# Bedrock Short Guide

## Bedrock by Lisa Alther

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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

Although they have talked on the phone almost daily for twenty years and are both artists, Clea, the central character, and her friend Elke, have very different personalities. Clea, a successful photographer with a picture-perfect family and an exciting extramarital life, is a sorority girl gone wild — good looks, good clothes, and good luck, and amazingly enough, a good marriage to Turner, an overgrown frat boy become international businessman. Elke, a shy, serious, haunted sculptor, is married to Terence, a protective but possessive intellectual whose antisocial tendencies are as pronounced as are Turner's social ones. The characters and couples are mirror images — Clea and Turner are superficial, ironized, glitzy, yuppies, the comic pair, and Elke and Terence the serious, self-absorbed, nihilistic intellectuals.

The novel turns around the relationship between Clea and Elke, two characters so different one sometimes wonders what they see in each other. Clea's superficial, shallow, self-indulgent character in itself begs satire, as does that of Turner, the middle-aged party chairman, and Terence, the armchair radical. These characters have refashioned reality to suit their preferences and nothing, even the readily observable deterioration of their marriage and the serial infidelities which make part of breakfast conversation for Clea and Turner, is allowed to intrude. Elke, in some ways a more sympathetic, less stylized character, has become isolated in a self-conscious, self-pitying drama in which she is a tragic victim, the world a place of unrelenting cruelty and destruction.

The denizens of Roches Ridge are a bizarre and colorful lot. The two cafes are run by Loretta and her beehive or by Ishtar, with her crystals and spider plants. A Jesus freak leads a harem of female followers in long dresses, the hairdresser and the executive's wife are a secret body building team, and Loretta's boyfriend Rayon Marsh would like to be a lesbian. Darker forces lie beneath — the devoted daughter torments her aged mother, working her to death as a donkey for Orion's cocaine smuggling, a grieving mother remains obsessed by death herself, and a halfwit pervert stalks young girls.

When Clea's attention turns from Elke to Dacron Marsh, Orion's sensitive (and handsome) younger brother, a primitive sculptor granted the gallery showing Elke never got, the women's friendship enters a crisis when Elke joins Clea in Roches Ridge, they become lovers, and each woman achieves the artistic breakthrough for which she has been searching — Elke's dark sculptures affirm a powerful maternal force, and Clea's decorative photographs are able to capture the deeper meanings she has been evading. The town of Roches Ridge, too, discovers and corrects the darkest of the forces within it. Orion Marsh's grave-robbing and cocaine trafficking business is found out, and buried pasts are revealed, as the Boudicca priestess Starshine surfaces as the lost daughter of Father Flanagan and his housekeeper.

Things unbalanced by the times are put to right, and extremes are brought into the center, just as Dacron Marsh wins back his hometown girl from the Boudiccas.

Both the individual and the community grow by recognizing and accepting things which have been feared, distrusted, or denied. Indeed, the human capacity to change and grow is the restorative force in the comic world, allowing Clea and Elke to establish both love and art for an open and promising future.

# Social Concerns/Themes

Known as a comic writer whose satirical portraits of regions and decades, especially the 1970s, Alther explores manners and mores both in high culture and rural life. Her intricately interwoven plots and character sketches bring together beautiful people and bumpkins to create a comedy of manners which explores each character's search for validation, however misguided it may seem. Her central concern is the web of bonds and mores which connect individuals in families, friendships, and communities.

The novel's focus on the nearly twenty-year-old friendship between two women places human relationships, especially women's friendship, as a central concern. Marriage and family, too, are central, as the partnerships between Turner and Clea and Terence and Elke are explored, exploded, and redefined. Since these four characters are all at midlife and middle age, with children gone from the nest, marriages stagnant, and careers in the doldrums, a renewed understanding of life's priorities is even more compelling. Recognizing that both marriages and careers lack secure foundations unless unresolved issues are set aside, the two women defect from Manhattan to a remote ski village in Vermont, where everything takes a new tack.

Personal relationships are reexamined, and the relationship between individual and the larger community, or the larger world, is redefined. Characters overcome familiar ways and predictable lives to reestablish themselves with new priorities.

Beyond the frequently comic, even satirical examination of yuppie life in the 1970s lies a serious theme — the search for meaning and purpose at the midpoint of an urbanized, regimented contemporary existence. In the face of a recent history and experience which appears either hopelessly slick and superficial or frighteningly evil and destructive, these characters search for a sense of affirmation and hope which can energize and transform the future.

