

Bark: Stories Study Guide

Bark: Stories by Lorrie Moore

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Plot Summary

“Bark” is a collection of eight short stories by Lorrie Moore. These eight short stories touch on many common themes, including loss, marriage, aging, unhappy endings, and cruelty.

In “Debarking”, divorcee Ira Milkens attempts to get back into the dating world by going out with Zora, a woman who is mentally unsound and unhealthily obsessed with her 16-year-old son – things which he overlooks due to Zora’s attractiveness and his own loneliness. It is an unusual situation that Ira never seems to overcome.

In “The Juniper Tree”, the narrator fails to see her friend, Robin, before Robin dies, and must therefore deal with the loss. She and some mutual friends of Robin’s engage in a nighttime toast to Robin’s life, and her memory.

In “Paper Losses”, an aging hippie couple heads for divorce after they are unable to live up to their former, idealized perceptions of one another. This involves everything from their politics to what they have come to look like in middle age.

In “Foes”, a liberal, late-middle-aged white man has his political convictions challenged by a young, beautiful, conservative Asian-American woman. It is something very unexpected, and throws him off-balance. Only on the way home does his wife manage to set the man back on course.

In “Wings”, a musician in her late-thirties takes advantage of an elderly man’s loneliness in order to steal his wealth and his house. In the process, the woman also ditches her boyfriend, who has been a sponge on her for years.

In “Referential”, a woman unknowingly begins to end her eight-year relationship with Pete as her son prepares to come home from being institutionalized. Pete has remained steadfastly loyal to her, even coming to visit her son with her in the hospital -but receives no such loyalty in return.

In “Subject to Search”, Tom must cut short his delayed romantic holiday in France in order to return to America to consult on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Liberal in politics, Tom is both saddened by the fact the the soldiers involved are too young to know any better, and annoyed that there is a war going on at all.

In “Thank You For Having Me”, the narrator attends the second wedding of her daughter’s former babysitter, which is mistaken for another wedding by a gang of bikers intending to crash it. Realizing their mistake. they apologize. As such, the narrator comes to understand that the mistakes of the past are in the past, the present must be lived for itself, and not for loss.



Debarking

Summary

Ira Milkens, six months divorced from Marilyn, finds it difficult to remove his wedding ring. He considers cutting off the finger, or his entire hand, and sending it to Marilyn, but his friend Mike tells him he'll remove the ring when he's ready. Mike, a casual Catholic, invites Ira, a Jew, over for Sunday Lenten dinner with his wife, Kate, and their friends. Ira accepts. At dinner, he meets one of Kate's divorcee friends, Zora, who laughs at everything Ira says. They seem to hit it off. Ira sends Zora a postcard, telling her it was good to meet her; she sends him one of Van Gogh's room in Arles in return, telling him it was good to meet him, and includes her number. Ira wonders why she didn't say more, but then he remembers how Marilyn used to tell him not to "bark" at people so quickly.

Ira then watches his daughter, four year-old Bekka, for the weekend. Bekka explains that Marilyn will allow her to have a dog and a bunny if Marilyn's boyfriend, Daniel, moves in. Bekka likes Marilyn's other boyfriend, Larry, better. Ira calls Zora, and they agree to get together for a drink. Zora is a pediatrician, has a teenaged son, and wants to write children's books about hedgehogs. She becomes irritable talking about her creative juices as an outlet for work, which Ira can understand. She explains her book will be about a hedgehog going to live with alligators, and that every family is a family of alligators. The next week, Zora invites Ira over. There, he sees numerous photographs of Zora's son, Bruno, naked, even as a teenager, as well as numerous sculptures of naked boys. He then smokes hashish with her, and they have sex. She then asks him if he is read to meet Bruno, and explains that she broke up with her last boyfriend because Bruno didn't like him.

As the War in Iraq comes on, Ira decides to buy Bekka two cats. She names the cats "Fireball" and "Fireflake". When Ira goes over for dinner to meet Bruno, he wonders if Zora isn't mentally imbalanced, though he does appreciate how attractive she is. Bruno is 16, and is not thrilled to meet Ira. Through dinner, Ira tries to make conversation with Bruno, about school and his being in the All-State Woodwinds, but Bruno is not very talkative. Later, Zora and Bruno wrestle, with Zora telling Bruno she can always pin him on the bed. Ira then decides to leave. A few days later, Zora invites Ira out to a movie with her and Bruno. It does not go well, with Bruno again giving Ira the cold shoulder.

On April Fool's Day, Zora pretends to break up with Ira, which hurts him deeply. He realizes Zora must indeed be psychologically impaired to attempt that kind of joke. Out for a drink with Mike, Ira confides in Mike that Zora seems mentally unwell. For Bruno's birthday, Zora only makes him a cake, but then brings the rest home for Bruno. Out on a date a short time later with Ira, Zora says she is thinking about Bruno, and says that she has recently come off antidepressants. She says she wishes she could get back the time from Bruno's childhood, and watch him grow up all over again. After Ira drops Zora off, he goes out for an Easter drink, and toasts the Resurrection, saying that God had



only looked away briefly to watch some I Love Lucy reruns. This causes a man in a blue shirt to comment that somebody should slap Ira.

Analysis

“Bark” is a collection of eight short stories by Lorrie Moore. These eight short stories touch on many common themes, including loss, marriage, aging, unhappy endings, and cruelty. Many of these themes are apparent immediately in the first story in the collection, “Debarking”.

Ira Milkens is looking to get back into the dating game after his marriage has failed – through no fault of his own. The reader should note that his ex-wife is currently dating two different men, clear evidence of the woman’s infidelity being the cause of the marriage’s demise. Marriage, here, as in most stories in the collection, is seen from a very negative standpoint. Indeed, most of the characters that will be met through the book are divorced.

The reader should also take note, here, of the fact that Ira has physical difficulty in removing his wedding ring. This, however, is not merely a physical challenge, but is symbolic of an emotional challenge in that Ira finds it difficult to let go of the past, and to move past his marriage. Here, the theme of loss can be seen clearly, as Ira feels emotionally run and lonely with the demise and loss of his marriage. Ira is also beginning to feel his age (and aging will become an important theme found throughout most stories in the collection), which adds to his loneliness and even desperation in finding someone else.

Loss also weighs heavily on Ira’s mind as he commits to a relationship with Zora. Loss – and its extension, loneliness – compel Ira to seek out acceptance and comfort wherever he can find it. He does so, to some extent, with Zora – and he looks past her obsession with her son and her mental instability because he is so lonely, and she is so attractive. Ira’s loneliness and sense of loss fuel a sort of desperation in him -a desperation not to be lonely, a desperation to find anyone at all, that Zora seems almost too good to be true -and she is.

