Brownies Study Guide

Brownies by ZZ Packer

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

“Brownies” is a story by ZZ Packer, a young African American writer. It appears in Packer’s short story collection, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, which was published in 2003 to great acclaim. The story is about a Brownie troop of fourth-grade African American girls from suburban Atlanta, Georgia, who go to summer camp. At the camp, they encounter a troop of white girls and believe that one of the white girls addressed them with a racial insult. The African American girls resolve to beat up the white girls.

“Brownies” is a story about racism as it is experienced by young girls, but it has a twist. The African American girls discover that the situation is not as clear-cut as they had believed, and as they return home on the bus, Laurel, the African American girl who narrates the story, tells them of an incident in her family involving a white Mennonite family. As she tells the story, she comes to an unsettling realization about racism and the nature of human life.

Author Biography

ZZ Packer was born in Chicago in 1973. Her first name is Zuwena, which is a Swahili word meaning “good.” But she has been known by the nickname ZZ for as long as she can remember, she told Richard Dorment in a March 2003 interview for *Interview* magazine. When she was five, she and her family moved to Atlanta, where she remained until she was eleven. Then her parents got divorced, and ZZ went to live in Louisville, Kentucky, with her mother. During her early schooling, Packer was interested in math and science, but in high school a teacher had the class write short stories, and that planted a seed in Packer’s mind that she might one day become a writer.

After graduating from high school, Packer attended Yale University. For a while she was unsure of whether to focus on the humanities or the sciences, but she then decided she would become an engineer. At the time she did not think writing was an activity that people could actually do in order to make a living. But after graduating from Yale, she attended the Writing Seminar at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. At Johns Hopkins, one of her tutors was Francine Prose, whose perspective on writing encouraged Packer to look at her own work in a new way.

After Johns Hopkins, Packer taught in a public high school for two years, determined to write during her spare time. But she found that teaching was a demanding profession, and it was difficult to find the time to write as well as teach. She took many odd jobs during the summers and then decided to apply to the prestigious Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. She was admitted to the program and graduated in 1997.

It was not long before she began to have success. Her story, “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” was included in the Debut Fiction issue of the *New Yorker* in 2000, and her work also appeared in *Seventeen*, *Harper’s*, *The Best American Short Stories* (2000), and *Ploughshares*. Eight of Packer’s stories, including “Brownies,” were collected in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, which was published by Riverhead Books in 2003 to universal praise from reviewers. John Updike chose the book as the June 2003, Today Book Club selection on the NBC network’s *Today Show*, and the book was also nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 2004.

Among the writers Packer most admires are Toni Morrison, especially Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. She has also been influenced by Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

As of 2006, Packer lived in San Francisco, California, and taught at Stanford University. She was working on a novel about the Buffalo Soldiers, African Americans who served in the U.S. Army following the Civil War.

Plot Summary

“Brownies” takes place at Camp Crescendo, a summer camp for fourth graders near the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. The story is told in the first person by an African American girl named Laurel, known to the other girls by her nickname, Snot. Laurel announces that by the second day at the camp, all the girls in her Brownie troop had decided they were going to “kick the asses” of every girl in Brownie Troop 909, who were all white girls. The black girls took a dislike to the white girls when they first saw them. Arnetta, the girls’ ringleader, said they smelled “like Chihuahuas. *Wet* Chihuahuas.” When she adds that they were like “*Caucasian* Chihuahuas,” all the black girls go into fits of laughter. They regard the word Caucasian as a hilarious term of abuse that can be used in almost any situation.

The black girls have seen whites before but have never had much to do with them. But the ten white girls they encounter at the camp are closer to them and, therefore, more real and capable of exciting envy and hatred.

At the end of the first day at camp, Arnetta reports she heard one of the white girls refer to Daphne, a black girl, as “a nigger.” On prompting by Arnetta, Daphne, a quiet girl, nods her head to confirm that the derogatory term was used. Arnetta tells the other girls that they cannot let the white girls get away with using that word about them. She says they must teach the white girls a lesson. Janice suggests that they put daddy-long-legs in the white girls’ sleeping bags, and when the girls awake, beat them up. Arnetta tells Janice, who is not a popular girl, to shut up. Arnetta then announces that they are to hold a secret meeting. She turns to Laurel, whom she appears not to like, and asks her whether Laurel plans to tell Mrs. Margolin, their troop leader, about the situation.

