Brazzaville Teen-ager Study Guide

Brazzaville Teen-ager by Bruce Jay Friedman

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Introduction

Bruce Jay Friedman's "Brazzaville Teen-ager" was first published in the author's 1966 short-story collection, *Black Angels.* "Brazzaville Teen-ager" differs from most of Friedman's works, which emphasize the Jewishness of their characters. In this story, the ethnicity of the protagonist, Gunther, as well as of the other characters, remains undefined. Most of Friedman's fiction, including this story, has been characterized as black humor, a twentieth century term coined by Friedman himself. Black comedies tend to involve neurotic, inept characters in modern settings, where they face comic and often absurd predicaments. In "Brazzaville Teen-ager," Gunther, a young man who is unable to communicate with his stoic father, feels he has a chance to break this communication barrier when his father gets seriously ill. Gunther believes that if he performs an illogical, embarrassing act - in this case, getting his boss to sing backup for a doo-wop band - it will help his father recover.

The doo-wop band was one of many forms of popular music in the 1960s, which also included the Motown sound, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll. The 1960s was also a serious era, as the United States became increasingly involved in Vietnam. The story mentions one such conflict, in the doo-wop song, "Brazzaville Teen-ager," where a teen accompanies his father into the war-torn Republic of Congo. Gunther's efforts to reconnect with his father ultimately fail, leading some critics to believe that the story is pointless. Friedman does use the story to explore the ideas of miscommunication, fear, and irrationality, and seems to imply that serious situations cannot be solved through frivolous solutions. The story can be found in the paperback version of *The Collected Short Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman,* which was published by Grove Press in 1997.

Author Biography

Friedman was born in New York City on April 26, 1930, and grew up in the Bronx. He wrote a column for his high school newspaper, which sparked his interest in writing. In 1951, he graduated from the University of Missouri with a bachelor's degree in journalism, then joined the United States Air Force. As an officer, he worked as a correspondent, feature writer, and photographer for the Air Force magazine, *Air Training.* He also wrote his first two short stories, including "Wonderful Golden Rule Days," which was his first story published in a commercial periodical. In 1954, a year after he left the military, Friedman began working for Magazine Management Company in New York, where he eventually became editor for three men's magazines. In 1962, Friedman published his first novel, *Stern,* which was a critical - if not popular - success. The next year, Friedman published *Far from the City of Class and Other Stories,* which collected ten years of his short stories, including the two he wrote while in the Air Force. In 1966, he published his second short story collection, *Black Angels,* which included the story "Brazzaville Teen-ager."

Besides his novels and short stories, Friedman has been successful in many other types of writing. In 1968, he wrote his first play, *Scuba Duba: A Tense Comedy,* which was a smash hit Off-Broadway that ran for two years. In 1978, Friedman published his first book of nonfiction essays, *The Lonely Guy's Book of Life.* The book was adapted into the film The Lonely Guy in 1984 and became a cult favorite. In addition to his own works that have been adapted, Friedman has also written original screenplays, including *Stir Crazy* (1980). His recent works include a novel, *A Father's Kisses* (1996), and two nonfiction works: *The Slightly Older Guy* (1995) and *Even the Rhinos Were Nymphos: Best Nonfiction* (2000). Friedman currently lives and works in New York.

Plot Summary

Friedman's "Brazzaville Teen-ager" begins with an introduction of Gunther, a young man who has always expected that his father would open up to him only in dire circumstances. When his father gets sick with an unknown, potentially fatal disease and is confined in a hospital harness, Gunther puts this theory to the test. However, as always, his father is very stoic, giving indifferent, unemotional answers to all of Gunther's questions, even those concerning the prospect of his death. Gunther leaves and decides that he can help his father recover if he does something outrageous, an embarrassing act that will sacrifice Gunther's self-esteem. Gunther goes in to work the next day and confronts his boss, Hartman, of whom he is terrified. Gunther explains that his dad is ill and says that if his boss will sing backup for a doo-wop band, for a new single that is about to be recorded, it will help Gunther's father get better. Hartman is understandably confused at Gunther's logic and kicks him out of his office.

That night, Gunther is driving around Manhattan and finds himself driving out to Hartman's estate, where he interrupts a dinner. Hartman takes Gunther into a side room, where Gunther pleads with his boss again to do the backup singing. Hartman's wife interrupts them and convinces her husband to help Gunther. The next day, Gunther uses his lunch hour to talk to Conrad Jaggers, a young record company president whom Gunther had met in a bar. Gunther convinces Jaggers to let Hartman be a backup singer on "Brazzaville Teenager," a new single that Jaggers had mentioned over drinks. Later that day, Hartman shows up to do the backup singing, and Jaggers asks him to try to sing like a little boy. Despite this potentially humiliating experience, Hartman admits on the ride back that he enjoyed himself somewhat. Gunther sees a man flipping pancakes in a restaurant window and convinces an initially unwilling Hartman to flip a round of pancakes. Gunther thinks this extra insurance will definitely help his father get better. Gunther's father does get better, but he is as stoic as ever. Gunther helps his father back to his apartment, where he tries and fails to start a serious conversation. After Gunther has seen his father safely into his apartment, he starts taking the elevator down to the lobby. He stops the elevator and screams up at his father, frustrated that even his embarrassing acts did not break the communication barrier between him and his father.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Brazzaville Teen-ager opens with a third person narrator that describes a young man named Gunther. Gunther is sitting at his father's deathbed. The story is set in Manhattan, and the introduction takes place in a hospital. The narrator notes that he expected the event to play out differently it has. He expected Gunther's father to confess to his secrets, such as his philosophy, his sexual history, and how much money he really has. Gunther's father is held up by netting and a series of harnesses. Two week earlier, his father's body collapsed into itself, causing pinched nerves. For this reason, Gunther's father's body has to be stretched out indefinitely.

As Gunther leans over his father's bed, he asks him how he feels. His father replies that "it's no picnic," and he thinks his young caretakers don't know what they are doing. Gunther wants to share in his father's secrets, but he is afraid to ask him the questions on his mind. Instead, he tries to reassure his father by telling him that he will be out of the hospital in no time. His father worries that he will die, because his doctors don't know enough about the ailment that is causing his illness.

Later that night, after Gunther has left the hospital, he thinks about his father's enlarged knuckles. His thinness and the contraptions he is forced into do not worry him as much. He sees the enlarged knuckles as a sign that his father will not recover. Gunther tries to think of ways to bring his father back to health. He believes that if he can discover a way to embarrass himself, then his father will get better. He figures out a plan, but as soon as it is in his mind he hesitates, wishing he had not thought of it.

The next day at work, Gunther is called into his boss' office. Gunther is a voucher clerk, and his boss, Hartman, is a highly intimidating man. Hartman is described as tall with grey hair and steady, "bomber-pilot" eyes. Although Hartman has never scolded Gunther, Gunther is afraid of him. Gunther makes a habit of coming to work an hour early each morning to ensure he is on time and avoid a confrontation with his boss. Before Hartman has a chance to speak, Gunther explains that his father is deathly ill and needs a favor in order to recover. Gunther explains that the only thing that would save his father to hear the boss sing back-up, while the music group Little Sigmund and the Flipouts make a recording of the song "Brazzaville Teen-ager."

Gunther's boss responds to him calmly, saying that he doesn't understand what the request is. Gunther elaborates, explaining that the song is about a boy whose father is a mercenary. The boy's father gets sent to the Congo. When the boy moves to the Congo with his father, he writes letters back to his girlfriend in the United States, telling her he remembers holding hands and surfing, but now he is stuck in Brazzaville. Gunther explains that the group who will be recording this song is new. Their only other recording is a song called, "Berlin Wall Teen-ager." He tells Hartman that if these recordings succeed, the group will make a full album with the theme of teenagers who

reside in different troubled areas of the world. He reassures Hartman that he will only have to be involved in the one recording.

