Bingo Short Guide

Bingo by Rita Mae Brown

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Contents

Bingo Short Guide.....1

Contents.....2

Characters.....3

Social Concerns/Themes.....4

Techniques/Literary Precedents.....6

Key Questions.....7

Related Titles.....8

Copyright Information.....9

Characters

Brown's fictional world is filled with hundreds of people and animals, and in Bingo she seems determined to include as many of them as possible.

On the first page we are introduced to the dogs, Lolly Mabel and Goodyear, and their feline companion, Pewter, who accompany their owners everywhere in Runnymede and thus appear in nearly every scene. Then, of course, there is the narrator and main character Nicole (Nickel), her adopted and much older mother Julia (Jutz), and her still older Aunt Louis (Wheeze), all of whom were central to Six of One (1978).

Julia, at eighty-one, jogs several miles a day, while Louise is known for her life-threatening manipulation of a 1952 Chrysler. (She owns three, all bought four decades ago, so that using two for parts, she would never have to buy another car.) The rivalry between the older women and Nicole's efforts to keep healthy and happy are a major part of the action.

Outside of the central family group is an unrelated extended family that encompasses the complete spectrum of white Runnymede. There are the employees of the Clarion, where Nicole is second-in-command below owner and editor, Charles Falkenroth, whose retirement supplies the main plot of the novel. Nicole's best friend Regina is the wife of Nicole's lawyer and lover. Runnymede being small and offering little choice, Nicole has not had a female lover for some time. The ostentatiously gay hair dresser, Mr. Pierre, and handsome, elderly newcomer Ed Tutweiler Walters, round out the secondary characters. Tertiary characters are legion: There is the estranged socialite couple Liz and Diz Rife — Diz is negotiating to buy the Clarion — the good sheriff from the south side of town, and the bad (or misinformed) one from the north, bingo caller Mutzi, and the teeming Bonneville family (the "Bon Bons") to name a few.

Characterization in this novel follows the pattern of Brown's other books. Nicole, the protagonist, is fully developed. The female characters are roundly drawn and, for the most part, believable, if a bit eccentric and more supportive than real human beings could ever manage. A jogging eightyone-year-old strains the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, but Julia's character is consistent and, given the premises, acceptable. The males, except for Mr. Pierre, whose underlying depth transcends his overt color, are flat and display an almost universal willingness to talk about feelings and tolerate difference that strains credulity.

Social Concerns/Themes

Perhaps chief among the social concerns of Bingo is what Brown's narrator and main character Nicole calls her "Blue Dot theory." According to the theory, if all women in the world who had experimented with homosexual love were to awaken with blue dots on their foreheads, most of us would have them. The intensity of the blue, however, would indicate the depth of the lesbian inclination of each woman. Nicole speculates that her dot would be deep aqua and goes on to demonstrate through an affair with her best friend's husband that, avowed lesbian that she is, she is capable of heterosexual love.

According to Nicole's theory — and, one presumes, Brown's — most women fall along a continuum somewhere between navy blue (absolutely homosexual) and no dots at all (absolutely heterosexual).

Closely allied with that theory is Brown's enthusiastic optimism about people's ability to care for each other despite sexual slights and oversights or long-running feuds. In her fictional town of Runnymede — bisected by the Mason-Dixon line — Brown paints a world of acceptance and forgiveness where underlying human affection overcomes the sexual battles that would destroy relationships in a less idealized setting. Nicole's most beloved friend Regina forgives her husband and her friend their affair, regretting only that she was not told. Her octogenarian mother and aunt, friendly enemies from an early age, forgive each other their rivalry over the handsome new male retiree in town. The town forgives and continues to love the two Southern males who, on a drunken toot, use the Civil War cannon in the park to wreck the office of a Yankee lawyer who takes the unpopular side in a local dispute. Nobody in Runnymede is capable of holding a grudge, and apparently evil people are only misinformed or not very bright.

When she wrote Rubyfruit Jungle (1973), Brown was a radical lesbian feminist. In each succeeding novel and in her private life, she has retreated more and more from this or any extreme position. In this book, Nicole — whom, one suspects, serves as Brown's alter ego — is a traditional political liberal intent on a message of tolerance and respect for individual inclinations.