On the second day of camp, the black girls eat their sandwich lunch by a stream that borders the field hockey lawn. Arnetta eyes the white girls from Troop 909 and would like to attack them right then and there, but the white girls are with their troop leader, which makes the mission impossible. When the white girls leave, Arnetta says they must find a way of getting them when they are alone. Laurel says that the girls will never be alone, and the only time they will be unsupervised is in the bathroom. Octavia tells Laurel to shut up, but Arnetta seems to think this is a useful piece of information.

The black girls walk to the restrooms, which are messy, with leaves and wads of chewing gum on the floor. Arnetta says that when they meet the white girls there, they will be nice to them at first and then tell them what happens when they call any one of the black girls a “nigger.” Janice says that she will tell the white girls, “We’re gonna teach you a *lesson*!” Laurel, who is normally very quiet, asks what will happen if the white girls say they did not use the offending word. Arnetta dismisses this possibility and says that all they have to do is fight. An exception is made for Daphne, however, since they are doing this to avenge her. The girls leave the restrooms, although Daphne stays behind, picking up the trash. When Arnetta is asked about the secret meeting, she replies that they have just had it.

That evening, just before their bedtime, Mrs. Hedy, the parent helper, comes to their cabin. The girls, knowing she is depressed about her impending divorce, sing her favorite Brownie song for her. The girls are then reluctantly persuaded by Mrs. Margolin to sing “The Doughnut Song,” a religious song which they all hate. Mrs. Margolin is tired and leaves to go to the lodge. Arnetta says it is time to go to the restroom, hoping that Mrs. Hedy will not go with them. Arnetta knows that the troop of white girls will be in the restrooms soon and will not be expecting an ambush. Mrs. Hedy indicates that the girls can go to the bathroom unaccompanied. She makes Octavia promise to be good.

Daphne tells Laurel that she is not going with them, and Laurel says she is not going either. But Arnetta overhears her and insists that she comes.

They make their way to the restrooms in the darkness, using a flashlight to guide them. They do not talk about fighting; they are all frightened enough to be walking through the woods at night.

When they arrive, the white girls are already there. Arnetta and Octavia go in first, instructing the others to follow when they hear Arnetta say, “We’re gonna teach you a lesson.”

After about a minute, Laurel hears one of the white girls deny that they had used the offensive word. The other black girls decide to go inside, even though Arnetta has not given the signal. Inside, they see five white girls huddled up against a bigger girl. Octavia whispers to Elise that she thinks the white girls are retarded. The big girl denies it, but it is obvious to the others that she and all the other white girls are indeed mentally handicapped. Arnetta says they are just pretending, but Octavia, deflated, says that they should just leave. Octavia tells the big girl they are leaving and not to tell anyone they were there. The big girl asks why not, saying she knows the black girls will get into trouble. She threatens to tell on them.

Shortly after this, the white girls’ troop leader enters the bathroom and assures the girls that everything will be all right. All the girls start crying. Then the ranger comes, then Mrs. Margolin and Daphne. Mrs. Margolin tells the leader of Troop 909 that the girls will apologize and their parents will punish them. The white girls’ leader denies that her girls are mentally handicapped but admits they are “*delayed* learners.”

The black girls are speechless, while the Troop 909 leader is full of words and energy. She tells Mrs. Margolin that some of her girls are “echolalic,” which means they will repeat whatever they hear. (Echolalia, the repeating of the speech of others, is a severe communication disorder associated with childhood schizophrenia and mental retardation.) So they might have used the racial slur, but it would not have been intentional. Arnetta points to a small girl and says it was she who used the word. The troop leader says that is impossible, since the girl never speaks. Arnetta then picks out another girl as the culprit, but Laurel thinks it very unlikely that this happy-looking girl would call anyone a “nigger.”

On the fourth morning, they board a bus to go home. The journey is quiet to begin with, but then the girls all try to silently imitate the expressions and mannerisms of the white girls, trying not to laugh too hard and attract the attention of Mrs. Margolin and Mrs. Hedy. Octavia wonders why they had to be stuck at camp with retarded girls. When Laurel starts to tell a story, Octavia tries to shut her up, but Daphne encourages Laurel to continue. Laurel tells her about an incident in a mall when she was there with her father. They saw a Mennonite family, dressed in their distinctive garb. Laurel's father had told her that if someone asked the Mennonites to do something for the person, they would be compelled to do it, because it was part of their religion. Laurel's father asked them to paint his porch, and the entire Mennonite family came and did so. Laurel's father explained to her that he had asked them to do this because it would be the only time he would be able to see a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free.