Hartman still doesn't understand what Gunther is talking about. He asks what this has to do with Gunther's sick father. Gunther says he cannot explain it, but assures his boss that this scheme is the only thing that will help. Hartman asks Gunther to leave his office and pretend he never gave that speech, adding that he will try to forget it, too. In spite of this response, Gunther is glad that he asked. He figures if he can get through that, then he can do anything.

After work, Gunther drives aimlessly around Manhattan. He has no reason to have a car in the city. In order to justify the expense, he often drives around for no reason. Gunther drives to Westchester to his boss' house, the Hartman estate. The estate reveals Hartman's immense wealth. Gunther remembers hearing stories that brothers-in-law and other connected individuals lived in the cabins on the estate grounds. He tries to see the cabins but can't make them out. Gunther exits his car and goes up to the main house, where he is escorted into the dinning room. Hartman, his wife, and some guests are finishing dinner. Hartman acknowledges Gunther and ushers him into another room. Once again, Gunther pleads with his boss to record the song. Hartman's wife overhears them and urges her husband to help his distraught employee. Hartman finally agrees to help, and Gunther thanks him and his wife.

At a recording studio, Gunther waits in the penthouse office of Conrad Jaggers, the young president of Dirty Bird recordings. Gunther met Jaggers at a bar the week before. It was during this initial meeting that Jaggers told Gunther about Little Sigmund and the Flipouts and their intended recordings. Gunther explains that his father is dying and tells Jaggers about the plan he has devised that warrants his help. Conrad agrees to help him and tells him that "Brazzaville Teen-ager" is being recorded in the afternoon. Gunther returns to the recording studio with Hartman later that day. Conrad asks Hartman to try to sing falsetto.

After the recording is complete, Gunther drives Hartman home. He thanks him again and says he hopes that the favor wasn't too much of an inconvenience. As Gunther continues to drive, he begins to sweat. He hopes that he is not cracking up, but he is unsure of himself. Gunther spots a restaurant where he can see cooks flipping pancakes in the window. He pulls the car over and rushes to open Hartman's door. He pleads with this boss to come inside the restaurant with him. Gunther tells Hartman that he just realized he needs one more favour for his father to recover. Hartman needs to flip flapjacks at the restaurant. Hartman at first says no, that he has suffered enough humiliation for one day. Finally, Hartman says he will do it, but he is only doing it for his wife, because she wanted him to help. The two men walk into the restaurant and Gunther leads his boss to the cooking area. Gunther offers the chef fifty dollars to let his boss flip the next batch of pancakes. The chef asks if this is a publicity stunt, but Gunther doesn't answer him.

A week later, Gunther arrives at the hospital to help his father, who is being released, to collect his belongings. His father has re-gained some weight, and the color has returned

to his cheeks. Gunther drives his father home. Once they are near his apartment, Gunther realizes how much he wants his father to talk to him and disclose his thoughts. Gunther begins to speak, but he stops himself. His father notices and remarks that he thought Gunther wanted something from him, but he must be incorrect. Gunther pulls up in front of his father's apartment and helps him in. He stays for half an hour, while his father gets settled. Afterward, while Gunther is in the elevator, he presses the emergency button while he is midway between floors. He yells up the elevator shaft, "You son of a bitch, do you know what I had to go through to get you on your goddammed feet?"

Analysis

Brazzaville Teen-ager by Bruce Jay Friedman is a story about a young man who struggles to communicate with his dying father. Gunther, the story's protagonist, hopes to cure his father by convincing his boss to sing back-up for a music group, during the recording of a song called "Brazzaville Teen-ager." Although this act, in itself, seems to have no connection to the father's illness, Gunther's confrontation with his boss is a vicarious address to his father. Gunther is equally intimated by both men, and by embarrassing himself in front of his boss, Gunther attempts to prepare himself to ask his father some personal questions.

Early in the story, the narrator states that Gunther is so fearful of his boss that he comes to work an hour early each day. This is evidence of Gunther's compulsiveness and deep need for approval. Again, it links Gunther's boss Gunther's father. It also foreshadows the bizarre and outrageous requests that Gunther will make of his boss later on in the story.

Gunther's father doesn't confess anything in the story, which foreshadows that he will not really die. The further relevance of this is the fact that his father's death is the only thing that would bring Gunther to face his fear and try to communicate with him. Of course, when his father recovers, Gunther is unable to muster up the courage to ask him any questions.

The fact that the author never states what is making the father sick helps make believable Gunther's strange logic. The mystery ailment seems to condone Gunther's nonsensical remedy. If an illness had been explicitly described, Gunther's treatment would be merely bizarre. Of course, the treatment that Gunther comes up with is not literally believable. It is more a symbolic gesture than anything else. Nevertheless, by withholding an explanation of the father's illness, the flow of the narrative is not disrupted.

At the end of the story, Gunther is resentful that his father doesn't acknowledge what he went through to guarantee his recovery. This ironic turn is a symbol indicating that the lack of communication will prevail in their relationship. Gunther's actions are unknown to his father, making Gunther's journey one of solitude. This represents that, even as Gunther tries to save his father's life, they are still separated.

Characters

Gunther

Gunther is a young man who assumes that either his father's potentially fatal disease or Gunther's attempts to help him cure it will finally get his stoic father to open up to him. Unfortunately, neither assumption is correct. Gunther has long hoped that he could find a way to get his father to talk to him about life and has daydreamed that it might happen on his father's deathbed. However, when he visits his suffering father in the hospital, his father is still nonchalant about everything, even about the immense pain he is suffering and what appears to be his impending death. Gunther thinks that if he overcomes his fears and does something illogical and potentially harmful, his sacrifice might help his father get better. As a result, Gunther asks his boss, of whom he is terrified, to be a backup singer on a doo-wop record. After convincing his boss to do this, he also asks him to flip some pancakes at a restaurant. Following these acts, Gunther's father gets better, but he is as stoic as ever, and the two remain distant in their communications.

Gunther's Father

Gunther's father is struck with an unknown, possibly fatal disease that keeps him in the hospital for weeks. Even this affliction is not enough to change his trademark stoicism.

Mr. Hartman

Hartman is Gunther's boss. He is a man whose calm, steady gaze inspires fear in his employees, including Gunther. Hartman goes along with Gunther's crazy request to sing backup for a fledgling doo-wop band's new single. Against his better judgment, he also agrees to flip some pancakes in a restaurant.

Hartman's Wife

Hartman's wife encourages her husband to go along with Gunther's crazy stunts.

Conrad Jaggers

Conrad Jaggers is a young record company president who meets Gunther in a bar, where he tells him about the "Brazzaville Teen-ager" recording. Gunther convinces Jaggers to include Hartman as one of the backup singers for the record.