However, just like Ira’s marriage, his relationship with Zora does not lead to a happy ending. In his marriage, Ira came second to whomever she cheated on him with. In his relationship with Zora, Ira comes second in relation to her son – a distant, conditional second at that. Ira will only be kept around by Zora so long as Bruno likes Ira. If Bruno ever comes to dislike Ira, Zora will break up with Ira, just as she has done so with numerous boyfriends before.

Discussion Question 1

How are the parenting styles of Ira and Zora different? How are they similar?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Ira continue to date Zora beside her obvious unhealthy obsession with her son, and her mental instability?

Discussion Question 3

What is important about Mike telling Ira that Ira's wedding ring will come off when he is ready?

Vocabulary

doughy, unmitigated, dejected, coveted, tremulously, diaphanous, morose, solipsism



The Juniper Tree

Summary

The narrator is dating a man who once dated Robin Ross. Robin is currently dying of a cancerous brain tumor. The narrator considers going to visit Robin, but decides to visit her in the morning instead, thinking she'll be better rested and better prepared to receive visitors. Robin dies overnight. The narrator and Robin are members of a college theater department, and it is ZJ, the chairman, who first breaks the news about Robin's death.

Isabel and Pat collect the narrator and go over to Robin's house. Outside, the narrator looks at the gardens and trees – including juniper trees – that Robin had planted. Inside, they encounter the spirit of Robin, and present her with gifts: a painting from Pat, a new dance from Isabel, and a rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” by the narrator. Robin tells the narrator she doesn't sing enough. The narrator reflects on speaking with Robin about the man Robin once dated, and the narrator is now dating. The narrator explained the man was then also dating a woman named Daphne Kern, whom Robin explained was very talented, physical, and probably very good in bed. This upsets the narrator.

Before the narrator left the house, Robin put a lemon meringue pie in her own face, saying she has always wanted to do it. This both baffles and amuses the writer, saying she is leaving, and Robin tells her to go onward.

Analysis

“The Juniper Tree” involves two themes found throughout the book, and touches on some important symbolism. The theme of loss is readily apparent in this short story, as the narrator must deal with the loss of a good friend, Robin Ross. The loss haunts the narrator because she could have seen Robin before Robin died, but in the end, chose not to.

This story also touches on the theme of unhappy endings, due to two primary issues. First, there is the death of Robin, an unhappy ending in that Robin clearly died before her time. Second, there is the knowledge on the part of the narrator (and the reader) that the narrator could have indeed gone to visit Robin the night before, and could have seen Robin before Robin passed away. However, there is some modicum of forgiveness in the symbolism present in the story. Robin planted a juniper tree in her garden years before, and the narrator notices this juniper tree when she and other friends go to Robin's now-empty house. Traditionally, junipers have been used in cleansing rituals, and here, the juniper tree symbolizes forgiveness and cleansing of the narrator by going to Robin's house to pay tribute to her spirit and her memory.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator put off going to see Robin? Why does she feel that her decision to visit Robin in the morning is enough?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator react when she learns of Robin's death? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the narrator, Isabel, and Pat, go to Robin's house after Robin has died? What do they gain from this?

Vocabulary

baffled, incomprehensible, precipitous, ebullient, precarious



Paper Losses – Foes

Summary

Paper Losses – Kit and Rafe, long-married, met at an anti-nuclear weapon rally decades before. All about peace and love years before, they are now at each other's throats. Rafe's hobbies – including building model rockets – have come to annoy Kit, and she wonders where the handsome hippie she fell in love with has gone. She complains about it to her friend, Jan.

Rafe ultimately files for divorce, wanting to end their marriage on their anniversary. In a last-ditch attempt at saving the marriage, Kit, Rafe, and their three children leave Beersboro for a vacation in La Caribe. The vacation does not work, and Kit wonders if she and Rafe were ever really together at all.

Foes – Baker “Bake” McKurty and his wife, Suzy, are staying at a Bed and Breakfast in Georgetown while exploring Washington, D.C. and awaiting to attend a banquet for the Lunar Lines Literary Journal. Bake has written a biography about George Washington. He and Suzy sit at table 79, and are soon joined by an investor couple, a sculptor and her son, an editorial assistant from the magazine, and a pretty Asian woman named Linda Santo, a lobbyist. Linda is a conservative, and dislikes Barack Obama intensely. She explains she was in the Pentagon on 9/11, was burned alive, and it made her come alive inside to really understand what the United States was all about.

Baker feels both sorry for Linda for what she has been through, and like he wants to strangle her for disliking Barack Obama. On the way back to the B&B, Suzy reassures Baker that Obama will be elected, and Baker tells Linda never to leave him, even in death.

Analysis

Loss, thematically, factors heavily into “Paper Losses”, and subtly into “Foes”. In “Paper Losses”, Kit and Rafe are dealing with the loss of their youth, and the impending loss of their marriage. No longer their former, youthful, and idealistic selves, Kit and Rafe cruelly (here, note the theme of cruelty) hold one another to those youthful, idealized perceptions, and are unable to accept that they have both changed to some degree (here, consider the theme of aging). Rather than compromising and allowing for something as natural as aging, they have allowed their differences and impossible expectations to tear them apart. Clearly, they have difficulty dealing with the aging process, and the loss of their youth. The loss of their marriage will be an even bigger blow to them – one which they do not yet realize, though divorce then seems the only plausible option.

In “Foes”, loss appears in a much more subtle way. Bake is set in his ways, and has a set view about the world in terms of his liberal adherence. Yet, his innocence is lost, so



to speak, when he encounters Linda Santo, a pretty conservative Asian-American woman. Just the fact that someone like Linda exists is enough to challenge Bake's assumptions about the world, for the liberal stereotype of conservatives maintains that they are all old, rich, white men. Linda defies the stereotype in every way, shape, and form.

It is also in "Foes" that marriage has one of its brief, positive thematic appearances. On the way home from the banquet, Bake tells his wife, Suzy, never to leave him, in this world or the next. She goes on to comfort Bake by telling him that Barack Obama will be the next president of the United States.

Discussion Question 1

What do Kit and Rafe hope to gain by bringing their family to La Caribe? Are they successful? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

For what reasons does the marriage between Kit and Rafe break down?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bake seem so jostled by his conversation with Linda? What happens as a result?

