The Best Girlfriend You Never Had Study Guide

The Best Girlfriend You Never Had by Pam Houston

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Introduction

"The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" is the first story in Pam Houston's 1998 collection of stories, *Waltzing the Cat*, published by W. W. Norton. Houston won the Willa Award for Contemporary Fiction for the book. As in all of the collection's eleven interlocked stories, Lucy O'Rourke narrates "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had." O'Rourke is a thirty-one-year-old photographer obsessed with finding lasting love. Comprised of a series of anecdotes and reflections in which O'Rourke recounts traumatic childhood episodes with her parents and key events of past relationships—those of her friends and hers—"The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" meanders along rather than charging ahead, while musing on the near-impossibility of finding a suitable partner. In this sense, the story is more of a collage of various encounters and insights that comments on a theme rather than a single story with a unified beginning, middle, and end. O'Rourke introduces characters such as her best friend, Leo, a stand-offish "boyfriend" named Josh, and Lucy's girlfriend, Thea, all of whom appear in other stories in the collection. Houston established her reputation by writing about her attraction to men she knows are inappropriate for her, and this theme also permeates many of these stories. John Updike included the story in the collection *Best American Short Stories of the Century* in 2000.

Author Biography

When Pam Houston published her first collection of stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, in 1992, she established herself as a promising young American fiction writer and a model for women who aspired to a life of outdoor adventure. Houston drew on her experiences as river guide, rafter, rock climber, skier, and extreme backpacker for the stories, and critics favorably compared her to writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Richard Ford, who similarly extol the joys of confronting the natural world head-on. Born in 1962 in New Jersey, the only child of a businessman and an actress, Houston grew up practicing to be a world-class tennis player, largely to please her father. After winning a tournament at thirteen, she gave up the sport for good. Houston pursued a life of adventure in earnest after graduating from Denison University in Ohio, bicycling through Canada and down to Colorado. After a series of odd jobs such as bartending, working on road crews, teaching skiing, etc., Houston entered the doctoral program in creative writing at the University of Utah. She left six months short of completing her degree.

Houston's second collection, *Waltzing the Cat* (1998), which contains her popular story "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," was as popular as her first, and publications such as *Mirabella, Mademoiselle, The New York Times, Elle*, and *Vogue* solicited essays and stories from her. A licensed river and hunting guide and seasoned horse rider, Houston created characters like herself: tough, daring women who fall in love easily and have their hearts broken. In addition to her story collections, Houston has edited *Women on Hunting: Essays, Fiction, and Poetry* (1994), and written the text for *Men Before Ten A.M.* (1997), a collection of photographs by French photographer Veronique Vial of male celebrities just waking up. In her book of essays, *A Little More About Me*, published in 1999, Houston writes of her globe-trotting adventures across five continents in places such as Bhutan, Bolivia, and Traverse City, Michigan during a five-year period in her life. In this text, she also muses on topics such as body image, the right of dogs to be free, her addiction to adrenaline, and the importance of close friends. A dynamic reader and gifted teacher, Houston appears often on talk shows and teaches at writing conferences. Houston lives on a 120-acre ranch in southwestern Colorado outside Durango.

Plot Summary

Section 1

In the first section of "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," Lucy O'Rourke introduces Leo, her best friend with whom she spends the entire day, and Guinevere, a Buddhist weaver Leo loves. The setting is the gardens of the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, a romantic place and popular for weddings. Architect Bernard R. Maybeck designed the palace for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, making his theme for the work a Roman ruin. The gardens of the palace are lush, filled with ponds, and surrounded by Greek-style buildings. After eating a breakfast of "flannel hash" (i.e., bacon and beets), Leo and Lucy read poems to each other, and Lucy snaps photographs of a wedding, though she is not being paid for it. "I always get the best stuff when nobody's paying me to shoot," she says.

Section 2

In this section, Lucy recounts the reasons she left Colorado and came to San Francisco, suggesting that she was losing her sense of identity to the landscape and to her friends. This is what she means when she says she felt sandwiched between Josh and Thea and was turning into "something shapeless like oil." Lucy believed the city of San Francisco could restore order to her life. She is proud when she recounts being surprised by a man in a wheelchair who urinates on her while she is walking in the city, likening it to a baptism. The Mission, where Lucy walks and shoots pictures during her first few weeks in San Francisco, refers to the Mission District, a gritty yet vibrant home to more than sixty thousand residents, many of them Hispanic. The name alludes to Mission Dolores at 16th and Dolores Streets, the oldest structure in San Francisco.

Lucy introduces Gordon in this section as well, describing him as a cunning and brilliant young man who knows how to work the system and manipulate people.

Section 3

In this section, Lucy returns to the present tense, continuing the description of her day with Leo. During a discussion about dating and options, Leo rhetorically asks Lucy, "Aren't I the best girlfriend you never had?" Leo is referring to the quality of the time they spend together, the subjects they discuss, and the intimacy they share, all of which are stereotypically associated more with friendships between women than with those between men and women. During their discussion, readers learn that Leo wants to have children and that Lucy fears admitting she is afraid.

Section 4

In this section, Lucy digresses from the present tense and recounts her history with Gordon and an encounter with Guinevere. When she says, "It took me less than half a baseball season to discover my oversight [about Gordon]," she means she found out that he was not the man for her in about three months. His fits of jealous rage poisoned their relationship.

Lucy confides in Guinevere things about Gordon that she cannot even tell Leo, such as his emotionally abusing her in public and her begging him not to leave her. Guinevere consoles Lucy, offering her a cookie and Kleenex, and tells her that she no longer strives to please men to the neglect of herself.

Section 5

In this short section, Lucy recalls an event when she was twenty-five and brought home a boyfriend, whom she thought was her future husband, for her parents to meet. She picked a type she believed her father would like, but her father told her, "Lucille . . . I haven't ever liked any of your boyfriends, and I don't expect I ever will." After that incident, Lucy stopped trying to please her father.

Section 6

Lucy recounts the first time she was mugged in the city, after seeing a show at the Castro Theater. The Castro Theater, a historical landmark and film house built in 1922, is in San Francisco's Castro District, the center of gay nightlife. Lucy's response to her mugger underscores her toughness and unwillingness to show fear.

