

The Book of Bebb Short Guide

The Book of Bebb by Frederick Buechner

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Contents

The Book of Bebb Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

Buechner was able to explore the themes of *The Book of Bebb* by creating an ensemble of characters, both central figures and others, who are gradually revealed to the reader in all their complexity and individuality. Even relatively minor characters such as Nancy Oglethorpe (Bebb's Mary Magdalene), practical joker and Indian wiseman John Turtle and Antonio's girlfriend Ellie who drifts from one liberal cause to another are drawn with wit and described so vividly that they make a lasting impression on the reader. It is characters who may appear briefly or intermittently throughout *The Book of Bebb* (such as the angel/ arsonist Golden) who aid in plot development and help to expose undiscovered facets of the major characters.

Volume one, *Lion Country*, introduces the reader to Leo Bebb, a mysterious figure who is the head of a suspect ecclesiastical organization known as Holy Love. Bebb's wife, Lucille is convinced that Bebb may well be a being from outer space. To Antonio Parr, a young man who has dabbled in many things but mastered none of them, Bebb is a con man to be investigated and his Church of Holy Love is to be debunked as a fraud. For Antonio, who is in the process of watching helplessly as his twin sister dies slowly of bone cancer, the unmasking of Leo Bebb offers an opportunity to overcome his sense of failure and frustration. By the end of the novel, Antonio has traveled to Lion Country where he meets Bebb on his own ground and discovers that the minister is more of a mystery than ever. In Lion Country, Antonio Parr also meets Bebb's wife Lucille, who has retreated into alcoholism to escape her feelings of guilt over the death of their only child, for which she may have been responsible. Antonio also meets Brownie, Bebb's assistant who was resurrected by Bebb but hides from life under a mask of resolute sweetness and servitude. Instead of debunking Bebb, Antonio Parr comes to be drawn increasingly closer to him. He marries Bebb's adopted daughter Sharon and embarks with her on a new life.

The succeeding volumes of *The Book of Bebb* serve to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of these characters in greater depth, as others join them.

Antonio learns the truth about Bebb's prison record and that Sharon is indeed Bebb's flesh and blood, conceived as a result of his affair with his sister-in-law Bert. However, despite his flaws Leo Bebb emerges as a man who is deeply sorry for his transgressions and is sincere in offering his faith and compassion to others.

Antonio's wife Sharon and Parr's nephew Anthony form a brief sexual alliance. Although Parr separates from Sharon for a time, he learns kindness and strength from his trials. Ultimately, they reunite, and fulfill Leo Bebb's last wish by reclaiming the family homestead and evicting Leo's evil twin, Babe. Antonio, who becomes a secondary school English teacher, not only grows in compassion through his relationship with his students and his marital problems, he even learns to accept the consequences of his own actions, such as his brief affair with a former student. Bebb continues to remain a mystery to others. In Princeton, he organizes a series of love feasts which draw together the most disparate elements of the town into an exuberant worshipping



community. When Bebb is prevented from using the Princeton campus facilities for his love feasts, a raucous demonstration follows. His own daring nature leads Leo Bebb to mount a final protest of his own. During the Princeton reunion, Bebb rides an antique flying machine over the town. The ancient aircraft's twenty foot pennants sport the messages "Here's to Jesus" and "Here's to You." In a show of bravado, Bebb showers Princeton with leaflets that boldly proclaim "LOVE IS A FEAST."

The plane crashes and Bebb disappears.

He is presumed dead although his body is never found. It is hard for some to accept Leo Bebb's apparent demise. His companion and follower, Gertrude Conover, is convinced that there can be no life without Leo Bebb.

She envisions him returning to life in another guise. To Antonio Parr, Gertrude Conover and others, Bebb represents (in his own words): "Life with a capital L."

Social Concerns

Although many of Buechner's literary and theological works have been issued during the 1960s and 1970s, periods of great social unrest and activism centering on issues of civil rights, the war in Vietnam and the threat of nuclear holocaust, his writings do not tend to overtly address these issues. In *Love Feast*, volume three of *The Book of Bebb* (*The Book of Bebb* is composed of four novels: *Lion Country*, 1971; *Open Heart*, 1972; *Love Feast*, 1974; *Treasure Hunt*, 1977), Leo Bebb defies the authorities of Princeton University in an attempt to save his unconventional ministry to the young, minorities and social outcasts from extinction. Bebb's services, best described as combination "happenings" and Holy Communion may be far from traditional mainstream worship. His message, however, is highly conservative. Bebb states his views bluntly: "I'll tell you one thing," he asserts to a group of youthful peace demonstrators, "I don't go in for dope or you-name-it sex or walking the public streets got up like Hallowe'en and knocking the U.S.A. every chance you get. . . ."

Bebb's liberalism only extends so far.