Vocabulary

homeopathic, synergistic, brazen, spontaneous, chaste, symbiosis, philanthropist, ominous, ostentatious, facetiously, peevishness, hideosity



Wings – Referential

Summary

Wings – Dench and KC are thirty-something members of a band that never made it big. Strapped for cash, in the past, KC has sold her hair – and she now considers doing it again if needed. It was KC who had first brought Dench into the band, even though the other members were skeptical. KC ultimately falls in love with Dench. At first, his use of marijuana and his strange music irk her a little, but she ends up falling in love with those things, as well. However, the public does not take as kindly to the music that Dench writes. KC begins to handle all the finances for herself and Dench, for Dench does not seem to work, and is nearly always short on cash. As time passes, the band fails to find an agent, being told that they have not developed or cared for their talents sufficiently.

KC also realizes, as time passes, that her own youth is slipping away fast. While out walking her dog, Cat, KC meets an elderly man named Milton Theale. They strike up a quick friendship. Milton is hard of hearing, and constructs a book nook in his front yard for people to come by and exchange books. Knowing they are in a wealthier neighborhood, Dench encourages KC to become friendlier with the man, thinking he may be willing to produce them or send money their way. This bothers KC, though Dench says he is only joking. KC sometimes feels as if Dench was only ever looking for a patroness, rather than a real girlfriend.

KC decides to visit Milton, and he invites her in. His house is full of books and clutter, and he has a piano. KC explains that her music career didn't work out, and that she moved to the area because it used to be where her grandmother lived in a nursing home. Milton knows the place. He asks about the kind of music KC plays, and she says she'll come by and play something for him, sometime. He says he will get the piano tuned.

On her next visit, KC learns that Milton's wife has been dead for two years. He explains that old age can be lonely. KC also finds Milton's idea of a book nook to be charming. She brings some books for it on her next visit. Dench begins to grow suspicious, and condescending of KC's friendship with Milton, and KC begins to grow disappointed and lose confidence in Dench. KC later plays and sings for Milton, who is thrilled. He then brings KC to his lawyer's office, and has his entire will rewritten to leave everything to KC so that her life and music can soar. KC does not tell Dench, both for reasons of tact, and because she isn't sure if Milton has changed his will before.

KC continues to visit Milton, eventually even taking him to his doctor's appointments. However, Milton's stepdaughters become concerned and attempt to intervene. Milton later admits to KC that he is glad his stepdaughters are gone. After dinner one night, Milton kisses KC, after which KC calls him crazy, and calls hospice to have him taken away. At home, KC punches Dench in the face. She comes to live in Milton's house, maintains the book nook, and grows into old age alone.



Referential – The narrator, and her out-of-work boyfriend, Pete, attempt to figure out what to buy their institutionalized son for his birthday, which can't be used as some kind of a weapon. The luster in the relationship between the narrator and Pete has faded, as has her beauty. She and Pete decide on a deckle-edged volume of biography about Daniel Boone. The narrator's son speaks of the cruelties of nature, of how sparrows can kill the baby birds of other species. He goes on to ask if his mother and Peter ever wonder about how people have things they don't deserve. Pete and the narrator return to the narrator's home, and then Pete leaves after the narrator decides she will bring her son home. Inside, the phone rings, but no one is on the other end when the narrator answers.

Analysis

In no story in Moore's collection is the theme of cruelty more apparent than in "Wings". In the story, KC befriends and seduces an elderly man into naming her in his will, and then has him committed in order to take his money and his house. KC appears to have begun the friendship with Milton out of actual kindness, but the decaying effect that Dench has had on her, as well as his devilish scheming and insistences, leads KC to alter her plans when it comes to Milton. KC steals his wealth and his house not only to find financial solvency, but also as a way to finally make a clean break from Dench.

KC has been regretting the loss of her youth – and here, the theme of aging is readily apparent – much of which has been spent catering to, and providing for, Dench. From here on out, KC will be selfish, living for herself alone. Loss, thematically, also figures into the short story – both in terms of KC's loss of so much of her youth, but also in that Milton loses his own freedom at the end of his life by having KC cruelly commit him to hospice.

The tragedy between KC and Milton also comes in the fact that, beyond their aging, they have suffered so much loss beyond youth and freedom. KC is dealing with a sense of loss of having accomplished anything substantial with her life that will allow her to transition into old age. Milton is dealing with the loss of his wife. This helps to make him so susceptible to the kindness that KC shows him.

Interestingly enough, the reader should also note that Milton's falling for KC seems to be a desire to recapture some of his own youth -and love. Unfortunately for Milton, romance is the last thing on KC's mind. Like Milton, KC is also aging -and doesn't want to grow into old age being sponged off of by Dench. Milton is merely someone expendable, a inconvenience to be dispensed with in her desire to finally get somewhere stable in life. Everything Milton has, KC wants -but KC doesn't want Milton.

Just as KC edges Milton out of his own life in "Wings", the unnamed woman referred to in "Referential" unknowingly is edging Pete out of her own life. Having endured the loss of her son to an institution, the woman is looking forward to having her son come home. Yet, she does not realize that as she prepared to receive her son, she is also forcing out Pete. She does not realize she can have room in her life for both her son and her



boyfriend – and as a result, Pete symbolically leaves the house at the end of the story – symbolic of loss that he is experiencing, and symbolic of the crumbling of his eight-year relationship.

The reader should also pay attention to the purchase of a Daniel Boone biography for the woman's son. Boone, a famous American frontiersman and explorer, was known for finding his way. The gift reflects the mother's hope that her son will find his way, even as she loses her own way with Pete.

Discussion Question 1

Why does KC lament the loss of her youth? What does she do about it?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think KC ever had any intention other than to take advantage of Milton? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does the woman in "Referential" not realize she is forcing out Pete as she prepares to let her son move back home?

Vocabulary

undulating, premeditation, perplexity, insolvency, frugal, balefully

Subject to Search – Thank You For Having Me

Summary

Subject to Search – Tom arrives for lunch in France with his suitcase, to which a John Kerry sticker is adhered. He tells his lover that he must return to the United States. He has gotten wind of American troops torturing Iraqi prisoners, but the troops are just kids and don't know what they are doing. He has to head back before the story breaks. Tom, formerly in the military, now works as a contracting consultant for the American government, a job he is not thrilled about taking, for he would prefer to work in a university. The narrator reflects on a conversation she had with Tom years before, when they were both still married. Tom had said that everyone was a sucker for a happy ending.