Section 7

Lucy returns to describing her day with Leo. It is now mid-afternoon, and they lunch on seviche at a Mexican restaurant. Seviche is a spicy Spanish fish dish. Lucy describes the fog rolling "down the lanyard side of Mount Tamalpais," saying that it glistens "like Galilee." "Lanyard" is a nautical term for a short rope or gasket used to secure rigging, which is often on the leeward side of the ship. Here, it refers to the side of the mountain facing the wind. Galilee refers to the Sea of Galilee, a large fresh-water lake located in the northern portion of Israel. According to the Bible, Jesus recruited several of his disciples there, and also walked on its waters.

While telling Leo about her fight with Gordon, she mentions John Lennon. Lennon was a member of the Beatles, a famous rock and roll group of the 1960s and early 1970s. Lennon was murdered in New York City by a mentally ill fan in 1980. When Leo takes Lucy's hands and tells her, "I love you . . . I mean, in the good way," he means as friends, which in Leo's mind ranks higher than as lovers.

Section 8

In this section, Lucy recalls an event from her childhood when she accidentally topples a seven-hundred-pound urn on her legs, breaking both her femurs. She calls the six weeks she spent in the hospital recuperating "the best of my childhood," as doctors, nurses, candy stripers, and her parents lavished her with attention. Lucy says for the rest of her childhood she fantasized about "illnesses and accidents."

Section 9

In this long section, Lucy elaborates on the history of her relationship with Gordon, describing a time when, in a fit of jealous rage, he attempted to abandon her at a trail head. Instead of being angry, Lucy begged not to be left there. She also lists a number of incidents from her childhood, such as the time a ten-year-old girl "rescued" Lucy from her parents, who were arguing. These incidents are meant as explanations for the adult Lucy's behavior. This is also the first time in the story when the narrator explicitly addresses the reader, showing an awareness of what their perceptions of her might be.

Leo recounts his own story of being mugged in this section, adding to the idea that San Francisco can be a dangerous place. A man who has been shot, and who introduces himself as "Bill," forces Leo to take money out of an automated teller machine at the grocery store and then makes Leo swear that he will call the man's girlfriend to tell her he is okay. Lucy is more interested in Bill's girlfriend's motivation for staying with him than she is in any potential harm done to Leo.

In the last part of this section, Lucy describes her split with Gordon, how he flew into a jealous rage when she talked to another man in a bar. Instead of inviting Gordon into her place when he dropped her off, she told him, "I want you to make your own decision." Gordon drove away in a fit and stalked Lucy afterwards, leaving messages on her door, tearing up her mail, and putting syrup in her gas tank.

Section 10

In this section, Lucy returns to the present tense and Leo. They are now drinking "late-afternoon lattes," and Lucy is talking about how overwhelmed she is with "want" and how she fears "that even if you changed everything right now it's late already to ever be full."

Section 11

Lucy returns to the past and an experience she had with her parents in Phoenix, Arizona, when they all met to attend a New Year's Eve college football game. Lucy was stopped by the police for running stop signs, speeding, and making an improper turn. She did not have her driver's license nor is she wearing her glasses. Her father, slightly drunk, berated Lucy while she interacted with the police officer, and her mother berated the father, yelling at him, "Okay now, on three, daughter, I wish you had never been born." Officer Jenkins felt sorry for Lucy and let her go with a warning, saying, "There's nothing I could do to you that's going to feel like punishment." At the party the family attended later that night, Lucy had another disconcerting experience with her father.

Section 12

In this section, Leo and Lucy borrow Leo's friend's sailboat and go for a ride. Lucy takes the tiller and races a much larger boat to the Golden Gate Bridge. When they sail under the bridge, Leo gives Lucy "an America's Cup hug." This refers to an annual sailboat competition. Lucy addresses herself in the second person throughout a good part of this section, saying things like, "You might forget, for example, that you live in a city where people have so many choices they throw words away, or so few they will bleed in your car for a hundred dollars." She's summarizing much of the information she's already presented, trying to calm herself, telling herself she's not really afraid. At the end of the section, she turns to Leo and admits, "I'm scared."

Section 13

This short section recounts an experience from Lucy's childhood when her father threw her in the ocean to see if she would sink or swim. Lucy's mother was hysterical, and two lifeguards charged to the rescue, but Lucy passed "the flotation test," and her father held her on his shoulders.

Section 14

Leo and Lucy return to the Palace of Fine Arts. Leo stays in the car while Lucy shoots a few photographs of the swans and of the "rose petals bleeding on the sidewalk." She fantasizes about being married under one of the palace's arches. In the final paragraph, Lucy says, "I'm scared" louder, admitting her fear to herself, feeling like the admission signals the beginning of possibility.

Characters

Bill

Bill is the person who mugs Leo, forcing him to drive to a Safeway and withdraw money from an automatic teller machine. Suffering from a gunshot wound, Bill makes Leo swear that he will telephone Bill's girlfriend to tell her Bill is all right. This mugger and his girlfriend play a role in Lucy's imagination, as Lucy wonders "what it was about her that made her stay with a man who ran from the law for a living." Lucy never meets Bill, but hears about him often, as Leo likes to recount the story of his mugging.

Gordon

Gordon is Lucy's former boyfriend. The son of "poor people, strawberry pickers in the Central Valley," Gordon, whose real name is Salvador, is a childhood prodigy, receiving a doctorate in literature from the University of California at Berkeley before he turned twenty and a tenure-track teaching job there before he turned twenty-one. Gordon, who craves attention from his unwilling mother, is obviously brilliant, and he and Lucy often spend their time reading poems to each other. However, he "had a jealous streak as vicious as a heat-seeking missile and he could make a problem out of a paper bag." After Lucy breaks up with him, he terrorizes her to the point that she believes it is entirely possible that he will kill her.

Guinevere

Guinevere is a Buddhist weaver who lives on Belvedere Island. Leo is in love with her but she scarcely pays him any attention. She, in turn, is in love with a man from New York City "who told her in a letter that the only thing better than three thousand miles between him and the object of his desire would be if she had a terminal illness." Guinevere lives an austere and disciplined life, believes that "choices can't be good or bad," and is through with making compromises to please men. She is also friends with Lucy, who confides in Guinevere that she is in love with Gordon.

