

Before I Say Good-bye Short Guide

Before I Say Good-bye by Mary Higgins Clark

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Characters

Before I Say Good-bye continually alternates point of view, introducing more than a dozen characters with a broad scope of psychological profiles. Fascinated by human psychology, Clark designs detailed character biographies for all of her characters, though she focuses on some more than others. This novel focuses predominantly on the community surrounding Nell, who, as the novel's central character, is the most psychologically rich. An independent and intelligent woman with political prospects, she is also vulnerable. Orphaned as a young girl, she is a lonely woman. Although she was raised with love by her grandfather Mac and Aunt Gert, they are her only family. Throughout the novel, she noticeably lacks a female community of friends. Eventually we learn that she had married Adam after a whirlwind romance in order to fill this void in her life. Mac and Gert, who are exact psychological opposites, influence Nell differently, though equally significantly.

Like Mac, Nell is aggressively rational and pragmatic, but like Gert, she shares a belief in the supernatural. Adam, the other most significant person in Nell's life, unfortunately turns out to be a sociopath. When writing about a disturbed personality, Clark reveals to CNN Book Chat that she carefully researches it: "I've taken many psychology courses and I always check with friends who are psychologists or psychiatrists to be sure I'm on target when I write about the psychopathic personality." Adam, as a result of this research, comes across as a textbook sociopath with his charming persona but ruthless indifference. Dan, the last person in Nell's immediate circle, promises to fill the emotional vacuum that Adam cannot. Yet, at least in terms of the novel's feminist sympathies, more promising than Dan's love is perhaps the friendship of Lisa Ryan. Lisa, the wife of one of the victims of the boat explosion, shows friendship to Nell by the end of the novel by supporting her election campaign. While the novel yields to convention by introducing a new love interest to combat Nell's loneliness, it also finally acknowledges the importance of a community of women.

Besides Nell's circle, there is a throng of minor characters. One of the most interesting of these is Winifred Johnson. Believed to have the "gumption of a wallflower," she proves to be deceptively cunning. Yet, Clark depicts her sympathetically. "Her background was very harsh, and as a result she has a very vivid fantasy life," Clark explains in the interview with White, "and she harbors a great deal of resentment which has to come out somewhere." A plain old maid ruled by her mother, Winifred finds herself susceptible to Adam's charm and professed affection. Having worked as a secretary in a prominent architecture firm for years, she discloses the industry's covert and illegal activities to Adam in order to help him gain financially from this knowledge. Jimmy and Lisa Ryan are also among the more fully developed characters. Jimmy is one of the victims of the boat explosion.

When Lisa discovers fifty thousand dollars in his workshop after his death, she is surprised and puzzled to learn that he accepted a bribe. A few years back, he had quit his job as a construction worker on ethical grounds, exposing the use of substandard materials in construction. Lisa, left to discover the secret of his depression the months



leading up to his death, unravels the mystery. Unemployed and in debt for years, Jimmy was grateful to Adam for finding him a job, but subsequently felt helpless to resist pressure from Adam to burn a landmark building on a site that he hoped to develop. In return for his act of arson, he accepted the bribe, but discovered to his horror that he had killed a street lady trapped in the building—a woman who proves to be Quinny, the long lost mother Dan attempts to locate throughout the novel.

Other noteworthy characters are those who function to heighten the suspense: Ben Tucker, a boy who witnesses the accident and has nightmares about a man who escapes from the boat as it explodes; Peter Lang, a hot-shot real estate developer, who should have been on the boat, but has a timely car accident that prevents him from getting on it; and Jed Kaplan, a thief who hates Adam Cauliff for buying property that he sees as his due inheritance.

One of the more interesting aspects of characterization in this novel is that it is organized on both psychological and thematic levels. While all of the characters have independent identities, they also are grouped in social units. Clark employs her understanding that identity is not formed in isolation, but rather in community, for literary and thematic effect. Gender is key to characterization in this novel and connects to its overarching assumption that women are victims of male violence and control. Although the female characters are individually distinct, they all are burdened by the men in their lives. Nell, Winifred, and Bonnie are all victims of Adam's manipulation and brutality, while Lisa suffers from her husband's secret guilt. The novel explores the different ways in which the characters respond to the same problem; Winifred's submissiveness, for instance, functioning as a foil to Nell's aggressiveness. If characters are organized into gendered thematic clusters, they also are organized into familial ones. As the novel explores the issue of contested authority, it introduces four characters whose lives are affected problematically, if differently, by parental authority. Nell struggles with Mac's domineering tendencies; Winifred is psychologically hampered by the continuous complaints and demands of her ailing mother; and Jed feels frustrated with his mother, who is far too savvy to allow him to control the purse strings. Connected to the issue of parental authority is parental abandonment. The characters of both Nell and Dan are formed by the loss of their parents to death and alcohol respectively. As the novel shows how identity is formed in relationships, it explores how people differently respond to similar social environments to become unique human beings, a literary feat that makes *Before I Say Good-bye* more psychologically sophisticated than the standard murder mystery.