Thank You For Having Me – The narrator is very sad upon hearing about the death of Michael Jackson, causing her to listen to all of his music, and causing her 15-year-old daughter, Nickie, to question what she is doing. The next day, the narrator and Nickie go to the wedding of Nickie's former babysitter, Maria, who was marrying for the second time to a man named Hank, short for Johannes. Her first husband, Ian, is playing music at the wedding. He wears a t-shirt that says "Thank You for Having Me".

Weddings make the narrator reflect on how people shouldn't only ever be geared for loss, but that it is spiritually important for people to go to things other than funerals, like weddings. Nickie asks her mother if she ever thinks about her dad, who left years before. The narrator does not answer the question. A gang of bikers shows up intending to disrupt the wedding, saying that mistakes have been made and must be put in the past at the fork in the road, but then leaves when they realize they have the wrong wedding. The narrator then goes to dance with Ian's dad, knowing the cyclists were right – mistakes are all in the past.

Analysis

In the final two stories of the collection – "Subject to Search" and "Thank You for Having Me", the theme of marriage again comes to the fore, negatively in the former story and positively in the latter. In "Subject to Search", both the narrator and Tom have gone through divorces, and they have come to France to begin a delayed romance with one another. As such, their marriages did not turn out in a positive fashion. In "Thank You For Having Me", though, the narrator is divorced, she comes to realize that life must be about more than loss (and here, the theme of loss can be seen again in her attitude prior to Maria's wedding), and that mistakes of the past are in the past. She looks positively to the wedding she is attending – a positive take on marriage, as Maria and Hank are to be wed. Though this is Maria's second wedding, her previous marriage



ended amicably, evidenced by the fact that her previous husband is in attendance at her second wedding.

While “Thank You For Having Me” also bucks the unhappy endings that have plagued many of the short stories up until now, “Subject to Search” ends unhappily. Though Tom and the narrator are finally able to enjoy a romantic holiday with one another, their trip is cut short by Tom’s need to return to consult on the Abu Ghraib scandal – an unhappy ending to the trip, and an unhappy ending in and of itself for those American soldiers involved in the scandal.

Discussion Question 1

Why must Tom cut short his romantic holiday with the narrator in France? How does he feel about having to do so?

Discussion Question 2

What are Tom’s thoughts about the American soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal? Why does he take this position?

Discussion Question 3

What lesson do the bikers teach the narrator in “Thank You For Having Me”? How does the narrator immediately act upon this lesson? Why?

Vocabulary

moonlighted, acclimates, articulated, evanesce, innuendo, bereaved



Characters

Ira Milken

Ira Milken is a middle-aged divorcee who features in the short story “Debarking”. Six months divorced, Ira has visitation rights with his 4-year-old daughter, Bekka, and Ira seeks to get back into the dating game because he is so lonely. He has, however, a difficult time physically removing his wedding ring from his finger – a symbolic issue demonstrating that he is not yet over his marriage, though he endeavors to be so. He begins dating a woman named Zora who has an unhealthy attachment to her son, and is probably mentally unwell – but Ira looks past this due to her attractiveness and his own loneliness. In his marriage, Ira came second to other men; and in his new relationship, he comes second to Bruno, Zora’s son –for if Bruno comes to dislike Ira, Zora will break up with Ira.

Zora

Zora is the attractive mother of Bruno, and the girlfriend of Ira Milken in the short story “Debarking”. Zora is, by all appearances, mentally disturbed, and has a bizarre obsession with her son. Her home is full of sculptures of nude boys, and photographs of Bruno, nude, through all his years. Zora tells Ira that she will only continue to date him as long as Bruno likes him, and that in the past, she has broken up with men because Bruno has not liked them.

The "Juniper Tree" Narrator

The narrator of “The Juniper Tree” is a woman who wishes she could be more action-oriented, but often settles for merely speaking rather than doing. The narrator’s good friend, Robin, is dying at home of a cancerous brain tumor, and the narrator decides to put off a visit until morning. Overnight, Robin dies, and the narrator is haunted by the decision not to go the night before. She ends up visiting Robin’s now-empty house with two other friends, and toasting Robin’s spirit.

Kit

Kit is the wife of Rafe in the story “Paper Losses”. Kit and Rafe are a middle-aged married couple headed straight for divorce. Kit has become disgusted that her husband is no longer as attractive as he was when he was younger, and is further disgusted that he enjoys building model rockets. Kit laments the loss of her youth, and constantly compares her husband to his former, idealistic, youthful self – something he is no longer.



Baker “Bake” McKurty

Baker “Bake” McKurty is a later middle-aged man married to Suzy, and works as a writer in the short story “Foes”. Deeply and uncompromisingly liberal, Bake attends a literary magazine banquet at which he enters into a political discussion with a beautiful, young, conservative Asian-American woman who nearly died on 9/11. Bake has his liberal assumptions challenged by the woman, for she is not the stereotypical conservative (old, rich, white, and male). On the way to their Bed & Breakfast after the banquet, Bake tells Suzy to never leave him, and Suzy comforts him by saying that Barack Obama will be the next president.

KC

KC is a woman in her late thirties who is preparing for the next phase of her life following a youth spent attempting to break into the music business. KC laments the loss of her youth, not for the music, but for all the time she has spent in a relationship with Dench, her boyfriend, who has become nothing more than an overgrown child. KC meets and befriends an elderly, wealthy man named Milton, whom Dench encourages KC to lead on in order to get his money. KC ultimately comes to befriend the man, leading to his will being rewritten for her. KC then leads Milton on, and when he moves toward her romantically, she has him committed to hospice, inherits his wealth, and moves into his house – all after breaking up with Dench.

Milton Theale

Milton Theale is an elderly man who lives in the same neighborhood as KC. He is lonely, for his wife has been dead two years and his stepdaughters do not get along well with him. He befriends KC when he meets her, believing she is truly interested in friendship – and later, something more. He rewrites his will so that everything is left to KC, and then KC lures him in romantically, only to call him crazy and have him committed to hospice, where he will spend the rest of his life.

The Woman in "Referential"

The woman in “Referential” is never named, and only ever referred to as “she” or “her”. The woman is a mother whose son has been institutionalized for cutting. The woman has also been in an eight year-long relationship with Pete. Yet the woman does not realize that she isn’t making room in her life for both Pete and her son. As her son prepares to come home from the hospital, she inadvertently begins to distance herself from Pete, forcing him out.