Jeffrey

Jeffrey was Lucy's boyfriend when she was twenty-five. He comes from a good family, is cultured, has a masters of business administration degree from Harvard University, plays golf in exclusive clubs, and is the type of boyfriend that Lucy believes her father would like.

Josh

Josh is another of Lucy's former boyfriends and is mentioned only briefly in the story. Lucy describes him as someone "who didn't want nearly enough from me," suggesting that the failure of their relationship to develop is partly responsible for her leaving Colorado for San Francisco.

Leo

Leo is a thirty-six-year-old witty, yet slightly depressed architect and Lucy's best friend. He utters the words that become the story's title, at one point asking Lucy, "Aren't I the best girlfriend you never had?" Like Lucy, he grew up on the East Coast, "eating Birds Eye frozen vegetables and Swanson's deep-dish meat pies on TV trays next to our parents and their third martinis, watching television and talking about anything on earth except what was wrong." Leo and Lucy spend a great deal of time together, discussing love and relationships. Although Lucy sees Leo as a potential mate, Leo sees Lucy as more of a sister. Like Lucy, Leo is also looking for someone to love. He considers suicide at one point after a relationship does not work out and claims that he wants to have children. However, he is antagonistic towards marriage, calling the bridegroom at the wedding he and Lucy watch in the gardens of the Palace of Fine Arts a "sucker."

Lucy O'Rourke

Lucy O'Rourke, a thirty-one-year-old freelance photographer, is the narrator of the story. She is tough, dreamy, and vulnerable, though not naive. In the story's present, she interacts primarily with Leo, an architect to whom she is attracted but who is in love with someone else. O'Rourke's descriptions of her friends, such as Leo and Guinevere, invariably include their inability to find lasting love. O'Rourke views almost every male as a potential partner, sizing up his suitability as soon as she sees him. She moved to San Francisco from Colorado a year before the story opens, writing, "I thought there might be an order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces and right angles that would give myself back to me." O'Rourke envies others who have found love, such as the Asian couple whose wedding she photographs. Her own relationships tend to end badly. For example, her months-long relationship with Gordon ends because she loses patience with his fits of jealousy and his inability to communicate. O'Rourke suggests that her relationship with her father, an emotionally immature man who does not support his daughter, plays a large part in her inability to find an appropriate partner.

Lucy's Parents

Lucy's father is a stubborn, selfish, slightly sadistic man who dislikes all of his daughter's boyfriends and who does not show Lucy affection or give her the support that she craves. He drinks, smokes cigars, and is generally unpleasant and bitter. Lucy's mother, born in the Rocky Mountains, is protective of Lucy, loves to sing torch songs, and disdains her husband's resentment of their daughter.

Themes

Chaos and Order

With their relentless activity, constant noise, and swarms of people, large cities can be overwhelming, and city dwellers often move to the country for its peace, its trees and rivers. Lucy, however, does just the opposite: she leaves the country and moves to the big city, saying she "couldn't keep separate anymore what was the land and what was me." Her move to the city, then, ironically becomes a move to find order in the chaos her life has fallen into. "I thought there might be order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces and right angles that would give myself back to me, take my work somewhere different, maybe to a safer place," she says. Lucy's desire for order is also a desire for balance, a quality she admires in Guinevere and a term that appears frequently in her conversations with Leo. As an adventurer and photographer whose work takes her to dangerous places, Lucy has come to love fear too much. By moving to the city, she seeks to balance her emotional life.

City life, however, proves as chaotic as country life. Lucy falls in love with the wrong kind of man *again*, is attacked by a mugger, urinated on by a wheelchair-bound man, and remains as emotionally lost as she was when she came to the city. Only after she admits her fear to herself and to Leo is she able to face the chaos of her own desires and see the possibility of order in her future.

Self-Esteem

The idea of self-esteem is a particularly American one, rooted in a kind of pop-psychological understanding of the self. Columnists, school counselors, and even politicians are fond of claiming that a person's lack of self-esteem is cause for a variety of phenomena including laziness, aggression, divorce, crime, bad hygiene, etc. Houston describes Lucy as someone who suffers in her relationships because she lacks self-esteem, a lack she developed during her childhood. The anecdotes about and references to Lucy's father's mean-spiritedness and refusal to give young Lucy the attention she needs are meant as precursors to her craving as an adult woman to please men, particularly men who treat her poorly. Lucy's refusal to admit her fear of being alone and her toughness in meeting danger head-on mask her own lack of self-worth. By the end of her day with Leo, Lucy arrives at an insight about herself, finally able to accept the person she has fought so hard not to become.

Romantic Love

For the last few hundred years or so, romantic love has become inextricably linked in the Western imagination to ideas of marriage and to a person's sense of fulfillment. Lucy's desperate attempts to find romantic love contribute to the bad choices she makes in potential mates, and colors her perceptions of others. When she recounts an experience with others or describes people, she invariably focuses on whether or not that person is in love or what that person's prospects are for love. When Leo tells Lucy about an event during which a mugger held a gun to his stomach, all Lucy can think about is the mugger's girlfriend and what about the mugger made her love him.

The very setting of the story, the gardens of the Palace of Fine Arts during a wedding ceremony, has Lucy mesmerized with dreams of finding a husband. In the last scene of the story, she actually fantasizes about "bow[ing] to . . . [her] imaginary husband" in the gardens. Houston juxtaposes Lucy's longing to find lasting romantic love with her friendship with Leo. Ironically, this friendship proves more durable and substantive than any of the romantic relationships in which Lucy finds herself.

Style

Plot

Plot refers to how events and information in a narrative work are organized to achieve particular effects (e.g., suspense, arousing fear or apprehension, etc.) and to provide a way in which the author can develop her themes. Houston employs an episodic structure, incorporating flashbacks into her description of a day Lucy spends with a friend, Leo. Only six of the fourteen sections are in the present tense. By selecting flashbacks detailing Lucy's relationships with men and her parents, Houston asks readers to make connections between Lucy's present dilemma and her past. Plot is different than "story," in that events do not have to be presented chronologically. Although the present tense sections of the story *are* ordered chronologically, the flashbacks are not.