Social Concerns

Mary Higgins Clark owes her enormous popular success as the "Queen of Suspense" to her penchant for the news. All of her novels have drawn from American current affairs, whether child abduction, capital punishment, or health maintenance organizations. In *Before I Say Good-bye*, Clark again buttresses her murder mystery with two newsworthy topics: corruption in the construction industry and fraud in the burgeoning field of psychic communication.

The mystery revolves around a cabin cruiser that was purposely blown up in New York Harbor, apparently killing four business associates, but the answer to the mystery lies in the criminal activities of New York's construction and psychic industries. Drawing from articles in the *New York Times* on the graft and fraud in the construction industry, Clark fictionalizes the bid-rigging and bribery among architectural firms, building contractors, and real-estate developers as a springboard for murder. ESP is also at the heart of this murder mystery.

Having read in the news about how New York welfare recipients were being trained as psychics, Clark became interested in psychic phenomena and the industry that has built up around it. After Nell MacDermott learns about her husband's accident on the boat, she attempts to correspond with him through a psychic, Bonnie Wilson, who can communicate with the dead. The novel balances belief in ESP with skepticism, juxtaposing the "phonies" in the industry against real psychic experience. While it authenticates Nell's psychic contact with her parents after their death in a plane accident, it repudiates the industry that capitalizes on people's grief and naivete.

Another consistent, if understated, social concern in *Before I Say Good-bye* is its feminism. Here, as in all of her fiction, Clark focuses on a strong female character in duress who is capable of coping with adversity with grace and intelligence. Nell is a well-educated, financially independent, ambitious woman who writes a newspaper column for the *New York Journal* and has a brilliant career ahead of her in New York congressional politics. Her political career, however, is hampered by resistance from her husband, Adam Cauliff, who himself has what looks like an auspicious career as an architect. For years, he reproaches Nell for her political ambitions, but it is not until after his accident that she begins to question his opposition to her career choices and reconsider the soundness of their marriage.

As she realizes that her marriage was a pretense, she also discovers that her husband is guilty of corruption and also responsible for the bombing. Adam blows up the boat in order to feign death and disappear with the cache he has amassed from bribes in the construction industry. Before the boat explodes, he makes a daring escape, but forgets the safety deposit key that he needs to collect his stash. In order to retrieve the key, he persuades Bonnie to con Nell into believing that he is contacting her from the dead, but he proves unsuccessful. In the final climactic scene, Adam discloses himself and his ruse to Nell; he attempts to murder her for interfering with his plans, but ultimately



plummets to his own death in the process. Nell is just one among many of Clark's female heroines who is victimized by the men in her life.

Yet, like Clark's other heroines under siege, Nell eventually prevails over her husband.

Mitigating the novel's feminism, however, is the introduction of an alternative love interest for Nell, Dr. Dan Minor. When Dan finally rescues Nell from her husband's brutality, the novel succumbs to a stock narrative convention that assumes women's fragility and establishes them as victims who require male protection. Clark's novel endorses a conservative rather than combative feminism, one that allows for women's financial and professional independence, but suggests that their emotional needs must be met by a male counterpart. *Before I Say Good-bye* may insist on women's full participation in society, finally revealing Nell as the winner of the congressional seat her grandfather had occupied for many years and establishing Dan as her most ardent supporter, but the novel does not challenge the heterosexual ideal or essentialist notions about femininity. The novel has the makings of a feminist murder mystery, with Nell as an amateur female detective at the helm, but it resorts to romantic platitudes that shift the focus away from female heroism and agency onto male heroism. Once Dan rescues Nell from the fire, Nell's characterization as an independent career woman/amateur sleuth becomes moot: in terms of plot development, she is simply the beautiful lady in distress.

