead marigolds, the fruit bowl with bitten apple, the Eskimo pictures, and the final painting of herself with Lulu inside her.

9. Augusts serve as the milestones in this book, and Dawn deals with each August away from analysis a little differently. What signs of progress do you see? How is the final August different from the previous ones?

Literary Precedents

August's heavy use of psychoanalysis is in keeping with a recent interest in the subject by both novelists and journalists. According to Walter Kendrick in the New York Times Book Review, "August is testimony to this new interest and a valuable contribution to it. I know of no other account, imagined or factual that gives such a vivid picture of the analytic experience, on both sides of its intense, troubled, ambiguous relationship."

Related Titles

In August, Rossner deals once again with the need for love and the fear of loss, but here the remedy is different from that in earlier books. Where Theresa (Looking for Mr. Goodbar, 1975) leaped into bed with whomever seemed willing and Nadine (Attachments) seduced and married a pair of Siamese twins to combat loneliness, Dawn talks it out and is able to overcome it. Both she and Lulu use sex to some extent, but in the end they find that the only permanent fix is in nonsexual attachments, in talking with and truly understanding another person.

Here the talking is formalized in psychoanalysis, but the same potential benefit could be offered by Dianne and Nadine's friendship in Attachments, or by Lulu and Sascha's bond or Dawn and Tony's bond in August, provided they take advantage of it. August is clearly the most hopeful of Rossner's books thus far, for it shows a way out of the fearful, lonely trap into which her main characters always seem to fall.

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