Symbol

Symbolic imagery is imagery that carries with it a wide range of associations through its repeated use in specific contexts. For example, Houston uses the image of swans at the gardens to symbolize monogamy and lasting romantic love. Swans usually have one partner and mate for life, the same thing that Lucy desires. Bridges, although a part of the San Francisco landscape, also have symbolic associations, as they represent a safe way to cross dangerous territory. Lucy is looking for just such a bridge in her quest for meaning and love. Houston uses other symbols as well, such as naming the street Lucy lived on as a child "Worth Avenue," signifying the very thing that the adult Lucy needs.

Setting

Setting refers to the place, time, and milieu in which a story takes place. The present-tense setting of the story at a wedding at the gardens of the Palace of Fine Arts is the most obvious symbol in the story, highlighting the very thing that Lucy wants but cannot seem to achieve. Instead of being the bride in a wedding party in one of the most romantic places in the United States, Lucy merely photographs the wedding, marginalizing her as a voyeur.

Historical Context

While Houston was chronicling Lucy O'Rourke's quest for love in the 1990s and recounting episodes from her dysfunctional childhood, the American family was changing. According to Stephanie Sado and Angela Bayer of the Population Resource Center, the median age for first marriage in the late 1990s was twenty-seven for men and twenty-five for women. But an increasing number of people were forsaking marriage to cohabitate. From 1990 to 2000, the number of unmarried couples living together soared from 3.2 million couples in 1990 to 5.5 million couples in 2000. However, the divorce rate declined during that time, from 4.8 per 1,000 to 4.2 per 1,000 in 1998. For dating, single men and women (and some married ones) increasingly turned to the "Personals," the classified section of newspapers and magazines in which people advertise for mates. Some women turned to books on dating strategy, such as Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider's bestselling *The Rules: Time Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1996). In an affront to many feminists and progressive thinkers, Fein and Schneider provide a list of dos and don'ts for women who want to "catch" a husband, reinscribing traditional gender roles and forms of behavior in their advice.

The turn toward adopting more traditional gender roles was symptomatic of 1990s America, which, even though it had elected a Democratic president, was developing more conservative social policies. In 1992, while George Bush senior was still in office, Vice President Dan Quayle made a speech in which he criticized single mothers. Though many condemned his remarks, experts agreed that broken families play a large role in the disaffection of youth. In his essay, "Alienated Affection: The Ties That Bind," Walter Kirn notes that during the 1990s, "As the backlash against divorce progressed, state legislatures . . . called for a rollback of no-fault divorce laws and even for premarital waiting periods." During this time, Houston herself married a former safari guide from South Africa, Mike Elkington, whom she subsequently divorced.

Houston's book about O'Rourke's outdoor adventures was one of a number of books on adventuring published during the late 1990s. Jon Krakauer's 1997 *Into Thin Air*, for example, chronicles a catastrophic expedition up Mount Everest in 1996 during which eight people died. Sebastian Junger's first book, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea* (1998), tells the story of the *Andrea Gail*, a swordfishing boat caught in a fierce storm in 1991 off the Grand Banks, and the fishermen aboard her who fought in vain to survive. The American public's hunger for outdoor adventure stories can, in part, be attributed to the increasing amount of time Americans spend indoors, often on the Internet. Houston's O'Rourke seeks a balance in her life between outdoor adventure, frequently putting her own life at stake shooting rapids and climbing mountains, and emotional stability. Though she pursues the former with passion, vigor, and grace, she cannot seem to achieve the latter.

Critical Overview

Reviewing *Waltzing the Cat for The New York Times Book Review*, Karen Karbo notes the stories' affinity with Houston's previous collection, *Cowboys Are My Weakness*. Karbo gives the collection a lukewarm appraisal, arguing that it is a "little shaky." Karbo writes:

Half the stories are gems; another quarter seem as if they could use one more spin through the word processor . . . and a few are as slack as one of Houston's beloved rivers at the end of a dry summer.

Sybil Steinberg and Jonathan Bing, writing in *Publishers Weekly*, praise Houston's prose, claiming, "Houston describes Lucy's sporting adventures with cinematic detail, conveying both her technical prowess and the exhilaration of physical daring." These same reviewers, however, note that some "readers may become exasperated at the number of selfish, foolish, posturing men who wander into Lucy's path." Writing for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman describes Lucy O'Rourke as a "smart, funny, and fearless tough gal," arguing, "Nature is Lucy's solace, and men are her downfall, but Houston still infuses her transported readers with the belief that Lucy's willingness to embrace life will eventually lead her to love." Joanna M. Burkhardt, in *Library Journal*, highly recommends the collection, saying, "Houston speaks to Everywoman." Burkhardt writes, "The dialog, the decisions, the choices, the questions—all are crafted with precision and with intricate and accurate detail." Yahlin Chang of *Newsweek* expresses a similar opinion, calling the collection "wonderful." Houston hasn't been writing long enough for her work to garner the kind of academic critical attention other writers have, but that could well change if she keeps writing with the kind of energy and passion she has thus far shown.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition who writes about literature and culture for various publications. In this essay, Semansky considers Houston's characterization of Lucy O'Rourke in "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had."

The process of creating characters in fiction varies from writer to writer, but key ingredients of characterization include a character's physical appearance, how she talks and interacts with others, her thoughts, and her personal history. Houston characterizes Lucy O'Rourke largely through her dialogue, behavior, and thought, but she also characterizes her through her personal history and her profession - photography. Lucy's passion for taking pictures is more than just a profession; it is a way of seeing the world, and it is integral to the way that Lucy tells her story.

The structure of Lucy's story resembles a photo album. In between her descriptions of the day she spends with Leo, Lucy sprinkles verbal "snapshots" of herself as a two-year-old child, as a teenager, as a young adult, and as a thirty-one-year-old newly arrived resident of San Francisco. Photo albums are intensely personal in nature and often are structured to tell a story - about an individual, a couple, a family, etc. - in pictures. The person compiling the photos chooses, consciously or not, photographs that illustrate how the subject changes over time. Conventionally, photo albums contain "happy snaps," that is, snapshots showing the subject in the best light, smiling during a birthday party or goofing around with the family at the beach during a summer vacation. Photographs of unhappy moments or of events that undermine the idea of a less-than-content childhood or less-than-perfect family are rarely taken. Lucy's life, however, is recounted as a photo album chock full of just such moments and events. She remembers them because they illuminate her emotional impasse.