The novel's social conservativeness manifests itself not only in its brand of feminism, but also in its focus on the professional classes. It is not the lives of the poor or even the middle class in which this novel is interested, but rather those of the privileged. While there are a bevy of indigents and social misfits who appear in the novel (like the petty criminal Jed Kaplan and the besotted street ladies Quinny and Karen Renfrew), they occupy a minor role, their history and psychology nowhere nearly as complete as their more affluent and successful counterparts. Nell, with her trust money and Upper East Side Manhattan apartment, Adam with his new forty-foot cabin cruiser, and Cornelius MacDermott (Mac) with his longtime Manhattan congressional seat, are the characters on which the novel dwells. Clark shows a materialist preoccupation with the glamour and luxury of their lives, noting Nell's "green silk Escada pants suit," the family dinner at the Four Seasons, and the precious Chivas Regal that Adam consumes. *Before I Say Goodbye* ultimately concerns itself then with admiring the lifestyle of Manhattan's elite and providing its largely middle-class readers a glimpse into a life about which they can only fantasize.

Techniques

Before I Say Good-bye is a murder mystery, a tautly plotted novel that relies on continuous suspense and intrigue for its success. As Clark insists in her interview with CNN Book Chat, "I want to keep the reader guessing until virtually the last page."

In order to prolong the suspense, Clark relies on a series of literary ploys that are the hallmark of the genre. Multiple suspects, red herrings, cliffhangers, and missing information are all the tricks of the trade that Clark exploits as a means to conceal the secret around which the mystery revolves.

As in most murder mysteries, the murder happens within the first few chapters. Almost immediately, the novel begins its investigation by casting suspicion and uncovering motive, introducing multiple suspects in the process. The ensuing investigation uncovers Jed's experience with explosives, Peter's frustration with Adam for impeding his lucrative, but precarious, real-estate project, Jimmy's fifty thousand dollar hush money, and Winifred's mysterious source of income. All of these false clues function as red herrings, their purpose to obfuscate and mislead readers so that they do not guess too far in advance that Adam is the true criminal. In order to provide multiple suspects and construct red herrings, the novel is selective about the information it reveals. One of the functions of the shifting narrative perspectives is to present false or misleading information to readers, thus placing them in the same position as the investigator whose knowledge is incomplete. For instance, early in the novel, one chapter is devoted to Adam's point of view, but Clark is chary about revealing too much information about him. She never intimates Adam's plans to blow up the boat, but rather encourages readers to sympathize with him for being the underappreciated son-in-law of the congressman. By so doing, Clark ensures that readers do not include Adam among the lists of suspects too soon.

In addition to these literary ploys, the novel follows other literary conventions of the murder mystery, particularly its narrative structure. Like most fiction of its kind, it begins with a murder, proceeds with an investigation, introduces a final and unexpected twist at the end (when Adam reappears from the dead), concludes with a full disclosure of the crime, follows with a climactic final conflict, and then finishes with a resolution. The narrative structure of the murder mystery reveals the fundamental conservatism of the genre; novels like Clark's depend on the thrill of danger, suspense, and crime for their success, but also carefully regulate and suppress this kind of social disruption in their conclusion. As a literary genre, the murder mystery is highly regulated and formulaic; as a social text, it is equally conservative.



Themes

Invasion is Clark's primary thematic focus in *Before I Say Good-bye*. As she reveals in an interview with Claire E. White, "I write about very nice people whose lives are invaded. They're not screeching at each other at the breakfast table. Something happens that cuts across their lives. They have to respond to it and solve the problem. . . .

It's not *American Beauty*; it's not that kind of relationship at all. I choose to write about people whose trouble comes from the outside, not the inside." In other words, it is not psychological, but social disruption that intrigues Clark. As the novel describes the attack on Nell's life by her husband, it correlates this abuse to larger social problems: women's victimization by men and the threat to the professional classes by the refractory rabble. *Before I Say Good-bye* presents us with an insular world of privilege, where a woman may be able to take over the patriarch's place as its head representative, but where other kinds of social mobility are thwarted. Adam attempts to enter this world of privilege by marrying Nell and exploiting her high-profile connections to find himself a position at a renowned architectural firm; however, he remains a perpetual outsider. Nell's grandfather, Mac, disapproves of him from the beginning.