He will ordain anyone who requests it, no matter what the candidate's background unless the person seeking ordination is female. Bebb also believes that men and women should concentrate on filling the traditionally assigned roles of breadwinner and mother, respectively. Although Bebb accepts a man known as Brownie to be his assistant at the Church of Holy Love, Brownie's homosexuality is clearly unacceptable to him.

For Bebb, the great issues of life are simply recognizing the need to repent, accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour and adhering to a traditional code of sexual morality.

Techniques

Buechner has employed a number of techniques in constructing *The Book of Bebb*. As a minister, Buechner has utilized many devices in writing his sermons that he has reclaimed as a novelist and used in *The Book of Bebb*. As a preacher, Buechner has not shied away from using sermon illustrations that may come from movies, history, fairy tales, Buddhist philosophy, television and his personal life. Buechner is also able to incorporate material from a number of eclectic sources in *The Book of Bebb* ranging from the apocryphal gospels and Native American tradition, to *King Lear* and *Abbot and Costello* movies. Frequently, his characters such as Bebb, Herman Redpath, Brownie and Joking Cousin are drawn with broad, satirical strokes. However, Buechner reserves a deep compassion for his characters, no matter how out of the ordinary they appear. The reader is prompted to laugh with them, not at them.

Humor is an important ingredient in *The Book of Bebb*. Frequently, the sacred is mixed with the profane to achieve hilarious results, as in the depiction of Indian millionaire Herman Redpath's unusual ordination and free-wheeling funeral. Although some might find the scatological nature of this humor offensive, others would be reminded of Rabelais. Buechner's satirical pen takes aim at the institution of the modern university, complete with a "with it" campus chaplain in *Love Feast*. In this novel, the post-Vatican II, post-Woodstock "hip" liturgies of the 1960s and 1970s are satirized in Buechner's depiction of Leo Bebb's exuberant love feasts. Buechner's affinity for the movies is attested by his use of broad, slapstick humor and the chase scene which takes Sharon and Antonio to the depths of a storage vault in hopes of encountering the elusive Leo Bebb in the concluding pages of *Love Feast*.

Throughout the four volumes of *The Book of Bebb*, "telling the truth" involves seeing the truth of life squarely and expressing it as a constantly changing kaleidoscope of tragedy and comedy, faith and despair, loss and regeneration. In a world where the improbable becomes the gospel truth, according to Leo Bebb, it is quite fitting that Buechner parades a series of dreams and visions before the reader, ranging from Christ in the trappings of Don Giovanni, to the suburban schoolteacher Antonio Parr receiving enlightenment in the Indian happy huntingground.

Themes

The themes that frequent the novels of Frederick Buechner are directly related to the values expressed in his sermons and theological works. Buechner, an ordained Presbyterian minister, was educated at Union Theological Seminary. As a seminarian, he studied under James Muilenberg, a popular interpreter of the Old Testament prophets. He was also influenced by the work of several renowned figures in the history of Protestant theology. In Kierkegaard, Buechner read of the crisis of meaning in human life that could lead to an encounter with God.

From Swiss theologian Karl Barth, Buechner learned to emphasize Christianity as a unique purveyor of truth and the importance of God's grace as the source of salvation for men and women. Paul Johannes Tillich provided Buechner with the conviction that sin is a consequence of the attitudes and behavior men and women exhibit in personal relationships.

The Book of Bebb enables Buechner to explore not only the reality of these theological beliefs but also the concept that life consists of elements of comedy, tragedy and the fairy tale. The man who feels alienated within himself, from others and from God, may also feel the touch of divine grace unexpectedly breaking into his life and transforming that life into one of hope and creativity. The reality of sin as a force that inhibits the growth of men, destroying their potential and resulting in dire consequences for those who are closest to them, is also an important theme in The Book of Bebb. Thus, for Buechner, the view of another famous preacher, John Donne, serves as a central truth: "No Man is an Island."

Buechner brings the central characters into a series of events which change their understanding of themselves and others. Especially, the characters' evaluation of their own moral fiber and others' righteousness constantly needs readjustment. At the beginning of Lion Country, the narrator Antonio Parr journeys forth on a self-righteous pilgrimage to unmask itinerant preacher Leo Bebb as a fraud. Although by the end of Treasure Hunt (the last volume of The Book of Bebb) Parr finds ample evidence that Leo Bebb has human flaws, he learns to appreciate Bebb's courage and concern for others as virtues he has lacked in his own life.

The theme of death recurs throughout The Book of Bebb, especially in the second book of the series, Open Heart.