Four of the fourteen sections in the story are verbal snapshots of Lucy interacting with her parents. Like Houston, Lucy is an only child. These interactions help to characterize Lucy, giving readers a glimpse into her personal history. They function as a kind of explanation for why Lucy is the way she is. In all four sections, Lucy focuses on her father and the ways in which he withholds love from her. When she describes her parents together, they are fighting. Perhaps the most telling snapshot, if you will, is of a time when Lucy was four years old and she accidentally toppled a large urn onto herself, breaking her legs. She writes about her six weeks in the hospital, exclaiming that they "were the best of my childhood." Lucy loved the attention, "I was surrounded by doctors who brought me presents, nurses who read me stories, candy stripers who came to my room and played games." What's telling about this memory is that Lucy begins her story of the accident by writing that she was *told* this had happened. Her "memory" of the event wasn't so much triggered as it was *instilled* by years of hearing the story told over and over again by her parents or other family members. This is similar to the way in which photographs construct memory by focusing readers' attention on what they see. What is excluded is forgotten. By having Lucy retell the event in the context of the larger story, Houston uses Lucy's personal history to create an image of the character in readers' minds.

Lucy's memories, however, can't be so easily dismissed. She is a credible narrator who presents the facts as they appear to her. Houston establishes Lucy's credibility both through Lucy's own self-deprecation and through the ways in which other characters respond to her. For example, when Lucy is stopped by Officer "Mad Dog" Jenkins for driving erratically while squiring her parents around Phoenix, and he witnesses the parents bickering about Lucy, he lets her off with a warning, remarking, "There's nothing I could do to you that's going to feel like punishment." Lucy's admissions about her consistently bad choices in men and her desperate need for male approval help both to establish her character *and* to establish trust with readers. By describing the incident at Point Reyes in which Gordon humiliates her and she lets him, Lucy presents herself as someone who is unstable but who cannot help herself. This kind of apparent honesty is heart-winning, as many readers are drawn to vulnerable characters that acknowledge their own flaws.

It makes sense that, as a photographer, Lucy thinks in images, so instead of telling readers that she has endured emotional abuse as a child and has repeated the pattern by seeking out a similar kind of abuse in the men she dates as an adult, Lucy *shows* this information to readers through description. The order in which she presents scenes describing her past is thematic rather than chronological. That is, she doesn't present episodes starting with her childhood and then work her way up to the present. Indeed, the last flashback she offers, near the end of the story, is of herself as a two-year-old. This kind of storytelling is organic; that is, Lucy presents the material as it comes to her, similar to the way that she "looks" for things, people, and situations to photograph. This kind of narration resembles the way that memory works, triggered by particular incidents in the present that have resonance with events from the past.

Lucy's profession as photographer is apt if one considers that by her own admission, she has difficulty separating herself from the objects she shoots and the men she loves. Photographs "freeze" action and in that way order the world, which is just what Lucy was looking for when she moved to San Francisco. Lucy writes that in Colorado she was becoming lost in the very things she photographed: "I had taken so many pictures by then of the chaos of heaved-up rock and petrified sand and endless sky that I'd lost my balance and fallen into them." Of San Francisco, she writes, "I thought there might be an order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces and right angles that would give myself back to me." Ironically, Lucy's practice of letting her photographic subjects choose her, instead of choosing photographic subjects herself, means she has not yet learned to impose order on the world. She is drawn to her photographic subjects because they signify for her the life that she wants, but that has thus far eluded her. In San Francisco, she falls into what she photographs, just as she did in Colorado. At the wedding party, she snaps a photo of the groom kissing the bride, and later she takes a shot of swans swimming in pairs and rose petals on the sidewalk. These photographs become icons of sorts for the lasting love Lucy desperately seeks. In "An Interview with Pam Houston," which is part of the "Reading Group Guide" included in *Waltzing the Cat*, Houston, an amateur photographer, says she made Lucy a photographer so she could "use the metaphor of photography for talking about writing." Houston says:

The two art forms seem similar to me in terms of framing, the way everything depends on what you leave in and what you leave out. I often construct stories as if they're a series of photographs, a series of sharp and particular images, a physical landscape that will stand in for the story's emotional landscape, that will carry and convey the story's emotional weight.

Lucy's desperation gives her story a sense of urgency. Even though very little happens in the present tense, the accumulated details of her history create a portrait of a woman on the brink of a breakdown or a breakthrough. These details result from Lucy's self-interrogation, and by "confessing" to them, she is taking part in the process of healing herself. The popularity of "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" is directly related to *how* Lucy tells her story, for it shows readers a character capable of self-understanding and change. It assures them that second chances, and third and fourth and fifth chances, can happen, and that change is possible.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines the character Lucy O'Rourke and discusses how images of pairs in "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" reflect aspects of Lucy's interior and exterior life.

"The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" is the first in a series of linked short stories about Lucy O'Rourke that make up Pam Houston's book *Waltzing the Cat*. The story serves as a kind of introduction to Lucy and her life; Lucy remembers her childhood, her life as a young adult before she moved to the West Coast, her experiences in the San Francisco area, and her inclination toward dangerous activities and environments.

Lucy's character is a study in dichotomies. Images of pairs abound as Houston draws Lucy as a young woman caught in the struggle between her interior and exterior lives and between a life that is orderly and one that is frantically out of control. The movement and disarray that define Lucy's life prevent her from confronting the fears she has. The recurring double images are particularly poignant given that Lucy is in her thirties and gloomy over her prospects of ever finding the right romantic partner.

Lucy's exterior world is defined by couples, some successful and others less so. When the story opens, she and her friend Leo are sitting in a San Francisco park reading love poems out loud to each other and watching Asian couples celebrate their weddings amid beautiful black swans. This is an activity the two friends pursue on a regular basis. In fact, before they come to the park on the weekends, they typically have breakfast at a restaurant named for a couple, "Rick and Ann's."