The Woman in "Subject to Search"

The never-named woman in "Subject to Search" is a divorced woman who meets up with the divorced Tom in France to begin a delayed romance – one that has been building for years. The narrator is dismayed to learn that Tom must return early to the United States to handle what will become a major national scandal – the Abu Ghraib prison situation.

The Narrator of "Thank You for Having Me"

The narrator of "Thank You for Having Me" is a divorced mother of a 15-year-old girl named Nickie. Both mother and daughter attend the second wedding of Maria, Nickie's old babysitter. The narrator watches as a biker gang crashes the wedding, only to discover they are in the wrong wedding in the wrong place, and apologize for their mistake. The narrator takes a lesson from the biker, knowing that all mistakes are in the past, and that she must learn to enjoy the present.

Mike and Bekka

Mike and Bekka are supporting characters in the short story "Debarking". Mike is a good friend of Ira's, who invites Ira to a dinner party at which Zora is also present. It is at this party that Ira and Zora are introduced. Ira later confers with Mike over Zora's mental issues.

Bekka is Ira's small daughter, who dislikes the fact that her mother is dating two different men at the same time. Bekka is the one sure thing that Ira has in life, and she means so much to him he allows her to name the two cats he purchases for her, "Fireball" and "Fireflake".

ZJ and Robin

ZJ and Robin are supporting characters in the short story "The Juniper Tree". ZJ is the department chair at the college where Robin and the narrator work, and it is ZJ who first announces Robin's death. Robin is a close friend of the narrator's, who is dying of a cancerous brain tumor. Robin was apparently an optimistic and lighthearted person who enjoyed planting and growing things -including hope and gentleness in others.

Rafe

Rafe is a supporting character in the short story "Paper Losses". He is the middle-aged husband of Kit, who, like Kit, becomes disillusioned with who they have become in life, for they are no longer their idealized younger selves. It is Rafe who files for divorce from Kit after a last-ditch attempt to save their marriage on a vacation fails.



Dench

Dench is a supporting character in the short story "Wings". He is the long-term boyfriend of KC, is vastly lazy and irresponsible, and sponges off of her. Formerly hoping to be a musician, Dench now has little motivation in life, and believes that his relationship with KC is close to perfect. KC however, feels differently -and ultimately dumps Dench.

Pete

Pete is the long-term boyfriend of the woman in "Referential", having been with her for eight years. Pete is vastly loyal to the woman, even going so far as to visit her son with her while he is institutionalized. As the woman prepares for her son to come home from the institution, Pete finds himself increasingly alienated, and pushed away from the woman.

Tom

Tom is a supporting character in the short story "Subject to Serve". A contracting consultant for the US government, he is called back early from vacation with the woman whom he is dating to handle the breaking Abu Grahیب scandal. Tom, politically liberal, is frustrated with American involvement in Iraq, but also feels sorry for the American soldiers involved in the scandal, believing they are too young to know any better.

Nickie and Maria

Nickie and Maria are supporting characters in the short story "Thank You For Having Me". Nickie is the fifteen-year old daughter of the narrator, and it is Nickie's former babysitter, Maria, whose wedding she and her mother are attending. Nickie is bright and optimistic, and looks forward to the wedding. Maria, very beautiful, is herself quite happy with how her wedding is turning out.

Ian

Ian is a supporting character in the short story "Thank You for Having Me". He is Maria's first husband, and having amicably divorced her and remained friends, he is invited to Maria's second wedding. There, Scott plays music and wears a shirt that says "Thank You For Having Me".

Pat and Isabel

Pat and Isabel are supporting characters in the short story "The Juniper Tree". Like the narrator, they are friends of Robin's, and go to Robin's house to celebrate her life after

she dies. They do this with offerings in Robin's memory by way of a painting from Pat, and a new dance from Isabel.

Linda

Linda is a beautiful, young, Asian-American conservative woman who attends a writer's banquet in the short story "Foes". There, she reveals she was almost killed on 9/11, and discusses politics with the liberal Bake, throwing Bake off his game because she defies the stereotypical conservative: she is not old, rich, or white.

Suzy

Suzy is the wife of Bake McKurty in the short story "Foes". Deeply liberal, she is sweet and comforting, and reassures Bake that Barack Obama will win the 2008 presidential election after Bake is shaken up following a conversation with the conservative Linda.



Symbols and Symbolism

Wedding ring

A wedding ring is worn by Ira Milkens in “Debarking” following his divorce six months before. Ira finds it difficult to remove the ring physically, but this is a symbolic manifestation of his emotional inability to move on yet. Ira’s friend, Mike, tells Ira that the ring will come off when he is ready to take it off, underscoring the point that Ira’s issues are emotional.

Sculptures

Sculptures of nude boys are carved by Zora, and kept around her house. These nude sculptures disturb Ira to some degree, as well as Zora’s nude photographs of her son through his teenage years.

Juniper Tree

A Juniper tree is planted by Robin Ross in her garden outside her house in the story “The Juniper Tree”. Traditionally, juniper has been used in cleansing rituals, and the night that the narrator visits Robin’s empty house with friends, she notices the juniper tree in the garden. This becomes symbolic of the narrator being cleansed by seeking forgiveness in coming to visit the house of Robin after she has died just hours before.

Luggage

Luggage is carried with Kit and Rafe when they take their kids on a vacation to La Caribe in a last-ditch attempt to save their marriage in the short story “Paper Losses”. The luggage they carry is symbolic of the emotional turmoil and pending divorce they have brought with them.

Biographies

Biographies are written by Bake McKurty in the short story “Foes”. The biographies are his trade as a writer, and serve to be the reason for his invitation to the Washington, D.C.-based banquet for Lunar Lines Literary Journal.

Book Nook

A book nook – a tiny library cabinet standing on a pole – is constructed by Milton Theale in his front yard to engender knowledge and the trading of books in the short story



“Wings”. He also constructs for people who are visiting the hospital down the road, so that they might have reading material while they are waiting for loved ones.

Hair

Hair is grown to great lengths by KC in the short story “Wings”. Short for money in the past, KC has cut off all her hair to sell for a thousand dollars. Short on money again, KC once more considers doing the same again, or letting it grow a little longer for more money.

Daniel Boone biography

A deckle-edged Daniel Boone biography is given to the son of the woman in the short story “Referential”. The son is a cutter and has been institutionalized, and the Boone biography is his birthday gift. Daniel Boone, a famous American frontiersman and explorer, was well-known for his ability to end up finding his way, even when lost. Here, Boone symbolically reflects the mother’s hopes that her son will find himself, and return home after being lost.

