Black Tickets Short Guide

Black Tickets by Jayne Anne Phillips

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Characters

Jayne Anne Phillips is concerned with the way social reality impinges upon consciousness. As a result, most of her characters are brittle and emotionally unstable, the products of their confused world. In "El Paso," a long story told from several points of view, one character says that the sky "opens up like a hole"; such an image of vertigo is characteristic. Her characters are always faced with loss: sometimes a loss of place brought about by betrayal or neglect, sometimes the loss of a loved one to cancer or madness. The literature of bereavement, of the outsider and of madness is often the literature of extremity. Often enough, however, a character loses innocence and, with it, her sense of reality as a childhood world dissolves into the experience of illness, death, and separation.

In "The Heavenly Animal," a young woman allows her divorced father to hose off her car before she leaves to meet her lover. "No one will ever help you but your family," he says. Soon afterwards she runs into a deer, stops and realizes "there was really nowhere to go."

The short fragmentary pieces, highly poetic and sometimes overwrought, are feverish prose poems which emphasize this separation — a highly-charged moment, often sexual in nature, is etched with photographic clarity into the mind of the point-of-view character. Childhood innocence is corrupted.

In "Sweethearts," for instance, the female voice remembers going to the movies every Friday and Sunday. On Fridays she and her friends would hide in the back row of the balcony as "sacred grunts rose in black corners." It was their initiation into the mystery of puberty and sex. On Sundays, however. the bony theater manager would let them use the phone only after pulling them close and calling them "Sweethearts" in a debased corrupted parody of affection.

Phillips's people do not so much live within a social fabric as balance on fault lines. They are representative of a world in which shared values and long-term commitments have vanished.

They come of age in a turbulent society in which the center has not held. In such a time the traditional stability of the middle-class seems as fragile as the day-to-day existence of society's outcasts, a point the organization of this book repeatedly makes.

Social Concerns

As several critics point out, Phillips is centrally concerned in giving voice to the inarticulate outcasts of society, whether they happen to be familiar suburban victims of recent social upheavals or dispossessed (even deranged) members of the underclass.

This mixture of familiar middle-class situations with the plights of outsiders makes the book an excellent one for study: first, it contains a range of situations and literary influences, a characteristic typical of the writing-workshop generation; second, it dramatizes the widely-held assumption that everyone in the contemporary age, whether well -off or barely surviving, is shell-shocked from cultural disintegration. Black Tickets consists of eleven longer stories counterpointed by sixteen short fragments, a couple of them only a paragraph. While most critics prefer the longer stories and find some of the shorter ones overwritten, they agree that both allow the inarticulate members of society to speak for themselves in passages full of street slang and carefully sculpted poetic images.

Several stories are concerned with the deterioration of family life, in particular with a young woman trying to reestablish intimacy with a parent who is divorced or very ill. Several others are period pieces which attempt to chronicle the rootlessness and exploitation of small-town life in a manner reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson and Southern Gothic fiction. And several others, not necessarily the most successful but perhaps the most memorable, are portraits of the underclass — pimps, prostitutes, serial murderers, and drug addicts. These latter pieces are striking because they are rendered in a staccato prose style full of surprising images. They are told intimately and disjunctively in the voice of these marginal characters, so that the usual social orientation of the reader is subverted and sympathy is created.

Techniques

The techniques pointed out most frequently by critics include the book's dramatic monologues, its vignettes and its staccato prose style full of shocking images and metaphors. Phillips carefully selects images of disease, of loss, of physical and emotional pain. In addition, her highly-crafted style requires the attention due to poetry. The stories which concern the dispossessed — strippers, prostitutes, pornographers, dope addicts, and murderers — are told in the first-person in a series of startling images. Phillips takes a fairly ordinary plot and skewers it by sifting it through the highly-charged consciousness of an outsider. Such a technique results in a stylized voice, bits of street slang textured with a carefully sculpted literary style.

Phillips is never interested in social realism in her "outsider" stories. The working methods of the oral historian or of a street-wise writer like Nelson Algren do not concern her so much as the highly-crafted style of the writing workshop. Flannery O'Connor once claimed that modern prose writers would have to become poets, eschewing social realism and distorting reality for the sake of some greater truth.