But in Lucy's social circle, pairing off is not simple or perfect. She observes that she lives in a community where "all the people you know— without exception—have their hearts all wrapped around someone who won't ever love them back." Leo loves Guinevere, a woman who can hardly remember his name when she sees him. Guinevere loves a man living on the East Coast who once told her, Lucy remembers, that "the only thing better than three thousand miles between him and the object of his desire would be if she had a terminal illness." Though Lucy is dating a dangerously jealous man, Gordon, she is "a little" in love with Leo, who is emotionally unavailable and tells her he is "the best girlfriend you never had." Lucy desperately wants her parents to love her, but they are too self-involved and drunk most of the time to connect with each other, let alone to be of any comfort to their daughter. One of the few happy memories of childhood for Lucy involves being in the hospital after an accident and having a cadre of caring doctors and nurses focused on her well-being.

Lucy's persona is split into two parts, as well, and much of the story is focused on her attempts to resolve the divisive inner issues that are apparent through her actions. It is as if there are two voices speaking to Lucy and, despite her exterior bravado, she does not know what she really wants or understand what she really feels. In "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," Lucy obliquely refers to an episode during which she failed to listen to her own fears about rafting a wild Colorado river and nearly drowning. The event is explored in more depth in the collection's second story, "Cataract," where it is revealed that, though Lucy is an experienced river guide, she let a less experienced partner talk her into doing something she knew in her gut was foolish and dangerous.

The skirmish between Lucy's exterior life and her interior voice continues after she has moved to Oakland. Here, too, she has trouble listening to her own feelings and admitting when she is afraid. At the park, Lucy and Leo examine a flyer that warns of a car-jacking epidemic in the city and urges motorists to drive to a convenience store to exchange information with anyone who bumps their car from behind. Leo doubts that Lucy could ever follow this advice, because it would mean she would have to appear frightened. "You're the only person I know who'd get your throat slit sooner than admit that you're afraid," he charges.

Lucy's desire for dangerous situations is evident in Oakland: "I'd walk even the nastiest part [of Oakland], the blood pumping through my veins as hard as when I first saw the Rocky Mountains," she notes, and she gleefully recounts to her friends how she was "baptized" in one of those tough neighborhoods by a man urinating in public. The city streets provide her with the rush of adrenaline she needs— "all those lives in such dangerous and unnatural proximity." Even when she is mugged, Lucy does not let on that she experiences fear.

Chaos surrounds Lucy, as indicated by her history as well as by her choice of men. By the time she is fifteen years old, Lucy has survived sixteen car accidents. When she is eighteen, Lucy is stopped by a police officer who says, after tailing her for a few miles and observing her break nearly every code of safe driving, "I really don't know where to start." The photographs Lucy took while living in Colorado are filled with disorder, and she remembers, "I had taken so many pictures by then of the chaos of heaved-up rock . . . that I'd lost my balance and fallen into them." She mentions to Leo that she can't blame men for not wanting to commit to her, because "if I saw me coming down the street with all my stuff hanging out I'm not so sure I'd pick myself up and go trailing after."

Lucy is a woman always in motion; before moving to California she lived in Alaska, in Colorado, and on the East Coast, and, as noted in the collection's other stories, she has pursued numerous physically challenging and often risky adventures around the world. Even when she decided to leave her rural life in Colorado for what she perceived as the stability of the city, her decision seemed rash. She packed up everything she owned for the trip to the West Coast but then "left behind everything I couldn't carry." Her move is an attempt to recreate a life away from the chaos and the danger. "I thought there might be order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces and right angles that would give myself back to me, take my work somewhere different, maybe to a safer place," she reflects.

Lucy's attraction to dangerous situations and her inability to listen to her gut feelings get her into difficult situations with the men she dates. For example, not only is Gordon insanely jealous, but he also displays a chilling violent streak after Lucy attempts to break up with him. He leaves messages made from cut-out letters taped to her front door and hangs scarves tied to look like nooses in her trees. Thinking back on Gordon's early declaration that "I take the people close to me and try to break them," Lucy wonders why "I could hear and didn't hear what he was saying, the reason why I thought the story could end differently for me." Lucy's interior voice—the one that comes from her gut—is speaking here, but she chooses not to listen to it. She has not had much experience paying attention to the self-preserving interior voice that advises her to run to safety, choosing, instead, the bravado that has helped her face down a mother bear and her cub, a mugger, dangerous rapids, and a fractured family. The skills she learns from these experiences, however, ultimately cannot help her successfully deal with an abusive boyfriend or understand why she feels so alone.

But Houston has not created a character who is completely beyond self-awareness and the promise of a better life. Lucy is a very sympathetic protagonist precisely because of her many quirks and faults, and her eventual redemption—or, at least, the moment when she decides to push beyond the noise and distraction of her exterior life and listen to some of the very smart things going on in her head—is hinted at in the story. In a series of admissions, Lucy lets on that she has a vulnerable side. She begins by asking Leo if he is ever afraid "that there are so many things you need swirling around inside you that they will just overtake you, smother you, suffocate you until you die?" She goes on to admit that she is worried that her life has progressed too far to ever change.

Lucy's emotional breakthrough, of sorts, occurs when she realizes the substantial yet artificial dichotomy between her interior and exterior lives. After experiencing the thrill of winning an impromptu sailboat race, Lucy notices that she is "still so high . . . that I can tell myself there's really nothing to be afraid of." Suddenly, she knows that this is a lie—there *are* things to be feared in life— and she begins to list the things she has until now tried to forget: her car wrecks, the fact that she is without a loving relationship, and that Gordon might be waiting for her at her house with a gun, for example. At that moment, Lucy begins to see how she has used the chaos and constant movement of her exterior life to cover up the fact that her interior life is in shambles. When she tells Leo "I'm scared," he says he cannot help her. But when Lucy returns to the park where she watched the weddings earlier in the day and says again, "I'm scared," she is saying it to herself, "stronger, almost like singing, as though it might be the first step . . . toward something like a real life."

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Taibl is an English instructor and a writer. In this essay, Taibl examines how the episodic structure of Houston's story illuminates the story's larger meaning.