Themes

Communication

In the story, Friedman explores the idea of communication in both personal and professional relationships. Gunther's father is very stoic, refusing to open up about how he is really feeling even when he is potentially on his deathbed. When Gunther visits his father in the hospital and asks how he is feeling, his father says simply, "It's no picnic." Gunther knows that his father is in excruciating pain, yet this is all his father says. For Gunther's father, this lack of communication appears to be a lifestyle choice. This is frustrating for Gunther, who wants to communicate with his father but does not know how to ask his father anything other than everyday questions. Gunther's father is not the only person Gunther has trouble communicating with, however. When Gunther is speaking to his boss, he tells his boss about this lifelong communication barrier between Gunther and his father, which also underscores the difficulty that Gunther has communicating with his boss. "Hell, I've talked more intimately with you, Mr. Hartman, and you know how I've kept my distance in the last eight years." The only time in the story that Gunther is able to let his guard down and really communicate with somebody else is when alcohol is involved. He meets Conrad Jaggers at a bar, and they strike up a great, relaxed conversation. When Gunther goes to visit Jaggers in his busy office, the atmosphere is changed, and Gunther realizes that it will be difficult "to get back on the footing they had so quickly established at the bar, three in the morning, two fellows drifting quickly into a kind of cabaret intimacy."

Illogic

When Gunther is searching for a way to help his father get better, he seizes on a highly illogical idea. Gunther believes that if he "were to debase himself, to do something painful beyond belief, the most embarrassing act he could imagine, only then would his dad recover." This is not a very rational idea, something that Gunther himself admits to Hartman after he explains his plan, asking "Can we forget the logic part for just a second?" Hartman ends up going along with Gunther's absurd plan, which ultimately consists of Hartman performing two acts: singing backup for a doo-wop band and flipping a round of pancakes in a restaurant window. Gunther's illogical beliefs are not just limited to his father's situation. At one point, the narrator notes the following about another one of Gunther's quirks: "For no special reason, he owned a car in the city and had to pay a huge monthly garage bill for it. To get his money's worth, he took it out for pointless drives at night."

Fear

Most of the characters in the story appear to have little or no fear, while they inspire fear in Gunther in some way. Gunther's father is depicted as the ultimate tough guy,

somebody with a "lifelong cool" who does not even express fear over what looks like his upcoming death. He states: "To tell you the truth, I think I'm finished." Gunther is so afraid of his father that, in the hospital, before he asks his father how he is feeling, "Gunther pulled up a chair, not too close." Gunther is afraid to get close to his father, even when his father is stretched out in an elaborate hospital contraption. In fact, Gunther thinks that if his father knew about the obscene questions Gunther wanted to ask him, "his father would somehow get out of the contraptions and smack him in the mouth." Hartman also appears to have no fears. He bravely sings his part in the doo-wop recording and flips the pancakes without expressing any fear or anxiety over performing these unfamiliar acts. On the other hand, Gunther, like most of Hartman's employees, "feared the man." Gunther comes "to work an hour early each morning so there would be no chance of a time clock slip up." Even Hartman's "calm reaction" after Gunther's absurd request sends "Gunther into panic." While Gunther overcomes his fears of his boss by begging him to fulfill Gunther's illogical request, Gunther never does overcome his fear of his father. In fact, at the end of the story, he attempts to get his father to open up but says only, "Dad." When Gunther's dad turns around "suddenly as though he had guessed Gunther's dirty thoughts and might throw a decrepit punch," Gunther drops his question, afraid to continue.

Style

Black Humor

Friedman himself is credited with coining the term black humor, which has evolved into a genre in which most of his fiction works are categorized. That said, however, most acknowledge that this is an ambiguous genre. Even Friedman refuses to clarify what a black comedy does or should contain. Still, black comedies share at least a few similar characteristics. They generally take place in a modern setting, like the New York setting in the story. The settings of many black comedies also have nightmarish qualities. The only such setting in the story is the African conflict in Brazzaville, which is not given much prominence, at least on the surface. Black comedies often feature frustrated attempts at communication, like Gunther's attempts to speak to his father in the story. Often, black comedies feature predicaments that are absurd, like Gunther's plan to save his father by having his boss sing backup for a doo-wop band. Finally, they often feature shock endings that contradict readers' expectations. One may wonder what is so comical about these characteristics, which often lead to depressing, or at least cynical, stories. Writers of black comedies expect that their audiences will laugh at the pathetic quality of their characters and the characters' absurd actions, which ultimately tend not to lead to satisfying resolutions.

Antihero

Black comedies also tend to contain antiheroes, protagonists that have widely different, and sometimes opposite, characteristics from those associated with traditional heroes. Traditional heroes are often good, brave, and confident, while antiheroes can be evil, fearful, and neurotic, to name just a few qualities. In Gunther's case, he is not evil, but he is both fearful and neurotic. Despite these characteristics, which may seem inherently negative, some antiheroes can have redeeming qualities that help readers identify with them better. In Gunther's case, however, even his one major redeeming quality is tarnished. Gunther has absurd, illogical beliefs that inspire a reader to mock his pathetic exploits, but at first he appears to be sacrificing himself for the purpose of helping his father recover - a noble act. By the end of the story, readers realize that Gunther's real purpose is to try to get his father to open up to him about the sordid parts of his personal life. "Had he ever stolen anything? . . . What about broads? Was Mom the first he'd ever slept with? Had he ever gone to a cathouse?" Gunther is so frustrated at his inability to acquire this private information that he gets mad at his father and does not care anymore about his father's recovery.

Shock Ending

Friedman is known for his endings that deliberately shock readers in one of two ways. Either they illuminate the absurdity of the human condition through Friedman's insightful

commentary or they baffle readers through their pointlessness. "Brazzaville Teen-ager" is an example of the latter type. Throughout the story, readers are exposed to Gunther's illogical ideas and actions, which leave little hope that they will do any good in healing his father's inexplicable and probably fatal disease. However, near the end, readers get a surprise when they find out that Gunther's father is recovering: "A week later, Gunther arrived at the hospital to help his father pack." The narrator goes on to describe Gunther's father's improved condition, saying that "color had appeared in his cheeks and he had put on a few pounds." At this point, the reader might expect that Gunther's crazy plan worked and that he and his father are finally going to reconcile. This is where Friedman introduces the shock. The communication barrier still holds between the two men, and Gunther has not gained enough confidence through his illogically brave acts to even try to break through it. The story ends on a baffling note. Gunther helps his father to his apartment, then waits until he is out of earshot before yelling at his father for not acknowledging the sacrifices Gunther had to make to help him get better.

Historical Context

Rock and Roll

In the story, Gunther convinces his boss to be a backup singer for a doo-wop band. In the 1960s, doo-wop was just one of many popular music styles that dominated the social scene. This pop-music phenomenon began with the introduction of rock and roll in the mid-1950s. Rock and roll had its roots in country music and rhythm and blues, and its first practitioners were African-American vocal groups that incorporated gospel-style harmonies. However, in such a racially segregated culture, most large record companies, owned and operated by whites, initially shunned rock and roll as an African-American fad. This changed with the immense popularity of Elvis Presley, a white singer from Tupelo, Mississippi. Presley's energetic voice, use of many vocal styles, and overt sexuality quickly won over ostensibly repressed white teens - much to the chagrin of parents and religious groups. Since Presley's voice had an African-American quality to it, white fans also started to buy more records by African-American rock-and-roll musicians, and the racial lines of music began to blur.

Doo-Wop

Like most popular music in this era, doo-wop was a combination of styles, in this case rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Doo-wop songs featured a lead singer with a group of backup singers, who made the sounds that gave the music its name. In addition, the lyrics themselves often featured a detailed narrative, telling a story that generally had to do with love. Doo-wop began in the 1950s in urban areas, where many young African-American singers could not afford the musical instruments used in other types of popular music. Doo-wop songs placed the emphasis on vocal harmony, so they required little or no instrumental accompaniment. This cut production costs, which allowed many small record companies to produce doo-wop records.