Phillips writes as if she has taken such prophecy to heart, except that there is no greater truth revealed in these stories. Like Ann Beattie's stories, hers often end with a summarizing image rather than a resolution, and the spiritual truth to which O'Connor alluded is difficult if not impossible to find.

Some critics complain that her prose becomes ornate in these stories, too self-conscious or mannered. The mixture of poetic images and street language is too studied, they continue, too unconvincing. The same criticism has been leveled at the short quick takes, never more than a page or two in length, which precede and follow most of the longer stories. Other critics consider the short takes analogous to snapshots, so that one minutely dramatized moment comes to stand for a lifetime. The startling images evoke the rhythms and logic of nightmare, creating a feverish obsessive tone appropriate to the voice of the story. The critical consensus is that the family stories are best because language is at the service of character and story, but that the "outsider" stories are genuine tickets into a talented imagination sympathetic to the dark side of life.

Themes

These stories are mostly concerned with love and alienation (the absence of love). Love's absence (or its imminent loss) and the feeling of being an outcast cause characters to inhabit a nightmare world. In "Lechery," a fourteen-year-old orphan joins two drug addicts in their travels, selling pornography to school boys whom she then seduces. In "Souvenir," a suburban girl returns home to her mother who is dying of cancer. Stories about the loneliness and sadness of family life in the suburbs are juxtaposed with portraits of the outcasts of society to point out the similarity in their emotional predicaments. Nobody can quite find a recognizable world in which to belong. In "Gemcrack," a meditation from the point of view of a mass murderer, the murderer tells readers that "mostly I'm invisible." In "Home," a college-age girl returns home to a divorced mother who talks constantly of cancer. After the mother overhears her daughter making love, she asks: "Please, how much can you expect me to take?"

Phillips is so insistent about the theme of alienation that it's a question almost any of the lonely desperate characters in the book could rightfully ask. The characters are hungry for commitment or relationship, especially for love, but the centrifugal force of a disintegrating society or the universal processes of mortality force them to settle for occasional moments of clear vision.

Literary Precedents

Jean Toomer's Cane (1923), a collection of stories which alternates longer developed fictions with poems and feverish vignettes, is the book which most resembles the structure and organization of Black Tickets. Phillips herself acknowledges a debt to Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and William Burroughs. Such erudition is typical of her writingworkshop generation, which tends to absorb material and styles from many sources. In Phillips's case, she tends both to find her material close to home, resulting in family stories, and to invent urban outcasts, resulting in the "outsider" stories. The family stories, occasionally Southern Gothic as in "1934," often dark dyspeptic narratives of rural or suburban America as in "The Heavenly Animal," are clearly influenced in choice of detail and texture by O'Connor, Welty, Porter, and Anderson. Welty's The Ponder Heart (1954), for example, treats similar material in the form of a dramatic monologue, while Porter's intensely personal narratives are unsentimental stories of separation, alienation, and the loss of innocence. Faulkner and Burroughs were stylistic innovators. From them (and from Gertrude Stein) Phillips has absorbed an innovative or eccentric use of punctuation, but the significant achievement of Faulkner and Burroughs concerned point of view. Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930), for instance, rotates through the minds of several related characters, as does "El Paso" in Black Tickets. Burroughs wrote in the argot of junkies; he also invented the "cutup," an extremely disjunctive experimental technique which tries to recreate the paranoia and vertigo of the heroin addict. Phillips domesticates this technique in her "outsider" stories and gives it a sharp polished workshop edge.

Related Titles

In Fast Lanes, (short stories, 1987) as in her earlier fiction, Phillips depicts the dislocations in contemporary American life. She examines in minute detail the impermanence of human relationships and the resulting destruction of individuals. Confronted with an impersonal society and disintegrating families which supply no enduring values, Phillips's characters can rely only on their own limited inner strength for support in their inevitable personal crises. Generally they have experienced—or are experiencing— either actual losses or omens of such losses. While the forms of their reactions vary, Phillips's people recognize the frailty of their psychological balance and use emotional detachment to shield themselves from further pain.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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

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