All the characters, whether comic or serious, are in some way engaged in a search for personal fulfillment and connections with others, however odd a turn their search may take.

In addition to relationship is the need for productive and meaningful work. Since both women are artists in need of new sources of personal and artistic creativity, the role of art itself as a representation of reality, becomes central. Clea, unable to break away from a kind of picture-postcard photography which changes reality into something more comfortable, is superficial and slick. Elke, a World War II orphan haunted by destruction and impermanence which is the legacy of the modern world, cannot escape an unrelenting tragic vision which is obsessive and enervating. Both must transform their lives in order to achieve the depth and balance their work needs. The artistic-academic milieu they inhabit in New York is wittily portrayed, but indeed all the characters are workers — Xerox executives, farmers, hairdressers, restaurateurs, and even junk metal salvagers, postal workers who open all mail, crematorium operators, Avon salespeople, or grave robbers.

The friendship between Clea and Elke, and the unresolved sexual attraction which has helped drive it, must be established on more authentic grounds or abandoned. The lesbian interest which has been present in the two women's relationship for many years is realized in the end, when Clea and Elke stay in Vermont while their husbands return to New York, the future open and, at least from the point of view of the two women, filled with possibilities. Along with the need to redefine or abandon confining personal relationships goes the need to abandon the superficial artistic academic circles of Manhattan for connection to a wider world.

When Clea leaves Gotham for a ramshackle farmhouse in Roches Ridge, Vermont, situated "on a spine of granite that wouldn't shift or vanish, a different reality is encountered. The stark underpinnings which suggest death and stillness are emblematic to the novel, as the characters come back to bedrock as a way to rejuvenate and resurrect their lives. Roches Ridge, no postcard New England village, is populated not only with the usual number of rustic bigots and small-minded beauty shop denizens, but also with the Marshes, Clea's throwback neighbors, whose house, littered with animal furs and decorated with bones, is home to a motley assortment of kin. From the noble savage Dacron to his brother Orion, who makes a business of robbing bones from crematorium corpses for sale to research labs, and his irrepressible mother Waneeta, they are antithetical to civilized and cerebral life in New York. A couple of gay farmers down the road and the Boudiccas, a radical feminist tribe gone back to the land to establish a women's graveyard, complete the picture.

# Techniques

Bedrock combines two story lines — the romantic friendship between Clea and Elke, presented in a series of chronological flashbacks beginning with Clea's childhood, and several mystery-adventures in the lives of the denizens of Roches Ridge, resolved as the severed foot found in Clea's shrubbery leads to Orion's trapping shed.

The novel's final scene emphasizes the enduring qualities of human quirkiness as the characters converge at the town's bicentennial celebration, accompanied by a spate of new marriages, pregnancies, and other personal celebrations, culminating in the cow bingo event, where a cow pie on the square marks luckiest townspeople. Her house restored, Clea's landscaping fits the rocky topography, "And they all lived happily ever after, a few logs short of a cord."

Alther's comic plot structure is that of the pastoral romance, where the lovers who venture into the woods and the rustics they find there are joined together in a celebration of reconciliation and community. Just as Alther's plot depends on discovering secrets and reconciling discordant elements to reclaim a stable whole, the tension in Alther's novels arises from the precarious balance of opposites — life and work, independence and connectedness, distance and empathy, subjectivity and objectivity, joy and despair, life and death. Even the novel's title Bedrock signifies a multilayered reality.

The smoothly orchestrated, predictable surface life the characters have built is underlaid by the obdurate, resistant, yet enduring flint beneath the Vermont soil — the bedrock on which Roches ridge — the French "rock" — to which the characters repair. Rocks, bones, and sometimes metal are connected to what is both frightening and destructive — an enduring, even joyous foundation for life.

Clea's dream of a picture-book New England country home is demolished when the bathtub falls through the floor and bedrock is found two inches below the soil, requiring a rock garden rather than manicured landscaping.

The details of daily life, especially those which signify lifestyle and its affectations, are precise — houses and their decorations, hairdos, vehicles, what people eat and wear, the art galleries of Soho and the Marshes' front porch.

Most of this detail is recorded through the photographic eye and memory of Clea, the observer who recounts her own personal history and her impressions of other people and places, especially Elke, and even the grotesque child-molester and potential sex murderer Zeno Racine. Virtually all the characters reveal their own perceptions to some degree. Although Clea's consciousness provides the most usual lens, her photographer's predilection for detail devoid of context and her own aversion to introspection or reflection provide an illusion of objectivity which allows even the most minor villager a moment of revelation. This use of third person narration from double

perspectives allows the reader to understand but not completely identify with the characters.