Here, Antonio Parr learns to accept the death of his sister Miriam. Bebb comes to terms with the death of his wealthy Indian supporter Herman Redpath and the disappearance of his wife, Lucille, who commits suicide. For Bebb, death is not the ultimate evil. It is "waste . . .

life wasted." Gertrude Conover, a wealthy widow who believes in reincarnation, interprets death not as an end but as an opportunity for a new beginning. At the end of



Treasure Hunt, the final novel in this series, belief that Bebb has overcome death and been reincarnated enables his family and followers to release themselves from the past and face the future.

The allusion to reincarnation serves as a means of calling attention to a major theme in *The Book of Bebb*; namely, that change is a constant in human life. Undergoing different experiences and reaching a more truthful understanding of their own identities and those of others cannot help but bring about a series of transformations in the beliefs human beings accept and the roles they choose to play in society.

Bebb is clearly an embodiment of change. He is a sinner and a saint, an ex-convict and a defender of traditional morality. Three times in *The Book of Bebb*, the itinerant evangelist seeks to settle down in a more permanent ministry but a series of events prods him forcefully to move on.

The Book of Bebb is much concerned about the relation of honesty and tolerance. The characters find that life flourishes only when they are able to take a realistic look at themselves and others.

They learn the importance of tempering honesty with compassion. Bebb, for example, views Brownie's homosexuality with disfavor but does not sever his relationship with him. Brownie continues as Bebb's assistant at the Church of the Holy Love. Although Gertrude Conover's theosophy is not compatible with Bebb's fundamentalist Christian beliefs, he continues as her companion.

In Buechner's hierarchy of values, however, the virtue of forgiveness has a greatness that surpasses tolerance.

Antonio Parr is able to forgive his wife Sharon and his nephew Anthony for their adulterous liaison. He returns home, willingly accepting a daughter who might be a product of Anthony and Sharon's relationship as his own child to raise and support. In the final pages of *Treasure Hunt*, the often vilified, long-suffering wife of Babe, Leo Bebb's twin brother, serves as an example of accepting the darkest truth about others and practicing forgiveness and compassion in spite of all. When Babe Bebb is unmasked and driven from the family home, his wife Bert insists on accompanying him in his exile.

The introduction of Leo Bebb's evil twin Babe in *Treasure Hunt* serves to illuminate a theme which recurs frequently in Buechner's writings. In sermons and novels, Buechner asserts that the presence of evil in the world is real and ongoing. The battle between good and evil is not a myth but a reality, shaping human destiny. Perhaps the greatest evil of all is the inability of men and women to forgive themselves which can lead to the destruction of themselves and others. It is Brownie's failure to accept the wavering of his faith and forgive himself for it that leads to his demise. Lucille Bebb's guilt leads her to retreat from life. Her selfdestruction which first takes the form of alcoholism culminates in suicide.



For Buechner, self-destruction is an evil but self-sacrifice is the highest form of good. Bebb's final flight over Princeton in *Love Feast* is not seen as a form of suicide but as an exuberant, daring expression of his need to risk all in order to bring enlightenment, as he sees it, to others. Gertrude Conover, Bebb's companion explains in terms of her own oriental philosophy, that the roaming preacher's capacity for unswerving service to others marks him as a being of the highest order. She refers to him as a "bodhisattva," in Buddhist belief, an enlightened being who refuses to remain in paradise. The bodhisattva's concern for the enlightenment of the entire human race is such that he will return to the earth again and again until everyone is liberated from his illusions and destructive tendencies.

The *Book of Bebb* is a comic and tragic, profound and slapstick exhortation that life is most richly lived in community with others and in a spirit of compassion. As in *The Alphabet of Grace* (1970), an autobiographical work, *The Book of Bebb* illustrates that the richness of human life and the presence of God's grace are often revealed in the ordinary, intimate moments of the daily round of activities. In a childishly scrawled, misspelled "Welcome Home" sign that Antonio Parr finds at the end of his travels in *Treasure Hunt*, he glimpses the glory of being a member of the human race. He finds purpose among those he knows and by whom he is known: ". . . to come back again to make amends if I can, to make peace, to make love when I can."

Literary Precedents

Among the sources of inspiration for Buechner's novels are the Oz books of L. Frank Baum, C. S. Lewis's *Surprised By Joy* (1955) and fantasies, and the character of the "whiskey priest" in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940). *The Entrance to Porlock* (1970) contains modern, adult versions of Dorothy, the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Wizard. It is, however, Baum's character of King Rinkitink, an ostensibly foolish man with great reserves of integrity and strength, which has haunted Buechner's imagination for many years. Buechner notes the "Rinkitink" personality in other literary figures such as Samuel Pickwick of Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837); the mysterious Sunday of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908); and the aforementioned whiskey priest of Graham Greene, a cleric who is flawed himself but nonetheless dispenses grace to others. The Rinkitink/whiskey priest character was clearly an influence upon Buechner when he was drawing the characters of Leo Bebb and Godric.

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