Laurel now understands why her father said that, although she does not agree with the sentiment. When Daphne asks if Laurel's father had thanked the Mennonites, Laurel replies no, and she suddenly realizes that there is "something mean" in the world that she cannot stop.

Characters

Arnetta

Arnetta is the strong-minded leader of the black girls in the Brownie troop. She is a dominant personality, and after she speaks the other girls are usually quiet: “Her tone had an upholstered confidence that was somehow both regal and vulgar at once. It demanded a few moments of silence in its wake, like the ringing of a church bell or the playing of taps.” It is Arnetta who says that she heard one of the white girls call Daphne a “nigger,” and she is determined that the white girls must not be allowed to get away with it. She is eager to start a fight and makes sure that the reluctant Snot goes along, too. Arnetta plans out how the confrontation in the restroom is to be handled and gives instructions to the other girls. With Octavia, Arnetta is the first one to enter the bathroom. Arnetta is also a cunning girl. She makes a point of listening to Mrs. Margolin in class and giving all the right answers. Mrs. Margolin, therefore, has a good opinion of Arnetta and does not realize quite how subversive she can be. Arnetta knows how to deceive both Mrs. Margolin and Mrs. Hedy.

Daphne

Daphne is the black girl who was allegedly insulted by one of the white girls, although she does not seem to be upset by it. Daphne is a very quiet girl. When she speaks, her voice is “petite and tinkly, the voice one might expect from a shiny new earring.” She appears to be intelligent and wrote a poem for Langston Hughes Day that won a prize at school. (Langston Hughes was a prominent African American poet.) Daphne’s parents are poor, and she wears old but clean clothes. She has no desire to fight the white girls and is excused from doing so by Arnetta. When the girls first visit the restrooms to assess the place where they seek out the fight, Daphne busies herself by cleaning up the trash.

Elise

Elise is a black girl who plays a minor role in the story. She is a follower of Arnetta and Octavia, although on one occasion she takes the unusual step of asking Snot, who is usually ignored by the others, for her opinion.

Mrs. Hedy

Mrs. Hedy is the parent helper for the troop of black girls. She is Octavia’s mother. Mrs. Hedy is worried about her impending divorce and talks about it in public, to Octavia’s embarrassment. She tries in a perfunctory manner to get the girls to behave themselves, but she has little authority over them. Instead, she persuades them to sing

Brownie songs to cheer her up. She is lenient and allows the girls to go to the restrooms on their own.

Octavia Hedy

Along with Arnetta, Octavia Hedy is one of the leaders in the troop of black girls. She is an aggressive girl with very long hair which "hung past her butt like a Hawaiian hula dancer's." Octavia is as determined as Arnetta that the white girls should not get away with insulting Daphne. She is scornful of Janice and keeps telling her to shut up, and she has the same attitude toward Laurel. She is also disdainful of the experience of being in camp. She says, "I mean, I really don't know why it's even called *camping*—all we ever do with Nature is find some twigs and say something like, 'Wow, this fell from a tree.'" It is Octavia who decides that the girls should leave the restroom when they discover the white girls are retarded.

Janice

Janice is the girl who comes up with a plan to put daddy-long-legs in the white girls' sleeping bags. She is a simple, country girl, "her looks homely, her jumpy acrobatics embarrassing to behold." Janice is a big fan of Michael Jackson. Arnetta and Octavia treat her with contempt, but Janice does not seem to mind or even notice. At one point, Snot and Daphne are worried that Octavia may push Janice into the stream. Janice is enthusiastic about the prospective fight and carefully rehearses the line she has thought up: "We're gonna teach you a *lesson*!" But when the time comes and she says this to the big white girl, it has no effect, and Octavia tells her to shut up.

Laurel

Laurel, the narrator of the story, is one of the black girls in the Brownie troop. She has been called Snot ever since first grade. Laurel is a quiet, studious, observant girl who tends to stand apart from the others. She is not very popular with them. No one ever asks for her opinion; Octavia tells her to shut up, and Arnetta demands to know whether she is going to tell on them to Mrs. Margolin. Laurel seems more thoughtful than the others. She is the only girl who considers the possibility that the white girl did not use the forbidden term, that perhaps Arnetta misheard what was said. Laurel also wonders, unlike the others, what will happen if the white girls deny using the bad word, and why none of her troop considers the possibility that the white girls will not be so easy to beat up and may well fight back. But it is Laurel who observes that the only time the white girls will be unsupervised will be when they are in the bathroom, so she is in a way partly responsible for the confrontation that ensues. However, Laurel does not want to fight and tries to stay behind with Daphne, but Arnetta refuses to let her. Finally, it is Laurel who tells the story about the Mennonite family that paints the porch of their house, and it is she who understands more deeply than the other girls the origins of racism.

