

The Bodysnatchers Short Guide

The Bodysnatchers by Jack Finney

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Characters

Miles Bennell, the novel's hero, is a product of this small town environment. Fond of Mill Valley, he has returned to its quiet ways to practice medicine. Despite his advanced degree, he is a modest, simple, honest, humorous, and easy-going individual, a fitting Everyman. Although he has never been challenged to perform heroically, he resists the pods and combats his transformed neighbors resourcefully and daringly. Bennell is a believable, endearing character who becomes a reliable narrator and interpreter of events.

Becky Driscoll, Bennell's girlfriend, has the same qualities. She aids Miles throughout his fight against the pods.

At times she slips into the stock role of the helpless female who faints, loses her shoe, or otherwise impedes the hero during a crisis.

Jack and Theodora Belicec are a mirror-image of Miles and Becky, although their characters are not well developed. Their role is to intensify the plot's conflicts by providing two more adventurous resisters against the invaders.

The minor characters such as Mannie Kaufman, the psychiatrist, are surprisingly well-done. Finney gives each the distinctive trait or detail which makes their brief incursion into the plot vivid as well as dramatic.

Social Concerns

The Bodysnatchers describes an invasion of Earth by extraterrestrial creatures who resemble oversized vegetable pods. Able to mold themselves into the exact physical replica of any human being, they replace a passionate individual with an emotionless automaton.

Although Finney claims that he evolved the frightening plot for The Bodysnatchers simply as an entertainment, he clearly found his fictional conflicts in the anxieties of his contemporaries. For the more speculativeminded, the rash of UFO sightings in the early 1950s had raised the question of extraterrestrial visitors to earth.

Another source of anxiety was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Having just defeated fascism in the Second World War, Americans were troubled by the specter of battling communism. Subversion from within seemed more likely than open attack. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover labeled Soviet agents "masters of deceit" who would trick, cajole, and brainwash ordinary American citizens into betraying their country.

Finney's tale of a small California town quietly invaded by ruthless extraterrestrials, of ordinary Americans turned, without outward change, into betrayers of their fellow citizens, skillfully combines two anxieties into one conflict.



Techniques

Finney skillfully uses the resources of first-person narration. Seeing the events through the eyes of Miles Bennell gives the sense of immediacy to the action. Choosing as the narrator a peaceable man who loves the routine of familiar things and intimately knows the personalities of the townspeople taken over by the pods increases the horror of the tale. Miles becomes a kind of Everyman, reacting as the average person would if thrown from a humdrum existence into a nightmarish, life-or-death struggle.

Another skillful technique is the juxtaposition of the fantastic with the ordinary. Finney does not attempt an elaborate explanation of the pods' origin or attribute to them a complicated technology. Instead Finney presents the fantastic as a given and concentrates on the human reaction to it.

Willingly accepting the kind, easygoing Miles's perspective, readers are likely to follow without question the incredible adventure that befalls him.

The novel moves rapidly because Finney constructs each chapter as a discreet dramatic episode. One incident sets off a chain reaction which rises to a climax before falling off to some (temporary) conclusion. The next chapter then starts from the equilibrium established previously, destroys the stasis, and traces events until a new momentary balance is reached.

Themes

The bodysnatchers are ultimately defeated through the efforts of indomitable spirits like the protagonist Miles Bennell. The pod-creatures flee when they realize that human beings will fight, even against hopeless odds, rather than surrender their individuality and that distinct quality of human life: the ability to feel passion and care intensely. The novel's most explicit theme is its praise of American selfreliance and hardiness. The same spirit that enabled Americans to survive the Depression and to defeat the Axis powers in World War II overcomes an alien invasion.

Another theme of the novel is the way that small-town life nourishes the spirit of the individual and strengthens him to stand up to terrifying threats.

Finney lovingly depicts the appearance, the populace, and the values of the small town. He draws attention to the ways buildings are constructed, streets are laid out, and people converse.

Adaptations

Don Siegel's screen version of Finney's novel, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), is widely regarded as a masterpiece of low-budget filmmaking.

Critics credit this black-and-white movie (starring Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter) with demonstrating the cinematic potential of science fiction scripts. The movie altered Finney's narrative in two important ways. It allows Becky Driscoll to be taken over by her pod-clone, and it ends with Miles Bennell vainly warning others.

The film concludes on a note of desperation rather than with a tribute to human indomitability.

In 1978, Philip Kaufman remade Don Siegel's movie on a larger scale. Kaufman shot the film in color, switched the setting to San Francisco, and added an eerie score of electronic music. Although a good film in its own right, Kaufman's picture further departed from the contrast which had made Finney's novel so powerful: overwhelming horror in an idyllic small town.



Literary Precedents

The *Bodysnatchers* has both immediate and distant predecessors. The theme of extraterrestrial invasion, originated by H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), proved popular in the early 1950s.

Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffid's*, all published between 1951 and 1955, explore the topic of extraterrestrial threats to humanity.

Finney's use of an ordinary person (rather than an adventurer or professional) narrator is a well-established tradition with science fiction and its predecessor, the scientific romance.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818; generally credited as the beginning of science fiction), Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Robert C. Sherrif's *The Hopkins' Manuscript* (1939), and numerous other novels use the device of the innocent, inexperienced protagonist/storyteller who finds himself in the midst of extraordinary events. The device allows a writer the liberty to posit incredible situations (like the artificial creation of life or the destruction of Earth) without constructing a convincing scientific explanation. The inexperienced narrator cannot be expected to explain exceptions to or inversions of the laws of physics, biology, or chemistry.

In addition, *The Bodysnatchers* builds upon a motif as old as the folk tale and as familiar as the fairy tale. A peaceable, flourishing kingdom is invaded and becomes cursed. Either from ignorance or weakness, the rightful authority is unable to act. The task of repelling the invasion and removing the danger falls to a good but unremarkable citizen. Stifling his own doubts and battling without a plan, the unlikely hero stumbles upon the one weapon or action that counters the threat. The hero's accomplishment occurs in the shadows; there are no parades or medals to celebrate him.

Related Titles

The Bodysnatchers is Finney's only science fiction novel. Some of the early magazine stories (collected as *The Third Level*, 1957) have science fiction elements, but they, like *The Bodysnatchers*, lack the attention to technology and other-worldliness which characterize most mainstream science fiction. Finney pays more attention to the wonder within this world than to alien worlds, to the inventiveness of the human imagination rather than to its engineering wizardry.

Marion's Wall (1973) repeats one theme of *The Bodysnatchers*: Finney explores again the takeover of personality. In this novel, Jan Cheyney struggles against the invasive personality of Marion Marsh, a dead movie actress whose spirit cannot rest until she sees herself on screen. Marion's possession of Jan is much more benign than the pods' takeover of a Mill Valley citizen.

Jan eventually defeats Marion, although not until the free-spirited actress has energized staid Jan's joy of living.



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