The Motown Sound

One of the biggest success stories of this era was Motown Records, which was founded in a Detroit basement in 1959 by Berry Gordy, Jr., a professional boxer turned record-store owner. The company eventually grew to become the largest African-American owned company in the United States. The name, "Motown," a shortened version of motor town - after Detroit's nickname, the Motor City - eventually expanded to encompass any song or musical act that embodied the qualities of those at Motown Records. The Motown sound, like doo-wop, generally consisted of a lead singer with a harmonizing backup group. In fact, doo-wop was one of several musical styles incorporated into the Motown sound, which also borrowed from rock and roll, rhythm and blues, gospel, and jazz. Unlike doo-wop, Motown music generally featured a full orchestral accompaniment. Motown achieved success early in the 1960s as a result of

Gordy's high standards, connections to talented African-American songwriters like Smokey Robinson, a talented pool of singers such as Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, and Gordy's unerring ability to pick hit songs.

The Beatles and the British Invasion

One of the biggest stories in popular music in the twentieth century was the Beatles, a group of four musicians from Liverpool, England. In 1964, they made their debut in the United States with eleven hit songs - six of which reached number one on the charts - and a film, *A Hard Day's Night.* The music of the Beatles borrowed from the conventions of rhythm and blues to create their unique style of positive, catchy rock and roll. The Beatles' extreme popularity, known as Beatlemania, led the way for other British bands, including the Rolling Stones, in a cultural phenomenon known as the British Invasion.

Critical Overview

Not much has been written specifically about "Brazzaville Teen-ager." In her 2001 entry on Friedman for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Brandy Brown Walker notes Gunther's wild attempts to save his father's life, but says that the illogic of Gunther's "reasoning is typical of Friedman's non-sequitur stories" and that the story's ending is "rather anticlimactic and as pointless as the stunts themselves." On the other hand, in his 1973 article for *Studies in Short Fiction,* Stuart Lewis takes the story seriously and analyzes Friedman's ritualistic use of the "doo-wahs' and 'yeh, yeh, yehs" as a "magic chant," like those found in traditional rituals.

Despite the lack of specific criticism on the story, it does share characteristics with other Friedman works, so many general critiques apply. For example, in her 1978 entry on Friedman for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Karen Rood says the following about Friedman's protagonists: "As losers who try to cast themselves as movie versions of romantic heroes, they seek the solutions to their problems in dramatic, simple, often physical acts." Rood also notes that "personal relationships within his family are especially sterile. His father is incapable of imparting manly wisdom, talking instead of such simple matters as his daily routine." Likewise, in his 1997 review of *The Collected Short Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman for Studies in Short Fiction,* Sanford Pinsker notes that "Friedman's characters are born losers, as nervous as they are neurotic."

Walker says that *Black Angels,* the collection in which the story first appeared, "exemplifies Friedman's trademark style of black humor, including themes of frustrated human communication and shock endings that twist reader expectations and thwart any resolution for characters within the story." In his assessment of the collection for the Winter 1966-67 issue of the *Hudson Review,* J. Mitchell Morse praises the work, but not as a literary endeavor. Says Morse: "Friedman doesn't aim high. He fully achieves his low ambition. He isn't satirizing . . . anything . . . he's just being generally contemptuous." Thirty years later, in his 1995 review of *The Collected Short Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman* for *Booklist,* Brad Hooper also praises Friedman's short stories as popular fiction. Says Hooper: "Readers who feel short stories are too high-flown - too literary, arcane, and serious - will find counterbalance in Friedman." However, David Gates disagrees. In his 1995 review of the collection for *Newsweek,* Gates notes: "The return to print of some of Friedman's best work is a bona fide literary event." Gates sees literary merit in many of the stories, which deal with "shame, anxiety, self-delusion and miscommunication."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette investigates and denounces the general assumption that the static endings of stories like Friedman's are pointless.

Many of Friedman's works have a reputation of being silly, absurd, and sometimes pointless. At first glance, "Brazzaville Teen-ager" seems to lack a point as well. Gunther chooses absurd and self-destructive ways of helping his father get well and healing their relationship. In the end, while his father does get better, they remain as distant as ever, and Gunther ends the story frustrated. As Brandy Brown Walker notes in her entry on Friedman for *Dictionary of Literary Biography:* "The ending. . . . is not a triumphant celebration of how irrational behavior that risks sacrificial self-destruction can result in happiness and fulfillment, but rather anticlimactic and as pointless as the stunts themselves." Although not much has been written about this specific story, many critics seem comfortable placing the majority of Friedman's works into one of two categories, both of which use a shock ending that either makes a profound statement or baffles the reader with its pointlessness. While the static ending of "Brazzaville Teen-ager" does seem at first to be pointless, there is a method to Friedman's madness. By examining Friedman's juxtaposition of serious and frivolous ideas and situations, readers can grasp his intended message.

"Brazzaville Teen-ager" is a story told in pairs. Throughout the story, Friedman juxtaposes serious ideas and situations with frivolous counterparts, bouncing back and forth between the two extremes. In the beginning, Gunther notes his long-held romantic notion that the communication barrier between his father would be broken on his father's deathbed. In Gunther's mind, the fantasy plays out like this:

. . . he and his father would clutch at each other in a sicklied fusion of sweetness and truth, the older man dropping his lifelong cool, finally spilling the beans, telling Gunther what it was all about.

When envisioning this fantasy, one can almost hear the rising swell of a background orchestra, as if this is a climactic scene in a movie. Indeed, as Karen Rood notes of Friedman's protagonists in her entry on the author for *Dictionary of Literary Biography:* "As losers who try to cast themselves as movie versions of romantic heroes, they seek the solutions to their problems in dramatic, simple, often physical acts." However, the next scene cuts through the romance of this fantasy with a gritty, realistic portrait of suffering and potential death. "Two weeks before, the old man had suddenly collapsed into himself, accordion-style, pinching off nerves. Undreamed of pain. A classic new high. He had to be kept stretched out indefinitely." The doctors are unsure what has caused this affliction, but as Gunther's father says: "It's bad, very bad. It's one of those things where they don't know. . . . To tell you the truth, I think I'm finished."

Gunther notes his father's deteriorating condition, and he stops for a moment, reflecting on the seriousness of the situation. He knows that there are practical methods of

helping his father recover but is alarmed by his father's swollen knuckles: "there were force-feedings. You could get back the weight. The knuckles were the tip-off, though. Once knuckles got out of hand, you were washed up." Faced with his father's impending death, Gunther forms a plan that he hopes will cure his father. At the same time, as Walker notes, Gunther's ultimate goal seems to be to break the communication barrier between the two men. In any case, like Gunther's romantic deathbed fantasy, this new idea is frivolous. After Gunther leaves the hospital, "the idea came to him that only if he, Gunther, were to debase himself, to do something painful beyond belief, the most embarrassing act he could imagine, only then would his dad recover."

Within this illogical plan, Gunther takes his frivolous notions a step further by picking a trivial vehicle for his plan - a doo-wop song. He feels that if he can get his boss - of whom he is terrified - to sing the background "doo-wah, doo-wahs and the second-chorus yeh, yeh, yehs," he will have tipped the cosmic scale in his father's favor. However, while 1960s doo-wop songs in general tended to be romantic and frivolous, this particular song, "Brazzaville Teen-ager," touches on a very serious topic: "It's about a young boy whose father is a mercenary and gets sent to the Congo." In 1960, six years before Friedman wrote this story, the area that is now known as the Republic of Congo received its independence from its European colonizers. As Martin Gilbert says in his book, *A History of the Twentieth Century, Vol. 3, 1952-1999:* "The transfer of power was accompanied by violent attacks by units of the Congolese army on Europeans, including rape, and looting." Gilbert notes that in the following years, the situation only got worse: "The struggles for power in the Congo, and the disruption caused by civil war, led to famine on a scale that horrified the United Nations observers sent in to advise."