Mrs. Margolin

Mrs. Margolin is in charge of the troop of black girls and watches over them like a mother duck looks after her ducklings. According to Snot, Mrs. Margolin even looks like a mother duck: “she had hair cropped close to a small ball of a head, almost no neck, and huge, miraculous breasts.” Mrs. Margolin is a religious woman who likes to give religious instruction to the girls in the Brownie troop.

Snot

See Laurel

Troop 909 Leader

The Troop 909 leader is a white woman who enters the restroom shortly after the confrontation between the two groups of girls. She explains to Mrs. Margolin that the white girls may have special needs, but they are not retarded.

Themes

Racial Segregation

The racial prejudice and hostility shown in the story appears to be the product of historical circumstances combined with the current reality of racial segregation. The first noticeable fact in the story is that the Brownie troops at the summer camp appear to be either all-white or all-black. No mixed-race troop is presented. It also transpires that in the Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in the south suburbs of Atlanta, there is only one white child, a boy named Dennis. For all intents and purposes, the black girls in the story have been raised in a racially segregated environment. This is confirmed by the remark of Laurel: “When you lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about.”

Because they have had so little contact with whites, the black girls are extremely conscious of the differences between themselves and the white girls. Many of these differences are purely imaginary: “Man, did you smell them?” asks Arnetta of the other girls in her troop after they first see the white girls of Troop 909. For the black girls, the term Caucasian is an all-purpose, humorous term of abuse that can be applied in almost any situation: “If you ate too fast you ate like a Caucasian, if you ate too slow you ate like a Caucasian.” It is because the black girls are so used to living in a racially segregated environment, in which they may catch only momentary sight of white people in places like clothing stores or the downtown library, that Arnetta regards the white girls as “*invaders*.”

Indeed, until the confrontation in the restrooms, Laurel, Arnetta, and their friends do not even see the white girls at the camp at close quarters. The one thing they are able to see is that the white girls’ long straight hair looks like the shampoo commercials they have seen on television, and this difference alone is cause for “envy and hatred.” But they cannot see “whether their faces were the way all white girls appeared on TV—ponytailed and full of energy, bubbling over with love and money.” In other words, the black girls’ knowledge of whites comes not from direct experience but through the distorting, homogenizing lens of mass culture.

Racial Prejudice

Given the extent of racial segregation, it is not surprising that the encounter between the black girls and the white girls should be full of misunderstandings. It is never established beyond doubt that any of the white girls actually used the racial insult, but even if they had, they would not have used it with the intention of offending the black girls. But this is not the whole story. If a white girl used the word, she must have heard it somewhere, possibly spoken in private by her parents or other white people. It is thus made clear that racial prejudice continues to exist in present-day Atlanta. This is confirmed by

Arnetta in the bus returning from the camp, when she reports on her experience at the mall in Buckhead. (Buckhead is an extremely affluent area in the northern part of Atlanta, known as a shopping mecca for the entire South.) While Arnetta was there with her family, she says, “this white lady just kept looking at us. I mean, like we were foreign or something. Like we were from China.” It appears that there are still places in Atlanta where black people are perceived as not belonging.

The story Laurel tells on the bus illustrates the depths of resentment that black people feel over such slights. Her father feels his resentments keenly, and that is why he asks the Mennonite family to paint his porch for free, so he can for once feel himself to be in a position of superiority over whites. Laurel now understands why her father did this: “When you’ve been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others.” This is a great moment of realization for Laurel. She is mature enough to realize that she does not agree with her father’s motivation, but she also learns that “there is something mean in the world” that she cannot stop, something that makes people dislike those who are different from themselves and also makes those who suffer discrimination harbor grudges and try to settle old scores whenever opportunity presents itself. The sad thing that Laurel realizes is that the kind act of the Mennonite family did nothing to heal the situation or remove past pain, since her father refused to thank the family for the work they had done. It is to Laurel’s credit that she does not indulge in racist thoughts of her own to explain such sad incidents. She appears to attribute the painful reality to human nature rather than to one specific racial group.