Although he never clearly outlines his grounds for disapproval, he reveals a prejudice against his lowly background when he notes the incongruity between Adam's appearance and reality: "You're from a onehorse town in North Dakota, but you look and sound like a preppie from Yale." Alluding continually to Adam's disadvantaged socioeconomic background in order to justify its ultimate assessment of him as a sociopath, the novel implicitly suggests that Adam's upbringing in a hick town and a "broken home" explains how he becomes a threat both to women and the professional classes. As his past employer explains about him, "Adam Cauliff believed absolutely that he had a right to anything he wanted, be it a woman or a simple possession . . .

[he] has a serious personality disorder and is probably a full-fleged sociopath. . . . He appears to have a complete disregard for, and to be in conflict with, the normal social code by which most people conduct their lives." Once Adam is killed, Dan conveniently assumes Adam's former role as Nell's love interest. A more suitable match for Nell, in terms of both background and pedigree, his character symbolizes the reinstatement of the social order as the novel defines it: one where women can succeed as well as men while still maintaining the trappings of femininity and one where politicians marry doctors, not small-town hicks.

Linked to this fear of invasion is the desire to retain power. Informing the two key power struggles in the novel are the social divisions of class, gender, and age.

The first contest of power is between Adam and Mac. Adam's incursion into Manhattan's professional elite threatens class boundaries. Mac repudiates him on the grounds of



social inferiority, while Adam resents his prejudice, observing to Nell, "I was never good enough for you, never good enough to mix with your precious grandfather's cronies." Siding with Mac, the novel condemns Adam as a sociopath and kills him off in the end; it apparently supports the class distinctions that Mac fights to uphold.

The second, and more complex, contest of power occurs between Mac and Nell. Nell's attempt to enter the political sphere that her grandfather once dominated is fraught with tension.

Reluctant to lose his position as Manhattan's reigning patriarch, he proves to be a domineering, though benevolent, mentor to Nell. "They fight constantly," Clark reveals in her interview with White, "but they are crazy about each other." After he retires, he encourages Nell to campaign for his old congressional seat, but he monitors her passage at every step: he advises her when to seek election, how to campaign, and how to avoid scandal. Adam aptly observes that Mac is unwilling to relinquish his dynasty: Nell simply refused to acknowledge the fact that Mac wanted her to run for his former seat for only one reason: he intended to make her his puppet. All that pious mouthing about retiring at eighty rather than be the oldest member of the House was a lot of baloney. The truth was that the guy the Democrats were putting up against him at the time was strong and might have staged an upset. Mac didn't want to retire; he just didn't want to go out a loser.

Albeit an unreliable observer, who assumes Mac's political vulnerability when there is no other evidence to support his claim, he does recognize Mac's ambivalence about abdicating his authority. The contest between Mac and Nell is both generational and gendered: Mac is not altogether prepared to embrace his old age or accept the social changes that have increased women's political opportunities. The transition of power from Mac to Nell, however, is far more successful than that between Mac and Adam. Nell eventually wins her seat, a victory proving that, in this novel, class difference is a more inflexible social barrier than either age or gender.

Adaptations

In 2000, *Before I Say Good-bye* was published in hardcover and on-line as an electronic text. Both abridged and unabridged versions of the novel have been recorded on audiocassette and compact disc, read by Jan Maxwell.



Key Questions

Before I Say Good-bye draws attention to women's interests and the professional classes, but neither its feminism nor its professionalism is clearly defined. While it focuses on female independence and intelligence, it also assumes female vulnerability. Similarly, while it spotlights the professional classes, it conveys the point of view of social misfits like Jed Kaplan and Karen Renfrew. Insofar as the novel furnishes an array of voices from the social spectrum, it may have more egalitarian sympathies than its concentration on the lives of the privileged initially suggests. The social concerns, themes, and characters that Clark introduces address these two issues, working both with and against each other to complicate the novel's stance. Her novel both creates and reflects the complexity with which the issues of feminism and elitism have been debated within American society itself.