In Pam Houston's second full collection of short stories *Waltzing the Cat*, readers are introduced to Lucy O'Rourke, a landscape photographer with a penchant for failed relationships. Throughout the series of interlocking stories, Lucy's character is revealed as if by snapshots, where each story is a separate moment in Lucy's life. The episodic form the collection adopts, in which the stories remain separate yet loosely connected, allows for, as Randall Osbourne says in the introduction to his 1999 *Salon* interview with Houston, the voice of a dawning wisdom, the kind you find and lose repeatedly, and then begin to find more often. By the end of the collection and many of the stories, Lucy is finding wisdom more often and revealing it to the reader. Houston uses the snapshot effect in the collection to build Lucy's life but also in several individual stories to build a story's individual meaning.

Through these short, narrative interludes that resemble in words what photographs reveal through images, Houston ties together a day-in-the-life of Lucy O'Rourke with a smattering of other stories that ultimately give shape to Lucy's future. Together, the snapshots within the story portray much about how individuals learn about themselves - often little by little as a composite of experiences build into self-understanding. The composite Lucy is left with at the end of "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" helps her to accept her single life and define a life as one that is not bounded by failed relationships with others but defined by a healthy relationship with herself.

Just as the photographer works with negative images to create a positive image, the brief, illuminating and factual narratives that comprise "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" tell just enough about a situation in order to imply something more. In her interview with Osbourne for *Salon*, Houston talks about photography as the one visual art form she has any talent for. She says, "It translated very well into what I was trying to talk about with stories and the way you make or save or erase your life with the stories you tell." In "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," the narrator, Lucy, chooses to recall certain stories or snapshots that illustrate her life. Some are destructive narratives. Some are victorious stories. Together, the stories help Lucy see herself in a new frame of reality. What have been negative images of her past life become positives. And what is not shown, to herself or the reader, but implied becomes as important as what is shown and explicit. The resulting image shows Lucy an accurate picture of herself and provides for a new image of the future.

What is explicit from the onset is Lucy's present - the one day in her life spent with her best friend, Leo. Glimpses of this day appear throughout the story and act as a frame for the various other recollections. Leo and Lucy spend their day, a perfect day in the city, acting out the perfect date. They begin by watching elegant weddings at the Palace of Fine Arts, an icon of romance in America. They read poetry and sail a boat. They almost torture each other by acting out an ideal that they know is not possible for them.

Not only do they watch picture-perfect weddings with the knowledge that they are a seemingly impossible dream, they also dream impossible dreams about the people in their lives. Leo says, for instance, "The only Buddha I could love is one who is capable of forgetfulness and sin." That desire is an inhibited one for Leo, since he loves a woman who does not love him but who loves another man - another man who thinks it would be ideal if she had a terminal illness. Here, illness is used as a great tease, a way to accentuate the romantic obstacles that inflame desire. Why such an emphasis on what cannot be had - the impossible? For Leo and Lucy, it just makes life easier. Being in love with the impossible is much easier than living through the risk that real love entails. The only big problem with desiring the impossible is that it creates a cycle of emptiness without fulfillment, what Lucy later calls, that *want* that won't let go of you. When Lucy begins to understand the dichotomies of her desires, for instance, how deeply she fears both love and the absence of love, she begins to understand the toll of unsatisfied wants and that satisfaction resides in herself and not in her relationships with others.

Leo, the best girlfriend Lucy never had, helps Lucy define a healthy relationship with herself. As the girlfriend, Leo is the one who shows Lucy what she is afraid of, what they need to and can be for each other, and what Lucy needs to be for herself. Their relationship is not complicated by sexual attraction and confusion; they are friends. He is the one to hold up the mirror and tell her, "you're the only person I know who'd get your throat slit sooner than admit you're afraid." When Lucy finally admits, "I'm scared," Leo is the one who says that he cannot help and implies that now she needs to help herself. By not having the answers, Leo is the best kind of friend, the kind that listens but does not give advice, the kind that supports and cheers without leading, the kind that lets the mistakes happen and is around to help pick up the broken pieces.

The best girlfriend Lucy has never had, though, is really herself. Sure, Leo is the best kind of girlfriend on the perfect day in the city. But, Lucy is the one who has been missing from her own life for all this time. Lucy admits she is afraid twice in the story. Once, she admits it to Leo, who not only tells her he cannot help her but implies that she must help herself. The second time, she admits her fear to herself in the park. Ultimately, Lucy is the one who must believe she is afraid and learn to cope with the consequences. The fact that the conclusion of the story implies that she is going to begin to live an honest life full of fear, as well as real possibilities instead of impossibilities, suggests that she is becoming the best girlfriend that she has never been.

Interspersed throughout this day with Leo are stories recalled from two sources, Lucy's own past experience and the lives of friends and strangers. Stories from Lucy's past reveal both moments she is sure to want to forget and moments when strength and courage are revealed to her in surprising ways. Sometimes, these are one and the same. Embarrassed, she remembers begging Gordon to take her back, and then she proudly remembers telling a would-be burglar to get lost. She remembers the story of her father and mother fighting in the car and her mother's suggestion that her father hates her. Then, she remembers surprising both him and herself as a young child by swimming far and fast. After confronting stories of rejection and disappointment in relationships that can perhaps never be healed and realizing that she's been waiting for everything to fix itself and that maybe, just maybe, that isn't going to happen, she decides to integrate the lessons the stories of rejection and the stories of victory are telling her. She learns that she is capable of surprising herself and that she may be stronger than she perhaps believes.

The stories from friends and strangers also fuel Lucy's growing revelations. Guinevere tells Lucy about her own failed relationships and serves as an example of living life on her own terms. When Guinevere pulls a new age card from the deck that she disagrees with - one that suggests weakness or submission - she tosses it in the garbage. She is not taking the cards that have been dealt her; she is taking control of her own story. Guinevere is one of the characters to whom Susan Salter Reynolds, in her *Los Angeles Times Book Review* article, could be referring when she says that Houston's stories are full of usable wisdom. Guinevere is the one who tells Lucy, "You only get a few chances to feel your life all the way through." She also gives Lucy permission to escape her choices. Lucy recalls her saying, "Choices can't be good or bad." There is only the event and the lessons learned from it. Similarly, the story's use of episodes or snapshots mirrors this piece of wisdom as each narrative avoids passing judgment on characters or situations and presents the scene or situation as a photograph is presented - as image without commentary.

