Bear and His Daughter Short Guide

Bear and His Daughter by Robert Stone

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Characters

James Wood, editor for The New Republic, has commented that Stone's male characters are "halved, severed, emotionally divorced. Certainly his men feel alone," and Stone has supported this view with his own description of these men as "lost" and of his intention to write stories because "We can't identify ourselves without them." His basic approach is to frame the question "Who do we think we are" in terms of the predicament that his protagonist faces, and to follow through circumstances of dramatic intensity or duress the manner in which the character reaches toward some kind of comprehension, if not an answer or resolution to the query. This process is especially wellillustrated by the story "Helping" in which the reader is essentially located within the flow of consciousness of a man in middle-age who has kept various demons (alcoholism, anger, self-loathing, cruelty) under control for more than a year but who is very close to unleashing them all.

Elliot, a counselor in a state hospital, knows what he should do in most situations but has strong inclinations to act otherwise in spite of the consequences.

Stone's intention is to make Elliot sympathetic and distasteful simultaneously, just as Elliot sees himself, and to trace Elliot's wayward course between incidents of harmful behavior and moments of minor valor. The ominous mood at the story's start, "One gray November day," with "wet streets cold and lonely" puts Elliot's fragile sobriety at risk immediately, and a succession of dispiriting encounters destroys it. "Disproportionately angry," Elliot passes a saloon and feels "childlike expectation" and that he has "encountered possibility." His wife is distraught at his return to alcohol, and Elliot is consumed by regret but energized sufficiently to snarl at one of his wife's clinging, parasitical clients and to unsettle a smug neighbor with bizarre antics. Although he is "tired of pain, anger and confusion," the liquor has given him "a perverse lucidity," and although Elliot knows that the aftermath of his actions will be "damn little justice and no mercy" (practically a motto for the characters in the world of Stone's stories), his need for an escape from the routine rut of his life has almost justified his actions. In an ambiguous but not entirely negative conclusion, Elliot returns home to see his wife waiting for him, "trembling at the window." His last thoughts are "to hope for forgiveness."

Whether he deserves it, or will know it remains uncertain, but the image of hope is the author's gift to a character he wants to help.

Stone neither condemns nor condones the behavior of most of his main characters. He is interested in their choices and is certainly sympathetic about their attempts to overcome their feelings of helplessness or weakness. One of their more striking attributes is a spirit of resistance akin to the rage Elliot feels, a refusal to let themselves be beaten when it would be easier to declare psychic bankruptcy. Liam Blessington in "Under the Pitons" finds the will to overcome fatigue and reach shore; Mary Urquhart in "Miserere" rebounds from monumental loss to challenge the established church and give strength to others; Will and Rowan Smart in "Bear and His Daughter" are ready to

destroy themselves before compromising their beliefs or making some accommodation to stupidity. The stubborn, almost perverse unreasonableness of these people is a part of their appeal, and if their actions seem to be excessive, Stone has surrounded them with a gallery of totally objectionable minor characters whose loathsome attributes require extreme measures.

In every story there is at least one repulsive figure. Mary Urquhart has to deal with a priest she sees as "the reeking model of every Jew-baiting, clerical fascist murderer"; Mackay in "Absence of Mercy" fights for his life on a subway platform with a lunatic; Liam Blessington is trapped on a cruise with homicidal drug-runners. Alison in "Aquarius Obscured" is living with a zonked-out, sponging, control freak. Stone's presentation of these people is direct and unsubtle, still convincing even if they are props.

He feels so strongly about the ugliness they represent that he has let strong description stand for a more complex depiction, yet he has mixed his distaste with a dash of dry humor, so that the potentially dangerous and very unpleasant companions Fletch travels with in "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta" reveal the emptiness of their manipulations by the strained, exhausted manner of their speech—an unconscious parody of what passed for cutting-edge style in the mid1960s but which sounds like the garbled babble of a man caught in a time warp decades later.