Style

Figurative language is the art of describing something in terms of something else. There are many types of figurative language. Prominent in “Brownies” are similes, in which something is compared to something else that on the surface may be dissimilar but at some other level is similar. Similes can be recognized by the presence of connecting words such as “like” or “as if.” Similes seem to come naturally to Laurel, the lively, observant first-person narrator of the story. Mrs. Hedy wags her finger “like a windshield wiper,” for example. The similarity between the finger and the windshield wiper is based on the regular, repetitive, rhythmic motion of both. The leader of Troop 909 holds a banana in front of her “like a microphone,” the similarity between banana and microphone based on the shape of the object and the way it is held. The shape and color of the dissimilar objects being compared are at the basis of the simile that occurs to Laurel in the bathroom: “Shaggy white balls of paper towels sat on the sinktops in a line like corsages on display.” Other similes include the tree branches that “looked like arms sprouting menacing hands”; the girl who flaps her hand “like a bird with a broken wing”; and Mrs. Margolin with her Brownie troop following behind her “like a brood of obedient ducklings.”

Unlike a simile, a metaphor is a figure of speech in which one object is identified with another, rather than compared with it. There are several metaphors in the story. At sunset, the leafy tops of the trees “formed a canopy of black lace,” the shared qualities between leaves and black lace being the color the leaves appear to take on in the setting sun and the delicate fine patterns or designs they appear to form as the narrator looks up at them. Another metaphor occurs when the sound made by a covey of insects leads Laurel to think of them as “a throng of tiny electric machines, all going at once.” Inside the restrooms, another metaphor occurs to Laurel. Noticing how the wooden rafters of the restroom come together in large V’s, she observes that “We were, it seems, inside a whale, viewing the ribs of the roof of its mouth.” Thus metaphorically, the interior of the restroom becomes the inside of a whale’s mouth. Laurel also shows a talent for humorous metaphorical thinking. After Arnetta suggests that they sing a Brownie song about old friends being gold, while new friends are only silver (both lines employ metaphor), Laurel dryly observes, “If most of the girls in the troop could be any type of metal, they’d be bunched-up wads of tinfoil, maybe, or rusty iron nails you had to get tetanus shots for.”

Historical Context

Racial Segregation in the United States

In “Brownies” the fictional Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in south suburban Atlanta has only one white student. This is a telling detail, since Atlanta, especially in the inner city, has one of the highest levels of separation between blacks and whites in the southern United States, a segregation that is also reflected in the public schools.

Since 1988, there has been a widespread trend in public schools in the United States towards more segregation. This is a reversal of a trend toward racial integration that began following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which ruled that racially segregated educational facilities were unconstitutional because they were inherently unequal. Researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that the years between 1991 and 1994 were marked by the largest movement back toward segregation since the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling. It was estimated that two-thirds of African American children in the United States attend schools in which most of the students are members of minority groups.

A study conducted by Catherine Freeman and others at the Fiscal Research Center, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, found that in Georgia from 1994 to 2001 there was a slight trend towards increased black-white segregation in public elementary schools. In 1994, 17.7 percent of students attended predominantly black elementary schools (defined as over 70 percent black). This increased to 19.1 percent in 2001. The highest level of black-white segregation was in the Atlanta metropolitan area, which is caused largely by segregation between school districts. Segregation within the same district is related to residential segregation. Residential segregation is apparent in the story, since Laurel states that in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was rare to see a white person. Another factor in the reemergence of racial segregation is that in the 1990s and early 2000s there has been less pressure from the courts to integrate public schools than there was from the mid-1950s to the 1980s.

The same study found that in Georgia, schools with higher percentages of blacks had higher teacher turnover rates. Such schools also have fewer teachers with advanced degrees and more inexperienced teachers. Teacher quality has a large impact on how well students perform. Schools with high percentages of African American students also received fewer school resources.

These statistics from Georgia reflect a trend toward increased segregation amongst whites and blacks in the general population elsewhere in the United States. University of Chicago researchers, as reported by James Waller in *Face to Face: The Changing State of Racism Across America* (1998), found that middle-class blacks are less likely than Hispanics or Asian Americans to live among whites.