Yet the fictional song "Brazzaville Teen-ager" does not explore or comment on these horrors. Instead, the song uses the tragic situation only as a platform for launching a plaintive love ballad. While the teenager is with his father in the Congo, he "writes this letter back to his girl in the States, talking about how great it was surfing and holding hands and now here he is in Brazzaville." In *Studies in Short Fiction,* Stuart Lewis notes the song's "commercialization and vulgarization" of this serious conflict. In fact, as Gunther notes to his boss, Hartman: "If this goes, the idea is to come up with an album of teen-agers at the world's trouble spots."

The actual recording of the song also introduces a situation that is both serious and frivolous. Conrad Jaggers is the president of a small but successful record company, which is planning on recording "Brazzaville Teen-ager" a week after Jaggers tells Gunther about it in a bar. The recording industry, then and now, is a highly competitive, cutthroat business, and the choice of singers - even backup singers - is a serious matter. If someone has the wrong type of voice, it can throw off the recording. This is especially true in a doo-wop band, which emphasizes harmony. Despite this fact, Gunther expects Jaggers to let Hartman, an unknown, sing backup, potentially creating a bad recording, just because Jaggers enjoyed talking to Gunther at the bar. This is a frivolous expectation, one that is fulfilled by Jaggers's own frivolous decision-making behavior. Jaggers puts "his head on the table," says "Yogi," and then meditates for thirty

seconds before giving his answer. "'Done,' he said. 'Like you say, two guys at a bar, one asks the other a favor. Operate that way and you never go wrong.'"

Even Gunther's expectations of his father touch on both serious and frivolous ideas. Gunther is desperate to have his father open up to him, which is a serious issue of communication, one faced by many parents and their children. However, for the most part, the type of knowledge that Gunther desires is not his dad's serious "philosophy" on life, as Gunther briefly claims in the beginning. Instead, what he really wants to know is extremely private information about his father's life, "stories of extramarital rascality, the straight dope on how much dough he had to the penny, was Mom any good in the hay." In addition to Gunther's desire for this trivial, and in many cases lewd, information, Gunther's anger at his father is also frivolous. At the end of the story, he leaves his father in his apartment, unable to ask the questions he wants to ask. As he is riding the elevator "he pulled the emergency switch and screamed up the shaft, 'You son of a b---, do you know what I had to go through to get you on your g--- feet?" The fact is, his father does not know, because Gunther has neglected to tell him. Even though Gunther's acts appear absurd to most people and may not have been the reason that his father got better, Gunther's actions do require a sacrifice on his part. Had he told his father about how he conquered his fears, his father might have appreciated his son's heartfelt, if misguided, attempts to save him. However, since Gunther lives in a romantic world, he does not want to have to tell his father; he just wants his illogical plan to magically work - like it might in a movie.

In the end, the juxtapositions of serious and frivolous ideas and situations and the static ending have a greater purpose than just unsettling the reader; they underscore a trend in 1960s society. Like Gunther, the Brazzaville teenager in the song is unable to free himself from his romantic notions long enough to properly assess the serious situation going on around him. By juxtaposing these two frivolous characters in their respective serious situations, Friedman is noting the effect of 1960s popular culture on young people who have been bombarded by romantic examples of how to solve problematic situations. Says Rood:

Friedman's protagonists try to deal with the complexities of modern, urban society, not with the full force of their intellectual and emotional powers, but by playing oversimplified roles which the mass media have foisted upon them.

In the 1960s, when the story was written, teenagers had to face many complex and serious issues. These included one of the biggest and most publicized stories of the decade, the bloody war in Vietnam - which is only hinted at in the story by the struggle in Brazzaville. However, as the ending of the story indicates, those who try to solve these serious problems through frivolous means only end up frustrated. In such situations, there can be no resolution. Thus, the story itself has no resolution.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Brazzaville Teen-ager," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses what sets Friedman's story apart from most contemporary literary fiction.

One of the things that sets Bruce Jay Friedman apart from most of his contemporaries is the richness of his writing. Much current American literary fiction is minimalist, to use a neutral term, or barren, to use a not-so-neutral one. In an article in the July/August 2001 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly,* B. R. Myers wrote what many readers and at least a few critics had been thinking. Myers's article begins:

Nothing gives me the feeling of having been born several decades too late quite like the modern "literary" bestseller. Give me a time-tested masterpiece or what critics patronizingly call a fun read - *Sister Carrie* or just plain *Carrie.* Give me anything, in fact, as long as it doesn't have a recent prize jury's seal of approval on the front and a clutch of previous raves on the back. In the bookstore I'll sometimes sample what all the fuss is about, but one glance at the affected prose - "furious dabs of tulips stuttering," say, or "in the dark before the day yet was" - and I'm hightailing it to the friendly black spines of the Penguin Classics.

The article is entitled "A Reader's Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness of American Literary Prose," and it stirred up so much passionate comment that Myers has since expanded it into a book. In his long article, Myers focuses on five much-ballyhooed authors (Annie Proulx, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, and David Guterson) and uses samples of their prose to make a powerful case that the emperors and empresses of contemporary literary fiction have no clothes. (Toni Morrison and Rick Moody also receive disapproving mentions.) A writer who has a story to tell and tells it well, Myers declares, is sure to be labeled an author of mere genre fiction; to earn the rank of literary author, a writer must produce what Myers calls "self-conscious, writerly prose" that is not actually about anything.

Fans of Friedman will not be surprised to learn that his name is absent from Myers's list of literary offenders. Unlike Proulx, Guterson, and a host of others, Friedman can be counted on to write stories that are about something; stories that have content and structure, texture and depth. The short story "Brazzaville Teen-ager" is a parade example of what sets Friedman apart from - and above - his contemporaries. In less than six and one-half pages, Friedman gives readers more than some writers do in a full-length novel.

"Brazzaville Teen-ager" is not only about something, it is about something important: the relationship between father and son. More specifically, the story is about a son's desperate attempt to connect with his emotionally distant father. While not all fathers are emotionally distant, virtually all men can relate to the struggle of Gunther, the son in Friedman's story. Nearly every woman knows at least one man like Gunther. Friedman has chosen a subject with universal relevance, and he uses both humor and pathos to

remind readers that Gunther's struggle is, at least in some degree, every man's struggle. The title gives the impression that the story is about a young African, but it is not. Gunther lives in New York City. Friedman drops the names of other far-flung locales - Berlin, Nairobi, Vienna - as one way of establishing the universality of his tale. Readers understand that this story could be set in any place where there are sons and fathers.

Having begun with a significant and universal subject, Friedman uses a combination of insight and humor to communicate his perspective on it. Friedman has something specific to say about this subject, another thing that sets him apart from his peers. He does not hold himself or his readers at a distance from his subject. His tone is not arch or condescending or even coolly neutral. He has compassion for Gunther, and he wants his readers to share it. *It is so hard to be a young man desperately trying to pry wisdom and love from a father who stays resolutely shut up inside himself, Friedman seems to say. It is hysterically funny, you see, but it is also deeply moving.*

Gunther's attempts to engage his father are absurd, and there is a strong current of hysteria in the story. But, Friedman reports Gunther's ridiculous machinations as if they were the feats of Hercules. Gunther is trying so hard, and the fact that what he is trying to do is absurd does not negate his courage and perseverance. Friedman shows readers both Gunther's fear and his determination to plow ahead in spite of it. When Gunther is on the verge of giving up his quest, Friedman writes:

At least I came out with it, Gunther thought. . . . His contentment lasted only momentarily and before long, he was stifled, out of breath. Hands other than his seem to sweep the car into a U-turn and out he drove to Westchester.