Briefcase

A briefcase is carried by Tom in the short story “Subject to Serve”. The briefcase denotes his professional nature as a consultant to the American government. The briefcase also displays a personal touch, in the John Kerry sticker that Tom had adhered to it.

"Thank You For Having Me" T-Shirt

A t-shirt which reads “Thank You For Having Me” is worn by Ian at the wedding of Maria and Hank in the short story “Thank You For Having Me”. Ian is providing music for the wedding. Maria is Ian’s former wife, with the divorce appearing to have been amicable given Ian’s presence at, and invitation to, the wedding. The t-shirt is a way for him to publicly announce his approval and delight at the occasion.



Settings

Beersboro

Beersboro is a town in an unidentified state in the United States. It is where Kit and Rafe live with their three children in the short story “Paper Losses”. It is from Beersboro that the family travels to La Caribe in a last-ditch attempt for Kit and Rafe to save their marriage. The attempt is unsuccessful, and the family returns to Beersboro worse than they left.

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., is the capital city of the United States of America, and serves as the setting for the short story “Foes”. Given the political nature of the story, the setting in Washington, D.C. –the epicenter of American politics –is perfect. It is in Washington, D.C., that Lunar Lines Literary Journal is holding a banquet, to which hundreds have been invited. Among them are Bake and Suzy McKurty, as well as Linda Santo. Liberal Bake and conservative Linda have a discussion about politics and the credentials of Barack Obama to be president.

France

France is a nation in Western Europe, and is the setting for the short story “Subject to Serve”. In France, the divorced Tom begins a delayed romance with the divorced narrator, only to have the romance cut short by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, at which time Tom must return to the United States before the story breaks.

Milton's house

Milton's house, in the short story “Wings”, is located a short distance away from the apartment being rented by KC and Dench. Milton's house is a fine old house, crammed with books, papers, and other clutter accumulated by Milton in the two years since the death of his wife. He begins to host KC at his house for friendly visits, which ultimately pave the way to KC using Milton to get to his wealth. She has him committed to hospice, moves into his house, and remodels it.

The countryside

The countryside – in an unidentified state – serves as the primary setting in the short story “Thank You For Having Me”. The country plays host to the wedding of Maria and Hank, and is attended by the narrator of the story, and her daughter, Nickie. The country

wedding is crashed by a gang of bikers, who realize they have the wrong country wedding, apologize, and depart.



Themes and Motifs

Marriage

Marriage is an important theme in the short story collection “Bark” by Lorrie Moore, and is one of the themes found consistently through the book. Marriage, in some way, shape, or form, has affected the plots and characters of nearly every story, usually in a negative fashion.

In the story “Debarking”, divorcee Ira Milkens attempts to get back into the dating game with a woman named Zora, who seems to be obsessed with her son. Ira’s marriage, having dissolved, leaves him reeling, and so he is willing to compromise normalcy for Zora’s mental instability based on her attractiveness, and Ira’s own desire not to be alone any longer. In “Paper Losses”, a married couple goes through the final throes of their life together, attempting to stave off divorce with a less than half-hearted last-minute vacation. The marriage no longer has the same youthful appeal, as both husband and wife have become dissatisfied with one another for various reasons. For example, Kit no longer finds her husband attractive. Rather than trying to work with one another and the way that they have become, both Kit and Rafe give up on one another because they are no longer the idealistic selves they were when younger.

In “Wings”, while KC and Dench are not married, they live together as if they are married – though Dench sponges off of KC. The relationship is not a positive or a healthy one. Dench encourages KC to gain the affection of a lonely old man, and then use him for his money. After KC is successful in doing this, she punches Dench in the face and does away with the relationship. In “Referential”, the narrator has long been divorced from her husband, having brought up her son on her own. She has been dating Pete for eight years, but their relationship – which was once strong and seemed poised for marriage – breaks down because the narrator cannot find room in her life for both her son and Pete. Pete is edged out as the narrator’s institutionalized son is due to return home, despite the amount of time and love Peter has given to the narrator. In “Subject to Serve”, both the narrator and Tom are divorced from their respective spouses. The narrator reflects on a conversation she and Tom had years before in which Tom says everyone is a sucker for a happy ending – but no such happy ending has yet come for the narrator or Tom.

Only in the short stories “Thank You For Having Me” and “Foes” is marriage approached with a nearly-positive perspective. In “Thank You For Having Me”, Maria, though divorced, is remarrying. Her former husband, Ian, is at her second wedding to provide music, signaling that the divorce was an amicable parting. A biker gang accidentally interrupts the wedding, mistaking it for another. One of the bikers speaks about mistakes being in the past, which causes the narrator to reflect on how the biker is right – that the past is the past. The narrator’s own husband left her years before, and it is time to move past it, just the way that Maria and Ian are moving beyond the mistakes of their past as well. In “Foes”, a liberal married couple takes comfort in one another after



the husband has a disquieting political conversation with a conservative Asian woman at a banquet. The liberal wife comforts her liberal husband with the belief that Barack Obama will win the presidency.

Unhappy Endings

Unhappy endings form an important theme found in nearly every story in “Bark” by Lorrie Moore. Unhappy endings, in Moore’s stories, always come about by way of the choices that characters make for themselves, or the choices that associated characters make which ultimately affect the main characters of the stories.

In “Debarking”, divorcee Ira Milkens begins a relationship with a woman named Zora. Ira’s marriage has obviously ended as a result of his wife’s infidelity (she currently has two boyfriends, a fact which does not escape her young daughter), and now, he strains to get back into dating. But like his marriage, this experience is not happy for him, either. He struggles with Zora’s obvious mental issues, as well as her unhealthy obsession with her teenage son – all because he is lonely, and he finds Zora incredibly attractive. However, the relationship is tempestuous as best, for Zora will break up with Ira if her son should ever disapprove of Ira. In “The Juniper Tree”, the narrator wishes to go and visit her dying friend, but waits until morning, only to discover that her friend has died during the night. The choice the narrator has made haunts her afterward, even though she can draw on good memories with her now dead friend.

In “Paper Losses”, Kit and Rafe, rather than being loving and accepting of one another as they age, refuse to accept each other’s aging, and they continue to view one another in light of their idealistic, youthful selves. Rather than accepting the aging process, and accepting that they are not altogether the same people they were decades before, they allow their marriage to disintegrate. In “Foes”, a white liberal historian has his settled viewpoints of the world challenged by a conservative, Asian woman, who almost died on 9/11. However, his wife returns him to happiness with assurances that Barack Obama will win the presidency. In “Wings”, KC has come to lament that she has wasted so much of her youth in a relationship with Dench, who has become an overgrown child. She is determined to live the rest of her life the way she wants it, and in so doing earns the trust of an elderly, wealthy man, whom she seduces into attempting to romance her, and then has him committed after he has left everything to her in his will. She spends the rest of her life alone; he spends the rest of his life in hospice.