1. To what extent is this novel a feminist murder mystery? Is its feminism consistent? Does its focus on female psychology, its assumption of female victimization, and its insertion of romance into the action preclude a male readership?
2. Is this novel elitist because it concentrates on the lives of the successful and affluent? Many contemporary mystery novels focus on the professional classes; is the genre itself an elitist one?
3. Is this novel an example of pulp fiction or high literature? To what extent does Clark's focus on topical issues from the news make her work more trendy than durable? What is the basis of the distinction between popular and literary novels?
4. Clark researches the psychological profiles of her characters. She consults psychologists about psychopathic personalities and, as she mentions to CNN Book Chat, consulted a psychologist about her character little Ben Tucker, the boy who witnessed the explosion of the boat. Does her research make her characterization more vivid and accurate, or does it make it more stiff and academic? Consider in particular the characterization of Adam, Winifred, and Ben.
5. This novel combines elements of the murder mystery, the romance, and the ghost story. In an interview with Claire E. White, Clark admits that the most challenging aspect of writing this book "was the balancing of the psychic elements with the suspense elements." Is the novel successful at combining these multiple genres, or do the aims of these genres conflict too readily to be joined?
6. Carol Higgins Clark likes to refer to her mother as "scary Mary." Yet, Clark's novels avoid gratuitous violence and instead rely on implied violence for their effects. Does Clark's avoidance of explicit violence diminish the "scariness" of the novel or heighten it? Consider what induces more terror: a chainsaw or a shadow.



7. Are feminism and professionalism, the two key social issues in *Before I Say Good-bye*, still of contemporary relevance? Or are these concerns now resolved and superannuated?

Literary Precedents

Clark's novel follows in a long tradition.

Wilkie Collins popularized the mystery novel in Victorian times with his publication of *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). Clark does not cite Collins as an influence, but she does acknowledge a literary debt to later turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century mystery writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. While she does not mention any contemporary influences or favorites (with the exception of her daughter Carol Higgins Clark, herself a fledgling mystery writer), a part of her success is owing to the flourishing interest in the thriller—whether the murder mystery, spy novel, crime novel, legal and medical thriller, police procedural, or horror story. Not only the book industry, but also the film and television industries have fueled and capitalized on the audience's desire for a thrill.

Often the same story is adapted to different media, and in some cases, a story presented in one medium will influence a work created in another. Before *I Say Good-bye*, for example, recalls Jerry Zucker's film *Ghost* (1990), a psychological suspense that involves a husband who communicates with his wife from the dead in order to catch his killer. The difference with Clark's novel is that the psychic communication is an elaborate ruse perpetrated by a husband who is not dead, but in fact the killer.

Clark's novel shares many similarities with the contemporary mystery novel, particularly in its attention to the professional classes. Professionalism is a key feature in recent mysteries, perhaps because many of the authors themselves have lucrative careers and identify with the lifestyle and concerns of the affluent and successful. Before *I Say Good-bye* is different from other contemporary mysteries, however, because of its lack of sex and violence. As Clark says in an interview with David Weich, "I don't use explicit sex or violence so I wind up on the reading list for the seventh grade. And it's not that I'm a prude; I've always just preferred the idea of implied violence. The Hitchcock way. How many ways can you shoot people up? I think footsteps—that can be scarier." Clark's novel is also distinctive for its increased focus on women and domesticity. While the novel chooses a professional woman as its protagonist, it describes her frequently in private settings where it freely explores both the architecture of her home and her mind. Many recent mystery writers, such as Sue Grafton, Patricia Cornwell, and Nora Roberts, choose female protagonists, but Clark is special because she has done so consistently during her twenty-five years as an author.



Related Titles

This novel is consistent with much of Clark's earlier fiction. Outside of her fictional biography of George Washington, *Aspire to the Heavens* (1968), Clark has written a total of twenty-two mystery novels.

All of her novels concentrate on a topical issue in the news, and typically, they feature a female protagonist who, out of exigency, adopts the role of amateur sleuth.

The theme of female victimization also appears frequently in her fiction. In *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* (1995), a beautiful woman is murdered by her male lover, and in *You Belong to Me* (1998), a ruthless and deranged man hunts lonely women on cruise ships.

Clark's novels also typically focus on the professional classes. *We'll Meet Again* (1999) bases its story on a female journalist and a doctor's wife. *The Lottery Winner: Alvira and Willy Stories* (1994) is a notable exception to this spotlight on the professional classes. Alvira, the wily protagonist of these stories, is a housekeeper who is only catapulted to the life of luxury—and crime—after she wins the lottery. In short, Clark's novels differ little from one another in terms of their thematic concerns and narrative structure. What makes them distinct is the specific topical issues that they explore.

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