Caroline's Daughters Short Guide

Caroline's Daughters by Alice Adams

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

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Characters

Surely Caroline and Ralph Carter, the vibrant, generous mid-sixties couple whose spirit keep the family in contact, are among the most successful middleage characters in literature. Adams's trademark use of the opening paragraph to create a model for her entire work is evident in the first image of the Carters: "impressive, even imposing . . . they are very large people, Caroline a tall fair woman, broad-faced, serene, with wideset green-blue eyes and heavy gray-blonde hair—and Ralph a towering, massive man." Their lives, however, have had ups and downs: "Ralph is Caroline's third husband, and she his fourth wife." Their warm, affirmative relationship, still very sexual, provides an anchor in the rather old-fashioned values they represent.

Ralph's death from stroke removes this connection with a more generous, open time in American life, leaving the moral universe open to the equivocal and selfserving values of those replacing him—the Roland Gallo's of the world.

Traditionally, in American fiction, characters, especially male characters, define themselves by becoming autonomous, by moving away from known contexts and relationships to test themselves against the unknown—war, the West, monsters.

Adams's characters, however, define themselves in terms of their past and their relationship to one another. More than just friends but not fully family either, the half sisters are bound together in complicated forms of rivalry, jealousy, and affection. Caroline negotiates a delicate balance between separation and connectedness with her daughters, finding that she must separate from all of them for a time after Ralph's death. Jill and Fiona share a bond and a set of values which are different from those of Sage and Portia, who join forces to protect themselves against their more rapacious siblings. Liza, set a little apart, observes and sometimes negotiates among the others. Although she seems the most like her mother ("both being large," Caroline thinks), her true nature is different, searching for fulfillment through her writing, as Caroline has through her connectedness with others. Sage's signature sculpture is five intertwined female figures, one larger than the others, and the reader surmises that Liza's fiction will probably reflect the family dance as well.

As their personal relationships are complicated and convoluted, so too are the women's relationships with men— frequently the same men. Sage is secretly in love with one her stepfather, Jim, while Roland Gallo has romanced first Sage, then Fiona, and finally Caroline herself.

Jill is conducting a rather perverse affair with Sage's philandering husband, handsome Noel. Except for Ralph and Liza's husband, Saul, men are either charismatic, faithless womanizers, distant and fearful of commitment, or gay. In the late 1980s world, where greed, betrayal, and faithlessness are commonalities, and abandonment, AIDS, and domestic violence casual occurrences, connections between characters are hard to maintain. Jill and Fiona never do overcome or even recognize their own brittle self-absorption and lack of emotional connection. The others continue to struggle for a

measure of fulfillment in work and personal relationships. Those who survive emotionally overcome their rage and pain to regard Roland Gallo, as Sage does, "as an exceptionally complicated, contradictory and humanly flawed person, whom she cares about, in his humanness."

Social Concerns/Themes

The real subject of Caroline's Daughters is the American landscape in the 1980s and its effects on those who came to maturity in it. Adams examines life in that gilded age through the perspective of a mother and her five daughters, their secrets and distances, and their concurrent desire for separation and connectedness. Characters are always conscious of their particular place in history—their past, and its role in their present. Caroline and her husband, Ralph Carter, are liberal-radical denizens of a bygone era, just back from five years in Portugal, and aging beautifully, if a little taken aback at the changes they have come home to.

Liza, the would-be writer, provides the most thoughtful insights; she remembers her 1960s childhood while watching her own children play in the sandbox in a park where she went to get stoned in high school, thinking how completely gone those days are, "swallowed by the strange Nixonian Seventies, and now the awful Eighties." Of the five half-sisters, Liza is the only one to have what might be called a stable family life. Sage, married to handsome, undependable Noel, is another sixties throwback, and Portia is Generation Xer, living in a cabin in Bolinas and housesitting for a living. Jill and Fiona are 1980s success stories, one a highly successful investment lawyer, and the other owner of a trendy Potrero Hill restaurant.

It is these two who illustrate the 1980s lifestyle. Fiona is a restaurateur who cannot cook, hates food, and weighs less than ninety pounds, and Jill turns thousand-dollar tricks on the side, in what she calls "The Game." Money, power, and sexuality all combine into an aphrodisiac for the 1980s. Money is proof of worthiness: "I did it because I got a thousand bucks a shot, and I knew I was worth it, and getting all that money helped me keep on thinking I'm terrific. Like buying hundred-buck panty-hose and two-fifty haircuts." All of this comes crashing down with the stock market on that fateful day when Jill lost almost a million, and her procurer appeared in the newspaper, along with the contents of his black book. Fiona's restaurant takes a downhill slide as its trend-following patrons move to a newer version, and Sage's husband, Noel, with whom Jill has been having an affair, smokes too much dope and drives off a curve at Stinson beach. As the selfabsorbed, self-congratulatory excesses of the 1980s come home to roost, others who had initially not fared so well under the new ethic come into the sunlight.

Sage, whose artistic career has finally taken off, divorces her lethally handsome, narcissistic husband Noel and takes up with Fiona's former business partner Stevie, with whom she is pregnant at the novel's end. Portia inherits a house from one of her housesitting clients and takes a woman lover. Liza herself finally embarks on the writing career she has long desired, having sold a story to a popular magazine.