Persistence of Racism in the United States

Although blatant, violent racism decreased in the United States between 1965 and 2005, racism still existed in more subtle forms. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, especially in the American South, black people were subject to beatings, racially motivated murders, cross-burnings by the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan, as well as everyday insults and humiliations, such as having to sit at the back on buses and use separate public facilities such as water fountains. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and changing public attitudes toward race and racism have ensured that old-style racism of this kind has been vastly reduced in the United States. However, it has been replaced by a less overt form of racism in which prejudice is not stated openly but is nonetheless discernible in different behaviors adopted by white people when dealing with blacks rather than people of their own race. Waller, in *Face to Face*, reports the comments made by a late 1990s graduate of Georgia Tech University about his experiences with racism:

[W]hite clerks ‘tailing’ him in a local music store; restaurant managers checking repeatedly on the satisfaction of other patrons while ignoring him and his dining partner; people expressing surprise at how ‘articulate’ and ‘well-spoken’ he was; and white women who, when passing by him on a downtown Atlanta sidewalk, would shift their purses to the opposite side of their bodies.

This student’s comments are in line with studies that have documented the regular occurrence of this kind of subtle but unmistakable everyday discrimination suffered by middle-class African Americans. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in “‘New Racism,’ Color-Blind Racism, and the Future of Whiteness in America,” calls this changing face of racism the “new racism.” He argues that although it appears less harmful than the older, violent form of racism, “it is as effective as slavery and Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo.”

Critical Overview

Packer's short story collection, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere,* was published to a chorus of praise from reviewers. The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* comments that "the clear-voiced humanity of Packer's characters, mostly black teenage girls, resonates unforgettably through the eight stories of this accomplished debut collection." The reviewer concludes, in a comment that might be applied also to "Brownies": "These stories never end neatly or easily. Packer knows how to keep the tone provocative and tense at the close of each tale, doing justice to the complexity and dignity of the characters and their difficult choices."

Jean Thompson in the *New York Times Book Review* praises Packer's skill in characterization; she also brings attention to the youthfulness of the characters and the fact that in some cases they lack self-knowledge. "The very young characters in "Brownies" [have not] developed much insight into matters of race, adulthood or a religion that reduces its teachings to acronyms—Satan, for example, is 'Serpent Always Tempting and Noisome.'"

Thompson's conclusion, however, is entirely positive regarding the collection as a whole:

Young writers, naturally enough, write about young characters. *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* is not really limited by this. Instead, there is a sense of a talented writer testing and pushing at those limits, ringing as many changes as possible within her fictional world. It is a world already populated by clamoring, sorrowing, eminently knowable people, and with the promise of more to come.

David Wiegand, in *San Francisco Chronicle*, also has fulsome praise for Packer's stories: "Packer doesn't merely tell stories brilliantly, but she also packs each one with a right-between-the-eyes moral about issues of race and black identity." However, Wiegand argues that in some stories Packer's didacticism, her desire to teach a moral lesson, "seems slightly forced." He cites as an example the incident in "Brownies," in which the learning disabled white girls innocently repeat the racial insult only because they have heard it somewhere themselves. "It's Packer's way of reminding us, unnecessarily, that prejudice is learned," writes Wiegand.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on literature. In this essay, he discusses "Brownies" in the context of modern racism in the United States.

"Brownies" is a story with a great deal of humor but a serious theme and purpose. No one who lives in the United States can be unaware that in the history of the nation, relations between black people and white people have been fraught with injustice and oppression. Although the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and later federal government policies, including equal opportunity laws and affirmative action, removed most of the egregious racist practices, racism continues to exist in the United States. This fact is plain from the story, not only in the words and actions of the little girls, but in a small but significant comment made by Laurel, the narrator, which gives a glimpse into the day-to-day world of the black girls' parents in suburban Atlanta. Laurel states, "We had all been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealings with whites, sickness and death." There is an old saying that the two inevitable things in life are death and taxes, but these young girls have also learned that "dealings with whites" must be added to those unpleasant realities.

In addition to the theme of racial prejudice, 'Brownies' makes another serious point. It shows the power of group thinking and the pressure to go along with the actions of the group to which one belongs, even against one's wishes and better judgment.

Modern racism, according to James Waller in *Face to Face*, is more insidious, subtle, and covert than the old racism. It manifests in negative, stereotypical, mistrustful attitudes that many whites have towards African Americans and other people of color. It is compounded by the fact that many whites believe that racism no longer exists in the United States, which makes them resistant to the demands by minorities for equal and fair treatment. Modern racism has measurable effects on quality of life indicators such as economic status and educational attainment, as well as self-esteem and general well being. According to Waller, the effects of such racism are "cumulative, draining, energy consuming, and, ultimately, life consuming."