The appropriation of the language of self-realization therapy by one of Elliot's patients in "Helping" is another example of Stone's sardonic portrayal of social patterns tending toward disintegration, as are the philosophic ruminations of the "porpoise" in "Aquarius Obscured" who sounds like a cult leader with the intimidating quasi-logical discourse he employs to frighten and subjugate Alison. When a character speaks with clarity in a language that seems entirely his or her own, as is the case with Rowan Smart and her friend John Hears the Sun Come Up (his name reflecting his Shoshone heritage) in "Bear and His Daughter," their obvious self-awareness and intelligence sets them apart from the clearly sinister and generally unpleasant people in the stories, and more significantly, from the "lost" men in Stone's world. They are a part of the next generation, and while their prospects are not any more promising, the shift in sensibility marked by the different modes of their speech suggest that they might be able to establish a more tangible connection with the elements in American culture that Stone admires.

Social Concerns

Whenever Robert Stone has discussed his work, he has emphasized his abiding interest in what he calls "my subject. America and Americans." His explanation of his intentions for his first novel A Hall of Minors (1967)—"I was looking for a vision of America, for a statement about the American condition"—is applicable to all of his work, and this often grim vision of American reality is the central feature of the short fiction which he has collected in Bear and His Daughter. While admitting that he is "sometimes bitterly critical," Stone maintains that he is "a patriot" and that "I love America." The dark cast of much of his work develops from what Stone sees as a gulf between a great national promise and the nature of life for many Americans. The elusiveness of what sometimes seems almost a national birthright has, Stone feels, put "people in a state of anomie, of frustration," and in stories published originally over three decades, he has attempted to explore and express this condition, and then to identify, to dramatize, to understand, and to some extent, to explain the social situations which have driven his characters to extremes of behavior which threaten their physical and psychological survival.

The six stories in Bear and His Daughter which have been previously published in magazines like The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine, and Esquire, and the novella-like title piece which was written for this collection, range across the spectrum of major social concerns of the last decades of the twentieth century. Stone has referred to the consumption of alcohol and drugs in his work as "ridiculous" in a characteristically self-mocking acknowledgment of one of his preoccupations, and every one of the stories involves to a significant degree a person whose addiction is a central aspect of their life. Perhaps most prominently, the protagonist of "Helping"—the story placed at the center of the book—is a man who is fully aware of the destructive nature of his desire to temporarily deflect an almost constant feeling of psychic distress by returning to a familiar pattern of alcoholic consumption that makes him unruly and unpleasant even in the company of the woman he loves. "What you have to understand, Grace," he tells her as an excuse he himself doesn't entirely believe or understand, "is that this drink I'm having is the only worthwhile thing I've done in the last year and a half." Like the protagonists of all the other stories, Elliot's addiction is a function of an individual need which makes him vulnerable to the pressures of living in a postmodern world. These people have been weakened by some unpleasant incident or unsettling relationship—a common feature of Stone's "American reality"—and their turn to the surcease of mind-altering or mind-numbing substances is the result of a personal problem combined with intolerable social pressures. Taken together, the stories present a catalogue of current concerns as Stone saw them through the last decades of the twentieth century.

Mary Urquhart in "Miserere" has suffered the most profound of human losses and turned, understandably, to heavy drinking before achieving a kind of recovery through a commitment to a religious calling. Her determination to rescue for salvation the souls of aborted fetuses troubles the priests she asks for assistance. The purity of her quest and the wavering of the clergy enables Stone to examine without explicit judgement the

extremely sensitive issue of abortion and the difficulty of acting effectively even from the most unselfish of motives.

"Absence of Mercy" is a meditation on violence—its seductive appeal, its terrifying effect on rational thought and its consequences for the men who have accepted it as a part of their masculinity, ultimately staking their virility on its dubious pleasures. Stone has said that "violence is very close to all of us" and his writing is a means of coming to terms with what cannot be avoided. "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta" also explores the hovering menace of a volatile social mix but is essentially concerned with the failure of certain styles of behavior lauded as cutting edge or hip in the 1960s, now revealed as exaggerated posturing, empty-headed babbling, and self-serving manipulation by imitators and calculators grasping at trends exhausted or debased and devoid of substance. Elliot in "Helping" is unable to avoid lapsing into old patterns of drinking due to what might be called defects in his basic character, but the bleakness of his job as a counselor, the smug assurance of some of the people in his neighborhood, the outright nastiness of some of his wife's clients, and the overall lack of hope for any improvement in his life contribute to his difficulties.