Friedman's story has a subject. It has a point of view. And, he conveys these in well-crafted prose that is designed to bring readers face to face with both the comedy and the tragedy of life. Friedman uses language in a way that is fresh and inventive but never nonsensical or self-conscious. He wants readers to focus on and understand the story and what it means, and to feel the struggle of his protagonist. Describing Gunther trying to think of a way to save his father, Friedman writes, "Grimly, he shopped along the noisy streets of his mind. The instant the plan formed, he wanted to tear it from his head." This is much, much more than words strung together in an unexpected way. This is both funny and painful, because every reader knows exactly how Gunther feels, and feels for him. What human being has not, at least once, realized that he had to do a certain thing and then wished that he had never realized it? Friedman's interest here is in his character and his readers, not in calling attention to the inscrutable ways in which he can manipulate the English language, and that makes him something of a throwback.

Even the absurd elements of "Brazzaville Teenager" are profoundly comprehensible. Gunther's mission is absurd; Hartman's two performances - one in the recording studio, the other in the diner - cannot possibly cure Gunther's father. But, readers understand what this means: Any feat that any son accomplishes in an effort to connect with a closed, distant father is an exercise in absurdity, because it is destined to fail. Yet, the

effort is not to be despised. Sons will always throw themselves into such doomed missions, risking all, because they must. It is the nature of being a young, male human, and there is nothing to be done about it, any more than a salmon can alter its fate of returning to its birthplace to spawn and die. It is the way of things.

The way of things is painful and sad, but in Friedman's world, the way of things is also funny. This, too, sets him apart. While most of his literary contemporaries find life bleak and unredeemable, Friedman finds it bleak and redeemed by laughter. *Bring on the tragedies, he seems to say. Watch me turn them into comedies with a few taps on my keyboard.* And while the rest of the pack often settles its gaze on the worst bits of humanity - from the merely unsavory to the truly disturbing - Friedman prefers to find the hero in even deeply flawed characters.

The hero of "Brazzaville Teen-ager" is almost, but not quite, ruled by fear. Friedman does not hide or minimize the fear; readers see it in Gunther's every action and interaction. He is afraid of his father. As he muses about outrageous questions he would like to ask his father, the narrator notes, "Let him dare to ask one of these; his father would somehow get out of the contraptions and smack him in the mouth." Gunther is afraid of Mr. Hartman, a wealthy, powerful man "with steady bomber-pilot eyes." Everybody is afraid of Hartman, readers learn ("The boss's quiet gaze had sent others in the office writhing into colitis attacks."), but they can also assume that only Gunther comes to work an hour early every day just in case the time clock should go haywire. Gunther is even afraid of record executive Conrad Jaggers, who seems to be about Gunther's age and with whom Gunther has struck up a friendship in a bar. In the bar, they had been peers, but when he goes to Jaggers's impressive office as part of his mission, "Gunther momentarily lost his nerve."

In other hands, Gunther might become a symbol of man's cowardliness and impotence. While Friedman acknowledges the weakness, he does not let it define Gunther. Gunther always loses his nerve, but only momentarily. He always screws up his courage and goes on against all odds, the way most ordinary men get through life. All adults know the horrors that life is capable of; there are twenty four-hour news stations to keep everyone apprised of the latest of them. Yet, nearly everyone gets out of bed every morning and runs to embrace life anyway. The fact that fear is a constant companion is not what makes ordinary people vile; it is what makes them heroes, according to Friedman. How refreshing.

Given Friedman's "half full" approach to humanity, it is not surprising that "Brazzaville Teenager" has plenty of conflict but no real villain. Gunther's father is his adversary, but he is not a bad man. He tells Gunther that the doctors who are trying to help him are nice. He is convinced that he will die of his illness, but he shows no fear. Of course, his lack of emotion is just what drives Gunther to absurdity, but stoicism is hardly a despicable quality. Gunther's father is not purposely withholding anything from his son. He simply cannot seem to grasp what it is that Gunther wants from him, as Friedman conveys clearly in the story's penultimate scene. Gunther's impossible quest has somehow succeeded. Gunther's father has recovered, and the son is taking the father back to the old man's apartment. Having jerked his father back from the brink of death,

having won for himself one last chance to connect with his father on more than a superficial level, Gunther is desperate to initiate a no-holds-barred, man-to-man conversation. He makes a feeble attempt but then tells his father that it is "nothing." "I thought you wanted something," his father says. "For a second there it sounded like it, but what the hell, everyone's wrong sometimes. The top men in the country."

With this comment the comedy and the tragedy of the tale reach a simultaneous crescendo. Gunther and the reader know that Gunther's best opportunity has just passed forever. That is tragic. But both parties also grasp the hilarity of the father's total lack of comprehension. Gunther's life has revolved around this thing he wants from his father, and only for one fleeting second did the father ever have a slight suspicion of the thing's existence. Humans frustrate and hurt each other out of lack of understanding more often than out of meanness.

Even the much-feared Mr. Hartman is a man of some kindness and patience. He says that he has never fired anyone "on the spot," and this is believable. He concludes that Gunther is a lunatic, but not only does he not fire him, he goes along with the lunacy. He does this at least in part to please his wife. In Hartman's case, it is the power the man wields, and not the man himself, that inspires fear. Harman may have "steady bomber-pilot eyes," but he is a teddy bear in executive's clothing.

This, then, is humanity, life, and literature according to Bruce Jay Friedman. Undoubtedly, *Atlantic Monthly* writer B. R. Myers would find it far preferable to the versions offered up by Proulx, McCarthy, DeLillo, Auster, Guterson, et al. He is not the only one.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "Brazzaville Teen-ager," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Schulz examines symbolism in the psychological relationship between Gunther and his father in "Brazzaville Teenager," asserting that Gunther is "risking sacrificial self-destruction as a way of realizing a closer blood union with his father."

Friedman's second collection of short stories, *Black Angels,* appeared in 1966. All but one of its sixteen stories had been published the preceding four years and most showed a marked improvement over those of *Far from the City of Class.* These stories in the second collection neatly divide into fantasy and realism. Friedman is basically a social critic, as indicated by his articles in *Esquire* and *The Saturday Evening Post* on such subjects as Raquel Welch and the definitive chickie, Joe Frazier in his training camp, Adam Clayton Powell on Bimini, the Philadelphia disc jockey Jerry Blavat at a dance session, and the Chicago detectives Valesares and Sullivan on a homicide case. He continued into the mid-1960's to ignore the stale cold-war horrors of the East-West confrontation, for his compulsions directed him to examine instead our more immediately felt life of platitudes, neuroses, and patented anodynes which he finds too horrible at times to contemplate other than when refracted through the Surrealistic blur of fantasy. Like his novels, the most thoughtful of these short stories have dual psychosocial tracks.

The best of the fantasies is the title story, "Black Angels." Its hero, Stefano, is a harried suburbanite; a free-lance writer of technical manuals, he has moved into a house beyond his means and, like Stern, finds the upkeep of the grounds a cyclical nightmare. On an impulse, desperate to find a gardener cheaper than his present one, Stefano checks the advertisement of a gardener named Please Try Us; and he receives a preposterously low estimate. Tingling with both guilt and glee, Stefano quickly hires Please Try Us, a quartet of stolid Negroes who work in stifling heat "in checkered shirts and heavy pants, two with fedoras impossibly balanced on the backs of their great shaved heads." In the next two months, for ridiculously low fees and for American cheese sandwiches given them by the conscience-stricken Stefano, they clean up the yard, fertilize the beds, shave the lawns, plant new trees, paint the house with four coats, waterproof the basement, clean out the attic, sand and shellac the floors. Stefano's property shines and is now a showplace that slows down passing cars.