This interweaving of the observer's and the character's observations which produces Alther's particular brand of irony. Just when the somewhat infatuated narrator has introduced Clea Shawn as a "sophisticated woman" with style and lovers to burn, Calvin Roche records her first appearance in Roches Ridge, "Looking like Mandy Winger on "Dallas" (plus crow's feet and graying hair), so excited that she shifted from foot to foot like she had to pee." Limitations, pet obsessions and favorite self-delusions moderate the major characters' more egotistical selfportraits, and the stock characters — bumpkins, weirdos, political and artsy types — all have compelling, if comical, inner lives.

Alther can be a witty social observer — the radical lesbians who outlaw roosters in their henhouse, the religious nut who burns rock records while lusting madly after Loretta's beehive. But she saves her criticism, aside from that which must necessarily arise from the comic world, for those who traffic in death and destruction, for intolerance, especially homophobia, and for those whose rigidity denies or excludes others (like the cult leader Daryl).

# Key Questions

Although Bedrock is identified as a feminist novel, many different readers would find its particular brand of humor and its lively kaleidoscope of characters and settings entertaining.

The subject of women's wit, and how it may be different from men's, is always good, and pop culture buffs enjoy the allusions to 1980s trends. The openended finish to the novel with Clea and Elke in Roches Ridge, Terence and Turner in New York, and the possibilities for their future left unresolved, offers opportunity for much speculation.

1. What is Alther's tone when she creates comic scenes or characters? Is it generous or mean? fair or unfair? Is anyone ridiculed unjustly? Who, or what, is most frequently singled out as the butt of jokes?

2. Clea and Elke are so very different characters, what do you think attracts them to one another? Is there relationship always a positive one? What changes does each partner need to make?

3. What is Alther's view of marriage?

What makes a marital relationship good or bad? How do the various relationships in the novel fit this pattern?

4. The obsession with death, dismemberment, and other horrors is omnipresent in Bedrock. What is the meaning of novel's epigraph from the Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi?

We dance along Death's icy brink, But is the dance less full of fun?

# Literary Precedents

Alther writes comedy of manners in the tradition of Mary McCarthy, Dorothy Parker and, more recently, Nora Ephron. More noticeable, however, has been her ability to identify herself as a chronicler of generations, of particular place and time. Although the flashback to Clea and Turner's college years — as Greeks, of course — and their sexual adventures and sexual politics is only part of the Bedrock saga, the evocation of Mary McCarthy's The Group (1963) is uncanny — the fads, fancies, driven women, remote men, comical sex, as are the echoes of Alix Kates Shulman's Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (1972) and Erica Jong's Fear of Flying (1973), other icons of the 1970s.

Alther's particular mixture of conservative satire — to be a fanatic about anything is bad form — and sexual adventurousness is in the tradition not only of McCarthy, but her lesbian eroticism plugs into a tradition of such literature which includes, not only The Well of Loneliness (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, but the festive lesbianism of Rita Mae Brown's Ruby Fruit Jungle (1973).

Marge Piercy's lusty radicals likewise escape to Vermont and these same overheated menages appear in her novels and poems of the 1960s and 1970s — Going Down Fast (1969), The High Cost of Loving (1973), Small Changes (1973), and To Be of Use (1973). The history of romantic friendship and lesbian love was documented and explored in such works as Lillian Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Past (1981). The focus on women's friendships has roots in the New England realists like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, who inhabited Alther's own ground and was a mainstay of feminist literature during the 1970s and beyond, even in such popular works as Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982). Popular nonfiction addressed the challenges of midlife as well, and Gail Sheehy's Passages: Predictable Crises in Adult Life was a 1973 best seller.

Alther's more deeply-structured antecedents, however, come from the classical tradition of romantic comedy and, in Bedrock, from its pastoral wing.

The archetype is pastoral drama, in which the romantic characters — none are usually middle-aged, however — retreat to the woods, where the rustic and satirical characters they meet help right misconceptions and return balance to the comic world, where a marriage (or several) and a dance usually form the final ceremony of reconciliation and balance. Here, frightening or disquieting elements are either expelled (for a time) or integrated, and the renewed community celebrates its foundations. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin on the comic carnival — the role of laughter in discourse and the novel — is a piece of the backdrop, as is the grotesque tradition of the Southern Gothic.

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