Racism is not confined to adults; it can also be found in young children. Research in the late 1990s and early 2000s has shown that children develop an awareness of racial categories and society's established racial hierarchies at a very early age. Previously it had been believed that young children were color blind in this respect, with no awareness of racial differences or the meanings applied to them by adults. But Debra van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin in *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, using experimental data on fifty-eight preschool children from age three to six in an ethnically diverse urban day-care center, demonstrate how children of this age use awareness and knowledge of race in their social relationships. These children had

already learned at an early age “the desirability of whiteness, of white identity and esteem”; they knew that “whiteness is privileged and darkness is not”; they had the ability to understand and use the power of racial insults to hurt other children and to reinforce the perceived superiority of whiteness over blackness. In some cases, white children had learned to exclude others from games based on racial identity, as with the four-year-old white girl who had been pulling a wagon across the floor and told an Asian girl that “Only white Americans can pull this wagon.” In another incident, a three-year-old white girl refused to let a three-year-old black boy get on a swing, telling him that “Black people are not allowed on the swing right now, especially Black boys.” The authors comment: “Children hold knowledge of the power and authority granted to whites and are not confused about the meanings of these harsh racial words and actions.” The children know where status and privilege lie. The authors further point out that “Black children, like Black adults, must constantly struggle to develop and maintain a healthy sense of themselves against the larger society that tells them in a legion of ways that they are inferior.”

If this is indeed so, the black girls in “Brownies” seem to have done extremely well. This is not a story about the struggles of these girls to establish self-esteem. On the contrary, whatever their parents may have told them, or what they may have overheard about the difficulties of “dealings with whites,” they are not suffering from any sense of inferiority. When they hear, or Arnetta thinks she hears, the offensive racial word used by a white girl, their reaction is not to go off into a corner and cry, but to fight back, to teach the white girls a painful lesson. These are tough, confident girls, especially Arnetta and Octavia.

The African American girls in “Brownies” also know how to use language to counter any negative names or labels that whites might try to impose on them. They simply do the same in reverse. Although none of them has directly encountered many white people—whites are largely objects of curiosity to them—they have adopted the term “Caucasian” as an all-round term of abuse and ridicule. When someone does something, or wears something, they do not approve of, or acts in a clumsy or incompetent manner, the response is, “What are you? *Caucasian*?” as Arnetta said to a black boy in school who was wearing jeans considered to be unfashionable.

The behavior of the African American girls in the story is a reverse image of the way in which some white people still use language that denigrates others because of their racial or ethnic identity. In “White Fright: Reproducing White Supremacy Through Casual Discourse,” Kristen Myers reports on her own experiment in tracking what she calls “casual racetalk” (talk that denigrates someone due to race or ethnicity or celebrates white supremacy) in the everyday encounters of a variety of mostly white people, including college students, family members, employers, coworkers, parishioners, and professors, as well as strangers. Myers used a covert approach because explicit racist expressions, since they are no longer considered socially acceptable, are not commonly used in public. Instead, Myers used informants to report on “casual racetalk” that occurs in contexts when people are with friends and others whom they believe think like they do. She found that the racetalk revealed whites’ belief that they form a “unified, superior group whose interests were threatened by the very

presence of people of color." Whites constructed language consisting of caricatures and slurs (including the word that incites the black girls to plan violence in "Brownies") that delineated an us-against-them mentality. Certain negative qualities were attributed to black people and then applied also to whites who did something that fitted the negative stereotype, as in this example:

We sat around on Saturday night, and sometimes we called each other niggers because something stupid would happen. I guess we sometimes refer stupidity to black people. For example, we were playing a card game. . . . I did something wrong, and my friend asked me, "Why are you such a black person?"

In addition to the theme of racial prejudice, "Brownies" makes another serious point. It shows the power of group thinking and the pressure to go along with the actions of the group to which one belongs, even against one's wishes and better judgment. People tend to do things when caught up in the pressures exerted by a group of peers, or even in a crowd of strangers, that they would not do if left to themselves. The example in the story is the narrator, Laurel. Laurel is more reflective than the other girls; she is the only one who questions whether the white girl actually made the insult, and she has no desire to fight. She wants to stay back with Daphne until Arnetta forces her to join in the planned assault. But then an interesting thing happens; as the girls approach the restrooms, Laurel finds that her thinking has changed: "Even though I didn't want to fight, was afraid of fighting, I felt I was part of the rest of the troop; like I was defending something." It should be noted that Laurel does not define what she is defending; it seems to be only a vague feeling, induced by her membership of a group that has collectively decided on a certain course of action. Had the fight broken out, no doubt the normally quiet, nonviolent Laurel would have done what was expected of her.