At this level of the story, Stefano acts out the wish fulfillment of the suburbanite who teeters anxiously between paycheck and monthly bills. But he has an even more upsetting problem than the height of this lawn: his wife has run away with an assistant director of daytime television and has taken their ten-year-old son with her. Stefano - lonely, unsuccessful in his quest for dates with young girls, weary of "Over 28" dances - is heartsore and in need of friendly counseling, if not psychoanalytic treatment. One night, over a beer, he tells a lot of his troubles to the head Negro gardener, who listens quietly and then stuns Stefano every now and then with an ambiguous, noncommittal question, like "You think you any good?" or "How long she gone?" that jolts him into a healthy reevaluation of his situation. Pleased with the results, Stefano asks the Negro

what he would charge an hour to listen to him a couple of times a week to pose occasionally a haymaker question. The Negro's fee of four hundred dollars floors Stefano, but his need for psychological comfort is so great that he engages the handyman on the spot. The story ends with Stefano's rambles about the similarity between his wife and his mother, while the gardener settles back in a couch, pad and pencil in hand, taking notes like a professional for the remaining minutes of the hour.

The shriek in "Black Angels" at the high price of getting one human being to listen to another is a variation on the recurrent situation in Friedman's fiction of people's confronting one another physically but failing to acknowledge the other's presence orally. This situation acquires sinister overtones, like so many of Roald Dahl's stories, when Friedman portrays his people as ready to take advantage of another's weaknesses only to discover that the chance-in-a-lifetime has a *quid pro quo* rider attached to it. At the same time that "Black Angels" looks squarely at the hidden traumas of suburbia, it glances obliquely at the fraudulent industry which has become rich on suburban ills. Many of the recent fantasies uncover the emotional quicksand that lies beneath the deceptively solid surface of some of our proudest and shabbiest national fixations. The hysteria of the stock market, parodied in "The Investor," is a witty instance of his hallucination version of our world.

Another story, "The Hero," satirizes the public's blind worship of a hero - any hero however grotesque and however imaginary or exploited his deeds. A boy, who dog-like goes for and bites all flying feet as a result of a football head injury, becomes an overnight national hero when he loses his life while clinging with a death's grip to the fleeing heel of an assassin of The Most Important Man in the Territory. The boy's vulgarian aunt (and reluctant guardian) reaps a deluge of gifts, testimonials, and money - both movable and unmovable property, to paraphrase Wemmick in Dicken's *Great Expectations.* A coarse harridan, she is identified in the eyes of the public with her nephew and is soon receiving their accolades as if she had been the hero. She is asked to comment on national and international questions, to address patriotic rallies, and to run for political office.

"The Hero" is a parody of the aftermath of the J. F. Kennedy assassination when the wife of the murdered police officer trying to apprehend Lee Harvey Oswald, reaped over a million dollars from well-meaning citizens as reward for what had been at best a negative or unsuccessful act of heroism. "The Night Boxing Ended" takes a hard look at the covert wish beyond the savage words of mayhem and abuse shouted as advice to boxers from the audience. Warming up, one such heckler at a heavyweight affair graduates from screaming insults about the fighter's nationality, which delights the fight mob, to chanting "KILL THE BASTARD . . . KICK HIS BALLS, PUNCH HIS EYES OUT. KNOCK HIS HEAD OFF, KNOCK HIS HEAD OFF." The instruction the other fighter obligingly follows by blasting his opponent's head into the sixth-row ringside "in the style of a baseball hit off the end of a cracked bat . . . with a certain amount of zip to it." The heckler was heard to say something like "attaboy" as he slumped in his seat.

The final macabre touch of the story is that the whole incident represents for the narrator "no big deal," merely his "saying goodbye, officially, to Uncle Roger." For

several years when the narrator was a boy, his uncle had taken him each Friday night to the fights. Then, when his uncle went into a hospital, he telephoned his nephew at the office twice a week. On one of these calls the nephew had been unable to talk at the time. Unfortunately, Uncle Roger "died in less than an hour," never giving "anyone a chance to say goodbye," which worried the narrator for years. Thus, the farewell to boxing becomes symbolically a wake for the uncle, a purging of grief, the ceremonial dismemberment of the scapegoat boxer giving tragic distance not only to public but also to private guilt.

"The Mission" laughs at the fetish with which we lugubriously honor the tradition of supplying the condemned man in Death Row with a last meal of his choice, even if it means chasing half way around the world for the ingredients and for the chef capable of preparing them. In this instance, the condemned man requests "Casserole of Sharpes - grysbok tongue with mushrooms in *bechamel* sauce." "The Mission," however, is not a one-cylindered sketch, with a single theme and a single twist to the narrative; instead, it is another instance of Friedman's mastery of dual-track storytelling. The Death Row context is introduced only in the final paragraph; until then, "The Mission" purports to be a parody of the screen-land superman, of the tight-lipped, little-man miracle worker, popularized by Alan Ladd.

Friedman's fascination with show business provides the bases of two other fantasies, one of the best in *Black Angels,* "Brazzaville Teen-ager," and one, "Show Biz Connections," whose central situation had already been used in the earlier story "The Big Six." "Show Biz Connections" is a not too successful attempt to update the fable of the lion and the mouse, or of Aladdin and the genie, into what could almost be the script for a Broadway musical version of how time machines should be used. As reward for pulling a thorn out of a distinguished looking stranger's foot, Mr. Kreevy, "a shambling, Lincolnesque man," is thrown among women about to die through some disaster. His genie-benefactor thus explains the reward:

"What I've got for you involves women, and what I've seen of those charming little ways for yours, and those socks you wear, you need this like life itself. . . You appear to them and suddenly they don't mind these cute little ways of yours the way they would if they met you under different circumstances. You're the last man they'll ever have a shot at. Are you getting the picture? You show up, they know it's all over and *bam,* you're all set. As soon as you finish up I whisk you out of there. *You* don't die, just them."

The inevitable *quid pro quo* interrupts Mr. Kreevy's larks when he wishes to return with one of the ladies, a redheaded actress with dazzling hips. The mysterious gentleman with the thorn in his foot agrees after many threats to bring her back, but the catch is that someone must stay behind to die - and that someone is Mr. Kreevy. As African natives come for him, the oldster and the redhead "twinkle off into the sun"; and the redhead's dazzling hips provide Mr. Kreevy with his last sight on this earth. What piquancy the story has derives from the flavor of the genie-benefactor's language, a "show-biz" patter about the "class operation" that he runs, which contrasts roguishly with his Edwardian appearance.

"Brazzaville Teen-ager," while evoking the frenzied, hallucinated social scene of the other fantasies, explores the psychosocial trauma of coming of age in America, a thematic preoccupation of Friedman in his novels, his plays, and his many Realistic short stories. The youth Gunther - distressed by the inherent gulf that separates father and son - dreams of a death-bed scene which would unite them. In it, the older man discloses at last, man to man, the answers to all Gunther's prurient questions about his father's sexual life - "Could he still get it up at his age? What about broads. Was Mom the first he'd ever slept with? Had he ever gone to a cathouse? Which way did he like it best, straight or tricky stuff?" - as if sexual confidence was somehow the key to their apartness. During a mysterious collapse of the old man into himself, "accordion-style, pinching off nerves," Gunther grimly conceives the idea that he must "do something painful beyond belief, the most embarrassing act he could imagine" - but only then would his dad recover. He is driven to cadge his boss, whom he deathly fears, into performing wild promotional stunts.