In “Referential”, a mother who seeks to have her son returned home after being institutionalized does not realize how little room there is in her life for both her son, and her boyfriend, whom she edges out as she decides to bring her son home. In “Subject to Serve”, a long-delayed romance between Tom and the narrator is cut short when Tom must leave France to return to the United States to deal with the unfolding Abu-Ghraib scandal. He is unhappy about his line of work as a consultant, and feels bad for the American soldiers who are part of the scandal, for he considers them too young to know any better. Their choices will affect them for the rest of their lives in a very negative fashion, as will his own.



Loss

Loss is an important theme in the short story collection “Bark” by Lorrie Moore. Loss is something that the characters in each of the stories in the collection deals with at some point or another, and it ultimately affects how those characters come to live their lives.

In “Debarking”, Ira deals with the loss of his marriage, and partial-custody rights of his daughter, Bekka. Bitterly alone, and looking to get back into the dating game as a result of loss, Ira compromises on many things – including the mental stability of his girlfriend, Zora – in exchange for not being alone and having an attractive girlfriend. In the short story “The Juniper Tree”, the narrator loses one of her good friends, Robin, to a cancerous brain tumor. What is tragic about the narrator’s loss here is that her decision to put off seeing Robin until the next morning means she will never get to see Robin again, for Robin dies overnight. As a result, the narrator and some mutual friends head to Robin’s now-empty house to toast her spirit.

In “Paper Losses”, a married couple – formerly anti-nuclear weapons hippies – have aged, and are set for divorce. They will lose their marriage and their family unity as a result. Their loss is not unavoidable, but comes as a result of choices that they make in that they refuse to handle their aging gracefully, and their refusal to see one another as anything other than what they saw in each other when they were younger. In “Foes”, an old, white liberal man has his views of the world shaken – his innocence lost, so to speak – by a conservative Asian woman who defies everything the Left stereotypes the Right as being (old white men). As such, he must take comfort in his wife’s reassurances that Barack Obama will be president. In “Wings”, KC must not only deal with the loss of her youth, but the necessity of needing to find a way to lose her long-term boyfriend, Dench. For KC, loss is a bittersweet thing – bitter in the departure of her youth, but sweet in the securing of her future. Milton, however, only experiences loss – the loss of his wife and the loss of his freedom after KC has him committed to hospice when he acts on her leading him on.

In “Referential”, a woman has long dealt with the absence, or loss, of her son, who has been institutionalized. She has been dating Pete for eight years, but doesn’t realize she is edging Pete out of her life as she attempts to make room for her son to return home. She doesn’t seem to realize she can make room in her life for both her son and Pete, and she will experience the loss of Pete as she regains her son. In “Subject to Search”, both the narrator and Tom have gone through the loss of divorce, ultimately leading to delayed romance between them. However, Tom must leave for home early to deal with a scandal of national significance, cutting short his holiday in France, and having to handle the loss of time in his delayed romance. In “Thank You for Having Me”, the narrator contemplates the loss of her estranged husband at a wedding, who left many years before, when her daughter was still an infant. However, she comes to realize, based on the mistake of the bikers speaking about mistakes, that the past is the past, and that she cannot be forever bound by it.



Aging

Aging is an important theme in the collection of short stories, “Bark”, by Lorrie Moore. Aging, thematically, deals with the aging process – how people grow older, and how they handle the process. In “Bark”, aging affects different characters, and their actions, in different ways.

In “Debarking”, middle-aged Ira attempts to get back into the dating game by going out with Zora. Because he is middle-aged and lonely, and knows that his chances are slimming as he ages, he decides to gloss over Zora’s unhealthy obsession with her teenage son, and Zora’s mental unstableness, in order to date her because she is so attractive. Ira himself is not handling the aging process well, lamenting the demise of his marriage (as symbolized by his inability to remove his wedding ring) and seeking beauty over substance in a relationship.

In “Paper Losses”, an aging hippie couple prepares for divorce. Both the narrator and her husband now look venomously at one another, for the luster has gone from their marriage as they have aged. They are no longer exactly the same people as they were when they were younger, and this weighs heavily on them – especially the wife, Kit’s, mind. It is Kit who finds the aged Rafe no longer attractive, for example. Both husband and wife still view each other in comparison to their younger, idealistic selves – and these are ideals to which the present cannot stand up to. As a result, neither one of them handles their aging gracefully in the least.

In “Foes”, following a conversation with a conservative Asian woman, the aging Bake McKurty worries about how much longer he’ll have with his wife. He tells her never to leave him, even in death. Here, Bake and his wife, Suzy, accept that they are aging, and they are doing so gracefully by remaining committed to one another. In “Wings”, aging is handled gracefully by Milton, who has accepted, more or less, that he is getting on in his years. KC, however, cannot accept that she is aging, and laments that so much of her youth was wasted – not on music, but with her boyfriend, Dench. After cruelly using Milton to secure his money and wealth, KC ditches Dench, determined to live the rest of her life as she wants to. As such, she breaks up with Dench, and remodels Milton’s house to live in for the rest of her life.

In “Thank You for Having Me”, the narrator is embittered by the mistakes of the past, and is haunted by how much of her past no longer exists in the present. This is exemplified by her sadness at the passing of Michael Jackson. However, the narrator comes to realize that getting older means letting go of the past, not letting it dominate her present.

Cruelty

Cruelty is an important theme in the collection of short stories, “Bark”, by Lorrie Moore. Cruelty – the commission of mean-spirited and harmful words and acts from one to



another – becomes essential to the plot of many of Moore’s stories, especially when it comes to certain characters.

In “Paper Losses”, an aging hippie couple is unable to handle their aging well, and their marriage and children suffer as a result. It is during this time that the couple – Kit and Rafe – do and say some incredibly cruel things to, and about one another. For example, Kit admits that she no longer finds her husband attractive anymore, as she did in her youth – without stopping to consider how she herself may have changed as well. Rather than be accepting of, and handling with grace their aging, Kit and Rafe cruelly compare one another to who they were in the past – their younger, beautiful, idealistic selves – and the result is, in the end, divorce.