This small example serves as a kind of inverse parable of race relations between blacks and whites up to the later twentieth century: many African Americans, especially in the South, have had good reason to fear the violence of an unthinking white mob, ready to beat and even lynch a man whose skin happened to be a different color than theirs because of some perceived racial insult. "Brownies" offers no comforting conclusion that this deep-seated racism, that has existed for centuries, may by overcome. Laurel's remark, that "there was something mean in the world that [she] could not stop" is a sobering reminder from a young girl of the enduring weight of racial prejudice and the pain it continues to cause.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Brownies," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Research the history of affirmative action and the role it plays in social policy today. Is affirmative action justified as a way of helping those who have been disadvantaged, or does it amount to “reverse discrimination?” Should it be continued or abolished? Partner with one other student and make a class presentation in which one person argues for affirmative action and the other argues against it.

• How can racism in schools be addressed? Write an essay about your own school and how such issues are tackled. Have you experienced or observed any racist behavior at your school? Are relations between students of different races at your school a problem? Do white students and students of color tend to sit apart from one another in the cafeteria? Is this is so, why does it happen? What can be done to improve the situation?

• Read another story in Packer’s collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* and compare it to “Brownies.” What role does race play in the story you have selected? Are there any parallels between the two stories? Write an essay comparing the two.

• With another student, select and interview one or more persons in your town or neighborhood who is of a different race. Ask how they feel about the topic of race and their experience with it. Try and draw them out and listen to their story. Then in a class presentation talk about your findings and draw some conclusions about issues of race generally in your school, neighborhood, city, or state.

What Do I Read Next?

- Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a novel about a lonely black girl, Pecola Breedlove, living in Ohio in the 1940s. Bombarded by white, middle-class perceptions of beauty and value, Pecola becomes obsessed with having the bluest eyes. The novel shows what it is like to be a young black girl in a culture defined by white, middle-class values.

- *How to Breathe Underwater* (2003), by Julie Orringer, is a highly praised collection of stories about adolescent girls—the difficulties they face as they grow up and their ability to survive the challenges and successfully emerge into young adulthood.

- *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1982), by Toni Cade Bambara, contains ten stories about the lives of black people by one of the leading late twentieth-century African American writers.

- *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present* (1997), edited by Gloria Naylor, contains thirty-seven stories that together depict the diversity of black life. The anthology includes such well-established writers as Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Charles Johnson, Ralph Ellison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Ntozake Shange, as well as newer writers.

Further Study

D’Souza, Dinesh, *The End of Racism*, Free Press, 1996.

This is a controversial study by a conservative writer of the history, nature, and effects of racism, as well as contemporary approaches to it. Most approaches, in the author’s view, are misguided. He claims that racism is no longer an important factor in American life and cannot be blamed for black underachievement.

Reddy, Maureen T., ed., *Acts Against Racism: Raising Children in a Multiracial World*, Seal Press, 1996.

This anthology of essays by mothers and teachers is a resource for parents. Drawing on their own experience, the authors describe strategies by which racial prejudice can be countered in schools, colleges, and elsewhere.

Stern-LaRosa, Caryl, and Ellen Hofheimer Bettmann, *The Anti-Defamation League’s Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice*, Scholastic Paperbacks, 2000.

This practical book offers a guide to how children learn prejudice and how it can be unlearned. The authors offer strategies, role plays, and sample dialogues for parents and teachers. Some of the sections record and discuss true stories about children of all ages who have initiated or suffered from hateful words and actions.

Wright, Marguerite, *I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World*, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Wright argues that young children do not understand adult racial prejudice and that such color blindness must be taken advantage of in order to guide the development of a child’s self-esteem. Wright discusses issues such as the age at which children understand the concept of race; how adults can avoid instilling in children their own prejudices, and how schools can lessen the impact of racism.

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Waller, James, *Face to Face: The Changing State of Racism Across America*, Plenum Press, 1998, pp. 95, 100, 137, 166.

Wiegand, David, "Packer Blends Race, Lessons, and Craft," in *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9, 2003, p. M1.

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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 unnamed—for 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.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

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

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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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