Always a respecter of age, the older Brown gets, the more she emphasizes that her fictional culture is a mixture of ages, sexual orientations, economic strata, religions, and social stations. In Runnymede, particularly at the weekly bingo games, all these groups interact as equals. Even so, African Americans are among the few Southerners not portrayed in Brown's contemporary fiction.

One other social concern deserves mention. The main plot of Bingo develops when the local newspaper for which Nicole works is sold to a buyer who will make it into a second-rate affiliate of a national chain rather than the excellent local paper it has been.

Nicole is worried about her job, but even more she is concerned with the influence that commercial interests will have on the absolute editorial freedom she and the other journalists have enjoyed. And she is dismayed by the fact that the traditional presses

will be re placed with computer-generated print that will further erode the autonomy of the paper — and put some traditional craftsmen out of work. The erosion of local autonomy and increasing centralization of the press is another contemporary trend that Brown attacks in this book.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

In a typical Brown touch, the author opens her book with a chatty acknowledgement section thanking a support network that ranges from friends, publishers, and models, to the animals that sustain her. Following is an "Introduction" where she asks tolerance for occasional and slight historical license: placing a few news stories days or weeks from their actual dates to further the plot. Having dealt with minor historical inaccuracies, Brown praises her readers for their help in making her work successful and admonishes them to make use of their own creativity, suggesting that anyone's active use of imagination enriches everyone. Beyond those fairly unorthodox forewords, the book adopts a straightforward plot structure. Brown abandons earlier experiments with time for a traditional chronological narrative, and she sees to it that all characters are fully introduced near the beginning of the book, occasionally telling us about them rather than revealing them. Still, dialogue is one of the author's strong points; it is sprightly, fast-paced, and peppered with colorful regionalisms.

Brown includes none of the graphic sexual descriptions that characterized some of her earlier work.

Brown still owes much to her mentors — Twain, Euripides, and Aristophanes — but with this second book in her Runnymede canon, she owes a little to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Runnymede is a small town, but like Faulkner's Jefferson, it is large enough for her to keep adding characters and local institutions to enhance the tale. In Bingo, Brown enriches her characters and her narrative with allusions to the classics of literature and history in such a way as to make her work more meaningful for educated readers while still leaving it accessible to a general audience.

Key Questions

Bingo revisits Runnymede, a small community introduced in Six of One.

The town seems poised on the brink of change, as the outside world intrudes by buying the local newspaper. Even so, people seem reasonably tolerant of others, with forgiveness being an important element in the fabric of community life. Discussion could begin with the issue of forgiveness. Are the people too forgiving? Should Regina not be angry with Nicole? Can grudges be dropped as easily as they are in Runnymede?

1. What do you think about Nicole's idea about blue dots indicating a woman's lesbian tendencies? Is this Brown speaking through Nicole, or is it strictly a matter of Nicole's characterization?

That is, is it something that represents Nicole's character but not necessarily Brown's personal opinion?

2. Is evil depicted realistically in Bingo? Does the novel present too sentimental a view of people's ability to forgive?

3. How does its mixture of age groups shape our perception of the book's themes?

4. How important are outside pressures in Bingo? Do the changes at the local newspaper represent the beginning of the end of the community's way of life?

5. How successful is Brown at portraying the life of the community? Are her characters credible parts of the whole?

6. Is Bingo too gentle? Should it have the sharper edge in tone and content of some of Brown's other novels such as Rubyfruit Jungle?

7. Is Runnymede a model of tolerance? Would you like your community to be like Runnymede?

Related Titles

This book is a sequel to Six of One.

Many of the characters reappear and some of those who have died are at least mentioned. That more than a decade has elapsed by the time Bingo takes place allows for the introduction of new characters and situations that would not have fit into Nicole's Six of One. The fact that Nicole has mellowed and settled down in Runnymede allows for a closer exploration of the community and its inhabitants. But the town retains its tolerant, self-contained identity, and the same major characters remain at the novel's core. And like Six of One, it too bears a thematic relationship to Rubyfruit Jungle.

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