In “Wings”, KC, a woman in her late thirties, befriends a much older man named Milton. Milton takes the friendship to be genuine, but KC has ulterior motives. Her boyfriend encourages KC to befriend Milton to take advantage of him financially, but KC is determined not only to take advantage of Milton, but to jettison her boyfriend as well at the first possible moment. Dench is incredibly cruel in his insistence that KC take advantage of Milton, but KC herself is even crueller in that she leads Milton on romantically. When Milton finally acts on his romantic feelings, KC – whom he has named the beneficiary of everything in his will – has him committed to hospice. She then callously moves into his house and remodels it so she can live the rest of her life there, on her own terms, though she has just denied Milton his chance to live the rest of his life on his own terms.

In “Subject to Serve”, Tom and the narrator, in France on a delayed romance, discuss the nature of cruelty as cruelty is what is at the root of the scandal that is bringing Tom back to the States early. Tom tells the narrator that cruelty is natural to human beings, that it has to be fought. Here, he is referring to the young American soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal, who cruelly mocked and harassed Iraqi prisoners. Tom says the soldiers are too young to truly know what they have done, but their actions are merely an element of natural cruelty.

Styles

Point of View

Lorrie Moore tells her short story collection “Bark” in the first and third-person narrative, depending on the story. The short stories “The Juniper Tree” and “Thank You For Having Me” are both told in the first-person perspective, while the short stories “Debarking”, “Paper Losses”, “Foes”, “Wings”, “Referential”, and “Subject to Search” are all told in the third-person. The stories “Debarking”, “The Juniper Tree”, “Paper Losses”, “Foes”, “Referential” and “Thank You For Having Me” maintain a limited-omniscient narrative mode regardless as to the person narrating, allowing the reader to learn and know only as much as the characters themselves come to learn and know things. In “Wings” and “Subject to Search”, the narration is omniscient, giving the reader all needed information as the stories progress. For example, in “Subject to Search”, though the vast number of people in the world have not yet heard about Abu Ghraib, the narrator, reader, and Tom are already aware of what is occurring.

Language and Meaning

Lorrie Moore tells her short story collection “Bark” in language that is educated and consistent across all of her stories, whether the narration is told in first or third-person. The educated language owes to the author’s work as a professor of English and creative writing. The unchanging narrative voice provides a common unifying voice between each of the short stories, allowing the reader to transition between different plots and characters more easily.

Structure

Lorrie Moore divides her short story collection “Bark” into eight sections, with each section being a short story. The short stories themselves vary in length. For example, the short story “Referential” is only eight pages in length, whereas the short story “Wings” is fifty-two pages in length. Each short story is preceded by a title page that bears the short story’s name. While the stories all share common themes with one another, there are no direct links in plot between the stories themselves.



Quotes

You'll remove that ring when you're ready.
-- Mike (Debarking paragraph 2)

Importance: Mike counsels Ira on his divorce six months ago. Ira has been reluctant to move on, to get back into the dating world, and his problem is symbolized by the physical inability he encounters when attempting to remove his wedding ring. This inability to remove the ring is indeed more symbolic than anything, for it demonstrates his emotional refusal to let go of the past.

Every family is a family of alligators.
-- Zora (Debarking paragraph 69)

Importance: Zora, though she was speaking to Ira about a book she intends to write, nevertheless makes a prescient statement about families – and one that is true of most families in Moore's collection of short stories. Families are not full of loving people in these stories, but alligators – cruel and unkind people that will eat others alive if given the chance. This is certainly true in later stories, such as Kit and Rafe in "Paper Losses" and KC in "Wings".

I felt I was a person of my word, and by saying something I would make it so. It was less like integrity and more like magic.
-- Narrator (The Juniper Tree paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, the narrator laments on her inability to act, and attempts to focus on her ability to say anything at all, instead. She talks herself out of going to visit her dying friend one night, deciding instead to go the following morning, and praising herself for this decision – only to learn that her friend dies overnight instead. This loss will desperately haunt the narrator as a result.

She died late last night.
-- ZJ (The Juniper Tree paragraph 12)

Importance: Here, a mutual friend of Robin's and the narrator's informs the narrator that Robin has died overnight. This makes the narrator feel horrible, for she had previously planned to visit Robin that morning. Now, instead of visiting a dying friend, she must deal with the loss of her friend, and must deal with the knowledge that she could have visited her friend before her friend died.

They had become, also, a little pro-nuke.
-- Narrator (Paper Losses paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, the narrator describes the aging of Kit and Rake, former hippies, and the decay of their marriage. Their marginal pro-nuke stance has nothing to do with nuclear weapons, but everything to do with how they have become toward one another



– as though their marriage were the Cold War writ small. As such, they are only headed for divorce by the end of the story.

Why had he come?

-- Narrator (Foes paragraph 23)

Importance: The narrator explains Baker McKurty's consideration of why he has come to Washington, D.C., for a banquet for a literary magazine. Even though he is aware of the ostensible reason, he is unsure as to his true motives. The trip, however, will lead him to challenge his liberal rationale, and will ultimately bring him a little closer to his wife.

She'd been given something perfect –youth! –and had done imperfect things with it.

-- Narrator (Wings paragraph 24)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains KC's unhappiness with the way her life has turned out so far. Now in her late-thirties, KC feels as if she has wasted so much of her youth –by focusing more on her boyfriend, Dench, than on her music and her own life, and by having stayed with Dench for so long when Dench himself has become nothing more than an overgrown child.

To me you always look so beautiful,' Peter no longer said.

-- Narrator (Referential paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, the decay of an eight-year relationship can be summed up by the aging of the relationship itself. The narrator is looking forward to bringing her son home from the institution, not realizing that she is edging Pete out in the process. The narrator's concern about her son has certainly worn the relationship with Pete thin, and this is clearly demonstrated in the distance that has been growing between the narrator and Pete.

Cruelty comes natural. It comes natural to everyone.

-- Tom (Subject to Serve paragraph 40)

Importance: Here, Tom speaks about human nature in general, though he is referring specifically to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. He says that the American soldiers were too young to realize, truly, what they were doing, and that natural cruelty came through. Cruelty is something that must be challenged in the self, and fought, otherwise, it will overcome all things.

People shouldn't have been set in motion on this planet only to grieve losses. And without weddings there were only funerals.

-- Narrator (Thank You For Having Me paragraph 19)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on how focused people seem to be on the sad things and sad events in life. Indeed, all of life seems geared for loss. However, happy

moments and happy occasions, like weddings, should be valued for their spiritual and emotional importance. Celebrations and gladness must be had amid sadness and loss.