Stone's depiction in "helping" what appears to be a typical community in modern America is designed as a caustic portrait of degeneration and discouragement. "Under the Pitons" is set in the Caribbean, and here Stone widens his view (as he has in the central American setting of "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta") to include sinister figures from the world beyond the United States, confirming suspicions that things are not discernibly better anywhere else. This narrative focus of this story is an unlikely love affair, growing out of circumstances hardly conducive to anything other than immediate and temporary gratification, and the poignance of the couple's desperate struggle to reach shore while their feeling for each other is growing beyond expectations is Stone's way of placing the entire concept of romantic love in jeopardy. It is as if he is challenging the commonly held belief (or hope) that "love is all you need." As a corollary, the young mother who takes her daughter to an aquarium in "Aquarius Obscured" has had her mind so addled by a drugdrenched existence that she is ready to engage a porpoise in a very serious philosophical debate. She seems to have totally accepted many of the post-hippie slogans and mantras that may have begun in wisdom but have evolved into mindless idiocy, and Stone uses her narration as a sympathetic consideration of her plight but also as a devastating critique of a series of New Age crazes. "Bear and His Daughter," while not quite a summing up, pulls together many of the social issues he has raised in the other stories.

The accomplished poet Will Smart and his daughter Rowan, a park ranger, are both brilliant, eccentric, haunted by the excesses of their mutual and separate past, and incapable of resisting the lure of narcotics. Mary Urquhart's search for a sort of salvation in a godless landscape is paralleled by Smart's attempt to compose a quest epic in which the natural world redeems the failure of urban civilization, while Rowan's retelling of Native American myths and legends serves the same function; the violence of "Absence of Mercy" overwhelms both of them; the ruptured but fundamentally crucial relationship between Elliot and Grace in "Helping" is echoed by Smart (the Bear) and

his daughter who are trapped in a world where their qualities are not appreciated and their capabilities underused.

Throughout the story, stupid people, strangling conventions, and social dysfunction are rampant. The horror and sadness at the conclusion seem inevitable considering the vision of contemporary life that Stone has generated.

Techniques

In his Introduction to the Best American Short Stories of 1992, which he edited, Stone noted that "the most significant development in late twentieth-century American fiction (is) the renewal and revitalization of the realist mode." He went on to observe that "American writers seem ready to accept traditional forms without self-consciousness in dealing with the complexity of the world around them." This comment would seem to support Stone's employment of some "traditional forms"—notably the realist mode—but Stone has always insisted on a more elaborate view of realism than the term sometimes suggests. "Realism as a theory of literature is meaningless," Stone contends. "I can start with it as a mode because I don't believe in it." Recalling his youth in the company of his mother who was diagnosed with symptoms of intermittent schizophrenia, he says that "Realism wasn't an issue because there wasn't any. There was no strong distinction for me between objective and imaginative worlds." Nonetheless, as James Woods says, his "great powers of real ism" provide a solid foundation for the imaginative techniques he uses.

For instance, Stone is able to write riveting scenes of action, such as the struggle on the subway platform in "Absence of Mercy," or the long, desperate swim in "Under the Pitons," or the wild ride in "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta," scenes which hold the reader in a vice of suspense and anticipation, the details vivid, graphic and relentless. And his dialogue is equally gripping, always pointed and convincing, as he finds a specific voice for each character which is rooted in their psychological make-up and consistent in tone and pace, its rhythms echoing the mood of the moment.

Similarly, his descriptive passages are graphic and visually intense, putting the reader into the tableau so that the landscape of Central America in "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta," the Caribbean seascape of "Under the Pitons" and the southwest Shoshone country in "Bear and His Daughter" are as accessible as the generally more familiar settings in the urban northeast of "Miserere," "Absence of Mercy," and "Helping." Nonetheless, the realistic aspects of these elements are far from the entire picture. The experience of landscape takes on surreal qualities in each story as the shifting moods of the characters alter their perceptions of what they see and feel. Fatigue and exhilaration give Blessington in "Under the Pitons" a vision of the ocean as a living entity that is his partner as well as his foe.

The speech of the characters remains consistent, thus apparently realistic, but Stone manipulates his practice of thirdperson narration so that the omniscient narration fuses with long stretches of dialogue that seem to emerge from a first-person, unfolding present-tense perspective, creating an impression of being within the character's mind.