Gunther is, in effect, risking sacrificial self-destruction as a way of realizing a closer blood union with his father. He bullies his employer into supplying the "doo-wah, doo-wah and yeh, yeh, yeh background" at a recording session of Little Sigmund and the Flipouts. The song, "Brazzaville Teen-ager," is about a teen-ager who accompanies his mercenary soldier father to the Congo. Homesick, nostalgically recalling how great it had been surfing and holding hands. In its lyrics and in its association with the high decibel world of hi-fi and discotheque, the song evokes in another dimension, if it does not exactly parallel, the troubled madness and adolescent yearning of Gunther's world.

When his father recovers, Gunther finds that the inalienable gulf between them has not lessened. No confidences ensue. Despite the father's near squeak with death, the two continue to address each other in the inspired language of triviality:

"Dad," said Gunther.

"What's that?" the old man said, whirling suddenly as though he had guessed Gunther's dirty thoughts and might throw a decrepit punch.

"Nothing," said Gunther.

"I thought you wanted something. For a second there it sounded like it, but what the hell, everyone's wrong sometimes. The top men in the country."

The less explicitly fantastic stories often remind one of the tales of Raold Dahl. The same ill defined smell of danger, the same distant whiff of the sinister, and the same dimly antagonistic people appear in both men's work. The transformation of the English author's tone and setting into an American voice and milieu is, however, bona fide. Whereas Dahl portrays most frequently the English upper-middle class at home and abroad, Friedman concentrates on the mass-produced product of urban America. Whereas Dahl's characters play for keeps a deadly game of get-the-other-fellow, Friedman's characters try to play the game but never quite succeed. Dahl is attracted to the story possibilities of such gadgetry and special situations as computers, wine

tasting, picture restoration, and dog racing; Friedman, while intrigued by such ridiculous occupations as sectional-couch making, shoulder-pad cutting, and the myriad peripheral jobs in show business, is stung into creativity by his contemplation of human obsessions, impulses, and undefined family antagonisms.

Source: Max F. Schulz, "Short Stories," in *Bruce J. Friedman,* Twayne Publishers, 1974, pp. 78-101.

Adaptations

Friedman's 1966 short story "A Change of Plan" was adapted as a film entitled *The Heartbreak Kid.* The film was directed by Elaine May, featured Charles Grodin and Cybill Shepherd, and was released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1972. It is available on DVD and VHS from Anchor Bay Entertainment.

Friedman's 1978 collection of essays, *The Lonely Guy's Book of Life,* was adapted as a film entitled *The Lonely Guy.* The film, which was directed by Arthur Hiller, featured Steve Martin, Charles Grodin, Merv Griffin, and Dr. Joyce Brothers. It was released by Universal Studios in 1984 and is available on DVD from Universal and on VHS from Goodtimes Home Video.

Friedman's novel *Stern* (1962) was adapted as an abridged audiobook by Jewish Contemporary Classics, Inc., in 2000. It is read by Adam Grupper.

Topics for Further Study

Choose one doo-wop or Motown group that was popular in the 1960s and write a short profile about this group.

In the story, Gunther performs pointless acts to try to save his father, leading some critics to call the story itself meaningless. Find another creative work from any medium that you find meaningless or difficult to understand. Research the history of this work and discuss whether this was the intention of the artist or artists.

Research how many record singles in each musical category were released during the 1960s and the 1990s. Compare the two time periods on chart or graph, by category.

Research any song from the 1960s until now that has capitalized on a war or other military conflict, like the song "Brazzaville Teen-ager" does in the story. Research the historical context of this song and create a sample compact-disc single insert that both advertises the single and gives the historical background of the song.

In the story, Gunther's father is struck with an unknown disease, which he thinks will be fatal. Research any of the rare or incurable diseases that are known to occur today. Write a short report on this disease, including its history, known symptoms, and any methods that are being used to treat it.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Doo-wop and the Motown sound are two African-American musical styles that find acceptance with white American teens.

Today: A variety of musical styles—including rock, pop, alternative, rap, rhythm and blues, and punk—and performers—including whites, African Americans, and Latin Americans—find acceptance with American teens of all races and ethnicities.

1960s: Large record companies dominate the American recording industry, forcing smaller companies like Motown Records to work harder to assert themselves and make sales.

Today: The American recording industry is undergoing undergoing massive changes, as it tries to deal with the changing face of technology. While the Internet gives record companies and their distributors greater flexibility in selling albums, it also gives private individuals the ability to distribute songs for free to other Internet users, thus threatening large record companies' profits.

1960s: The United States escalates its military involvement in Vietnam in an effort to stop the spread of communism in Asia.

Today: Following the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., in September 2001, the United States escalates its military involvement in the Middle East in an effort to stop the spread of terrorism.

What Do I Read Next?

Readers of "Brazzaville Teen-ager" might question whether the author intended the story to have a point. For those who like pointless questions, David Borgenicht's *The Little Book of Stupid Questions: 300 Hilarious, Bold, Embarrassing, Personal, and Basically Pointless Queries* (1999) will not disappoint.

William Boyd's novel *Brazzaville Beach* (1991) tells the story of Hope, a young Englishwoman who seeks solitude on the coast of Africa following traumatic personal and professional experiences. Her professional experiences entailed her work at an animal research center in Africa, in a region that is surrounded by guerrilla war.

Friedman's novel A *Mother's Kisses* (1964) tells the story of Joseph and his oppressive Jewish mother. The two share an unusually close mother-son relationship, which smothers Joseph and affects his ability to lead an independent life. While Joseph resents his mother at times, he finds it hard to leave the familiarity of their relationship. Unlike "Brazzaville Teen-ager" but consistent with most of Friedman's novels, A *Mother's Kisses* emphasizes the Jewishness of the characters.

Friedman worked the first part of his career as a journalist, and much of his nonfiction was characterized by the same view of the world as that found in many of his stories. In *Even the Rhinos Were Nymphos: Best Nonfiction* (2000), Friedman offers his unique insight on a wide range of topics, including the film industry, Japan, author Mario Puzo, butlers, and cigars.

Further Study

Dudley, William, ed., *The 1960s,* America's Decades series, Greenhaven Press, 2000.

Like other books in the America's Decades series, this book offers a brief overview of the history and culture of America in a particular ten-year period. The book covers several topics, including popular music, the space race, the Civil Rights movement, and overseas conflicts like the Vietnam War.

George, Nelson, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound,* St. Martin's Press, 1985.

George gives a comprehensive account of Motown's development, from the sociological factors that ultimately forced Berry Gordy Jr.'s family to move to Detroit, to Gordy's sale of Motown's distribution rights in the 1980s. George draws on several first-person accounts from industry insiders to chronicle Gordy's struggle to launch and sustain Motown, offering plenty of behind-the-scenes anecdotes along the way. The book also includes a comprehensive chart that gives information on Motown's greatest hits.

Gribin, Anthony J., and Matthew M. Schiff, *The Complete Book of Doo-Wop,* 2d ed., Krause Publications, 2000.

This book provides a detailed history of doo-wop music from the 1950s to the early 1970s. It features definitions, photos, sheet-music covers, prices for the most popular albums, fun facts, anecdotes, and quizzes. This book is a great introduction to the history and culture of doo-wop music.

Schulz, Max F., *Bruce Jay Friedman,* Twayne, 1974.

Schulz offers an in-depth, critical discussion of the first half of Friedman's life and career, including the period in which he wrote "Brazzaville Teen-ager."

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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 unnamedfor 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.

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

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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.

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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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