Toward the end of the story, the stories of others really help Lucy define her own story's future path. Lucy wonders about the girlfriend of the robber who kidnapped Leo. "I wonder how she saw herself," she says, "as what part of the story, and how much she had invested in how it would end." Lucy is realizing, at this point, that she is invested in her own story. The composite image that the snapshots are slowly revealing to her is helping her to really see herself. In her own voice, she says, "I could tell you the lie I told myself with Gordon. That anybody is better than nobody." Here, Lucy starts to see herself clearly enough to become her own best girlfriend. Her sage advice is imparted through her own story. She admits that she lied to herself and implies that she did so because she was afraid to be alone.

The final episodes share common themes of survival and victory, and bring together the three types of stories that illuminate Lucy's future: those of strangers, of past life, and of the present. One story that Gordon told her recalls two suicidal bridge jumpers who meet up there on the walkway and find out they are both survivors of a previous jump. She doesn't tell us what this means for her, but the power of definition is implied. When one is suddenly found to be a survivor rather than a possible victim, life changes. The power of definition changes perceptions in life, and the implication as Lucy begins to change the definitions in her life is that she is changing into a survivor, too. The second story from Lucy's childhood recalls a story where Lucy's father threw her into the surf and waited to see her sink or swim. She swam like a pro, surprising herself and her father. This story implies that Lucy is capable of surprising herself and others - that this is still possible. The final scene returns to the present and the stories of brides. Lucy returns to the site of the weddings to take photos of the swans. Here, even the swans have paired up. Symbolically, Lucy bows to an imaginary husband and admits that she is scared. She is alone, finally and truly, and for the first time, she feels like she has a real life, something true, and wise, and lasting. The relationship in the end that defines all others is Lucy's relationship with herself. The composite image left after all the snapshots is a future with and as her true self. Echoing Karen Karbo's *New York Times Book Review* article, the story, like the collection, is far from perfect, but then, so are the characters and themes in Lucy's messy life. In a struggle for identity, future path, and happiness, self-knowledge is the gem that Houston unearths and polishes using a click of the camera shutter to reveal the self frame-by-frame until the whole, true picture is revealed.

Source: Erika Taibl, Critical Essay on "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

Houston reads stories from *Waltzing the Cat* on an audio cassette of the same name, published in 1998 by Publishing Mills. The same company has released a tape of Houston reading stories from her first collection, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* (1992).

Topics for Further Study

Collect personal advertisements from local newspapers and online sources, and then analyze them. Consider how women describe themselves and how men describe themselves, and then how women describe the man they are looking for and how men describe the woman they are looking for. In class, make a chart of the similarities (if any) and differences, and discuss.

Look at one or more family snapshots and, using these snapshots as a catalyst for memory, tell the *true* story of your childhood. Focus on the discrepancies between what the photograph implies about your childhood and what you remember the case to be.

In groups, discuss the character with whom you most identify in Houston's story, and why. Name a member of your group as note taker and another member as spokesperson who will report highlights of the group's discussion to the class.

Assume that Lucy O'Rourke's story doesn't end where it does but continues for a few more pages. Write those pages. What "next steps" does Lucy take after admitting her fear?

Design a questionnaire to discover your classmates' attitudes towards marriage, then photocopy it and distribute it to the class. Make sure respondents can answer anonymously. Summarize the data from the questionnaire, analyze your findings, and then report them to your class.

Read the rest of the stories in *Waltzing the Cat*, paying close attention to how Houston develops the characters from "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had." As a class, discuss which characters seem to be most "fully drawn," that is, believable. Make sure to support your choices with specific reasons.

Houston has received criticism from some women for the way she unabashedly describes her love for men. Are there ways in which Lucy O'Rourke can be considered a feminist (according to your own understanding of that term)? Discuss your answers as a class.

Compare and contrast the dangers that Lucy faced in the city and the wilderness. Do her responses differ, and if so, how? Write a short essay arguing that Lucy demonstrates courage or cowardice. Be sure to provide examples from the text to support your claim.

Do you believe that people are attracted to a particular "type" of person? On the board, brainstorm a list of characteristics of the type of man Lucy is looking for and the type of woman Leo is looking for, and then discuss whether or not you believe their desires are realistic.

Some reviewers have called *Waltzing the Cat* a novel. In a short essay, argue for or against the idea that Houston's book is a novel.

What Do I Read Next?

Critics often compare Houston's stories to those of Richard Ford. Both write about the American West and the complexities of love. Ford's *A Multitude of Sins* (2002) collects stories and a novella on these topics.

Cowboys Are My Weakness (1992), Houston's first collection of stories, established her reputation as a serious writer. Houston writes about failed relationships and her adventures in the wild in this well-received volume.

Many of Houston's stories take place on rivers. *The Whitewater Sourcebook: A Directory of Information on American Whitewater Rivers* (1990), by Richard Penny, is one of the most comprehensive coast-to-coast whitewater reference books available.

Houston wrote the text to accompany Veronique Vial's black-and-white photographs in *Men before Ten A.M.* (1996). All of the photographs are of men as they wake up in the morning, including celebrities such as Peter Falk, Robert Altman, Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips, Gary Oldman, Wim Wenders, and John Singleton.

John Updike and Katrina Kenison co-edited *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (2000), in which Houston's "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had" appears.

Further Study

Houston, Pam, "Creating Your Own," in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Vol. 2, Issue 12, December 2001, p. 169.

In this nonfiction piece, Houston describes how she has cultivated a "rotating family" of friends as a substitute for the large family she never had.

_____, *A Little More about Me*, Washington Square Press, 2000.

Houston's autobiographical collection of essays describes her globe-trotting adventures in places such as Botswana, the Grand Tetons, and the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

_____, "Redneck Chic," in *Los Angeles Magazine*, Vol. 41, No. 7, July 1996, pp. 90-100. In this nonfiction piece, Houston describes activities in Los Angeles that are often associated with rural life.

Williams, Linda, and Jamie Jensen, eds., *Eyewitness Travel Guide to San Francisco and Northern California*, DK Publishing, 1994.

This travel guide provides numerous pictures and graphics explaining the architecture of popular buildings in San Francisco, helping readers visualize many of the places Lucy O'Rourke visits and names.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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