The poet Will Smart in "Bear and His Daughter" is frequently reflective, moving back across earlier incidents in his life, and adding verses to a poem he is refashioning, putting the reader close to the flow of thought in his conscious and subconscious faculties. In choosing to actually show Smart's poem, Stone is taking something of a risk since he has centered the story around the assumption that Smart is a poet of national

prominence, his gifts still flourishing even if his place in the national literary firmament is less certain than it once was. The equivalence of the man and his work—"You became scattered lines of your own poem," Smart realizes with some satisfaction—and the exultation of the creative moment—"A magical experience it had been that night, all poetry and light!"—

are at the heart of Stone's affectionate, empathetic characterization, and the poem that Smart is working on runs through the story like a continuing chorus of affirmation, its glowing images and insights countering the sad, pathetic fumbling of a drunken sentimentalist. It is not surprising that among his "forbears" Stone mentions that he likes Celine and Nathaniel West and Dos Passos, whose work also extends the realistic into other areas, but when an interviewer suggests an affinity with "writers like John Barth and William Gass and Donald Barthelme," Stone replies that his difference from those writers is that "they take realism too seriously and so have to react against it." His own fusion is more seamless, possibly because he has so much faith in the narrative thread of the events of the story itself, an aesthetic position validated by the singularity of his short fiction.

Themes

The forces in what a critic called "an America gone haywire" unraveling the social fabric in Stone's books have severely damaged the characters but Stone intends to do much more than just record their distress. Responding to the charge that his bleak outlook is too pessimistic, Stone contends while "I deal with much that's negative and gruesome—I don't write to dispirit people." At the heart of his work is an artistic credo that fits into the tradition of the writers Stone admires (Dickens; Dos Passos; Fitzgerald). Envisioning a readership somewhat akin to the characters themselves, Stone proclaims: "I write to give them courage, to make them confront things as they are in a more courageous way." Only Mary Urquhart in "Miserere" has any direct contact with some form of organized religion, but Stone's universe includes, even insists, on the presence of God in some form. However, as a character remarks in his novel A Flag For Sunrise (1981), "There's always a place for God— there's some question as to whether he's in it." Stone explains this position by saying "I feel a very deep connection to the existentialist tradition of God as an absence—-nota meaningless void, but a negative presence we live in terms of." The first two stories of Bear and His Daughter set the parameters of this position. The title "Miserere" is taken from the well-known prayer, "the prayer sung over and over since the beginning of music itself," which intones: Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, Miserere nobis. It is a fervent expression of the soul's need for God's mercy, and in that story, at least for Urquhart, an expression of the possibilities of that prayer being answered. The tide, though, also carries its aural suggestion: Misery. How fine, Stone wonders, is the line separating a life of misery from the grace of a merciful God? The next story, with its unnerving title, "Absence of Mercy," is a partial answer, and the characters in the other stories are to some degree suspended in the gulf between despair and faith or hope, lurching toward either sector as the narrative progresses. Throughout, manifestations of the divine may occur as the redemptive powers of art (for Will Smart), or in the grandeur of the natural world (as in "Under the Pitons" where the OCEAN, which Stone says he has imprinted "in a very strong way," suggests some cosmic order), or perhaps most significantly, in a relationship in which the characters find some strength in their struggles. Smart and his daughter, for all the grievous flaws they share, have something of this, as do Liam and Gillian in "Under the Pitons." Typically, it is not enough to ensure their survival but it gives them the courage to continue as well as they can.

In "Helping," Elliot and Grace are close to tearing each other apart, yet it becomes clear that their individual and mutual existence depends upon the recognition of what they can share and how much each actually cares for the other, as well as a sense of how much damage they are also going to inflict and how much must be forgiven. Perhaps in the context of existential thought, it is humans acting with love and mercy that tends to signal the tangible reality of the absent God, the "negative presence" supplanted by the grace or generosity of people themselves, wavering and unsure. While Stone uses the theological dimension as an overlying element in these stories, he finds several positive features in American cultural history which he believes are an important aspect of the values which he, often by inference, wishes to support. When asked what he felt was

best about America, he answered, "Idealism. A tradition of rectitude—Enlightenment ideas written into the Constitution," but also observed that "so much that is best in America is a state of mind you can't export." In Bear and His Daughter, it is generally small acts of decency committed without regard for personal profit which reflect the best side of the a people who are often, as Stone put it, living "where there's a problem that doesn't have a solution."

Key Questions

In spite of Stone's continued insistence that "I love America" even if he is "sometimes bitterly critical," and that he regards himself as "a patriot," some reviewers have found his work totally deficient in terms of American values. One wrote, "Not a hint of a whiff of a shred of a trace of a clue about what is best about America has ever showed up in a Robert Stone novel." One approach to Stone's short fiction would be to consider just how he does represent the best of American experience. Another kind of complaint about his work is summarized in wry self-mockery by Stone himself, who called his writing "heavy, lugubrious, life is dreadful, nothing's funny, just one long plaintive wail unrelieved by brio." Since there are numerous expressions of a comic mode in the stories, a consideration of how comedy works (comedy of manner; satire; comedy of situation; comic dialogue) would also be interesting.

And while Stone has certainly emphasized the male characters in his novels, there are some portraits of women in the short stories which are an indication of his intention to write about aspects of feminine experience with the same degree of interest he has brought to the men. A discussion of the similarities and differences between male and female protagonists would be worthwhile as a means for understanding Stone's ideas.

1. Consider the theological dimensions of Mary Urquhart's decision about abortion in "Miserere." How does Stone locate God in human affairs in this story?

2. Explore the dimensions of violence as Stone uses them in "Absence of Mercy."

3. How does Stone move between the sinister and the hilarious in "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta?" Does the mixture of modes enhance or detract from the presentation of the central character?

4. Does Stone expect the reader to sympathize with or feel disgust for Chas Elliot in "Helping"? How does Elliot's treatment of his wife, Grace, affect the reader's feelings?

5. What is the role of seascape in "Under the Pitons?" How does Stone use the ocean as a symbol?

6. Is Stone's use of a talking porpoise in "Aquarius Obscured" a version of the technique known as "magical realism"?

Consider the concept and its applicability to the story.

7. In what way is John Hears the Sun Come Up in "Bear and His Daughter" an attempt by Stone to depict a man who is not "lost?" Why has he changed his focus here?

8. Examine the entire poem that Will Smart is composing in "Bear and His Daughter." What are the values Stone is seeking in its gradual development? How good is the poem?

9. What admirable qualities does Stone find in Rowan Smart in "Bear and His Daughter"? Is her death inevitable? What does her tragic action say about American society?

Literary Precedents

Ernest Hemingway's short stories cast a long shadow over the work of the writers who followed him, but the inevitable revision of a reputation after the author's death has reduced Hemingway's reputation from its mid-twentieth century godlike stature, and many new modes of fiction (like the work of Barth, Barthelme, and Oates) have made the "Hemingway story" seem a little old-fashioned to some. Nevertheless, the power of his best work—"Hills Like White Elephants," "In Another Country," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"—has not been diminished by the passage of time, and Stone's interest in men who must stand alone, men who are tested by their ability in a physically demanding situation, men who are struggling to act with decency and honor echoes some of Hemingway's central concerns. Stone also uses the sea as an important setting and symbol, carrying on the line of Melville and Conrad (who might be included among what Stone calls his "great masters, the late Victorians") which Hemingway picked up as well, but in his exploration of social situations and in his incisive examination of the women who are prominent characters in his stories, Stone is working in territory that was more Fitzgerald's than Hemingway's. The angst that Stone's characters experience seems to be a distinctly postCold War phenomenon, but Stone might be seen as operating in some of the same areas as such slightly older semicontemporaries as Malamud, Roth, and Salinger, and the fact that every story includes a considerable consumption of alcohol suggests a sort of kinship to Cheever, whose characters also drank heavily, although with much less anger.

Related Titles

The protagonists of Stone's novels, Strickland in Outerbridge Reach (1992; see separate entry), Hicks in Dog Soldiers (1974; see separate entry), Holliwell in A Flag for Sunrise (1981; see separate entry), resemble the male characters in his short fiction in many ways. They, too, are "lost" and often energized by anger, their lives apparently directed by forces they almost reluctantly must finally confront.

The threat of violence is ever present, and they are usually involved in a difficult relationship with a woman they care for.

The war—in Vietnam or Central America—which occupies a prominent place in their memories has been a defining event in their lives. Drugs or booze are ever present. Because Stone wrote the stories in Bear and His Daughter through the three decades that also saw the publication of all his novels prior to Damascus Gate of 1997, the social issues raised in the novels are often present, sometimes from another angle, in the stories as well.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994