The disastrous moral price of the decade, however, still must be paid. After the death of Ralph, her labor-activist husband, Caroline is caught in the sphere of influence of Ralph's total opposite, Roland Gallo, the seductive Sicilian gangster and emblem of 1980s ruthlessness, former lover of both Sage and Fiona, and of Caroline as well, if she

wished. Of Jill's involvement in the call girl operation, Caroline thinks "How selfish they all are, really—beautiful, selfish, spoiled, and greedy girls, San Francisco girls, perfect products of that spoiled and lovely city."

If prostitution, the Game, is the metaphor for 1980s greed and nihilism, the ubiquitous present of homeless street people is the mirror image of itself that privileged society cannot escape. Caroline herself is dogged by the specter of a mad bag-lady formerly married to one of Caroline's husband's colleagues, a woman Caroline once envied for her polished perfection in the role of doctor's wife.

That polished perfection overlaying a distraught, ravaged interior is another emblem of "the elegant Eighties," an image in which appearance masks a lack of substance, as with the novel's politicos, who are always comparing themselves to Ronald Reagan, and their campaigns, in which there are no issues, only images.

Salvaging this woman, the other half of herself, becomes an obsession with Caroline, who locates the woman's sister in Seattle, the northern, pure refuge from a soiled, broken San Francisco. Restored, Caroline ends the novel looking forward to a little more promising nineties which, as a survivor, she faces with equanimity, if not elation.

Techniques

Adams constructs her narrative as a series of vignettes interweaving scenes in the five women's lives, linked together by a consistent thread of authorial insight which reveals the secret thoughts of each.

The scenes are mirror images of one another—complementary encounters which form an interwoven history. Coincidence, surprise, and the logic of moral consequences combine into an intricate, active narrative where everything is related and contextual. Possession leads to loss—Fiona's restaurant, Jill's money, Noel's seductive good looks in the Bolinas crash—while poverty is rewarded with surprise success in Sage's New York show and Portia's house.

The San Francisco setting which Adams so loves, and the countryside around it, becomes an emblem of American life in that decade. Caroline and Ralph, returning from five years in Portugal, are in a sense no longer quite American, and the more European flavor they bring, their more relaxed, mellow attitude, is a comment on the frenetic activity around them. Europe is the place where Caroline rediscovers herself, and some secrets she would have preferred to keep hidden after Ralph's death, and the contrasting setting of Seattle, are necessary to create the distance and acceptance she finds at the novel's end.

Houses and gardens are important, too, including Fiona's restaurant, Jill's apartment, the house Sage and Noel are always fixing up, Portia's cabin and the places she house-sits, Liza's family setting, and Caroline's house, where they gather from time to time, especially during Ralph's illness. All of these surroundings have a personalized aura which reflects each character rather than conventional taste, but it is really taste, or bad taste, which defines the atmosphere of the 1980s, not only pretentious clothes and personal trappings, but the eternal talk about food, drink, and travel, the yuppie talk which all the characters make fun of at various times. It is the hallmark of the 1980s that fundamental things be appropriated to selfish interests. Jill is a lawyer and Fiona a restaurateur, and although a society beset by injustice, homelessness, and hunger is in need of both, its needs are not served by these institutions. While Fiona's skinny patrons pick and choose their way between lavish California-cuisine and expensive wines, others talk of food pantries and homeless shelters.

Food and flowers are always present.

The characters almost always meet over lunch, a meal, or even a picnic, and who controls these meals is frequently a site of conflict. When Noel takes over the celebration dinner which Portia has planned for Sage, the surprise meal Sage had planned for Jim is left behind in its bag.

The most prominent of the flowers are roses, always associated with Caroline and her voluptuous garden, an expression of her own life-affirming nature.

Key Questions

Novels which focus on family relationships are popular in group discussion, and many universities offer thematic courses on the family in literature. Discussion would probably focus on the social context of the novel, and the characters' search for autonomy within connectedness. Since Adams creates positive images of older Americans as her central characters, Caroline's Daughters would be an excellent choice for older readers or nontraditional students.

1. How does the relationship between Caroline and Ralph set a moral tone for the novel, and how do their daughters both respond and react to this image?

2. Examine the relationships between the five siblings-—their similarities and differences, their rivalries and commonalities.

3. How does Adams' create an image of the 1980s lifestyle, and what does she suggest about it? Is this image satiric, complacent, or somewhere in between?

4. Sexuality is a major metaphor in the novel—everyone thinks and even talks about it almost all the time. How is this an expression of the characters' different personalities and relationships?

5. What is the role of creativity—literary, artistic, or domestic—in the characters' developing sense of self?

6. How does Adams use the extreme contrast between rich and poor, opulence and deprivation, characteristic of the 1980s to comment on her characters and their times?

7. How do Caroline's trips—to Italy and Seattle—contribute to her attempt to come to terms with Ralph's death and her own life?

8. How does Adams present the challenges and rewards of growing older in our society? How does this compare with the popular image?

Literary Precedents

Adams's literary precedents would seem to be those cited by Liza—"the heavy Victorians, Mrs. Gaskell and Gissing and Trollope, Dickens—and further down the line, Henry James and Edith Wharton, Elizabeth Bowen—and of course Virginia Woolf." The Victorians provide the backdrop of a social world driven by manners and the hidden imperatives of the human heart, combined with the modern writers' emphasis on motivation and introspection. The California family saga set against the backdrop of the 1980s was popularized in Howard Fast's Lavette family chronicles, The Immigrants (1977; see separate entry), Second Generation (1979), The Establishment (1980), and TheLegay (1981), and tales of fast-living Valley girls take their roots from Jacqueline Suzann's Valley of the Dolls (1966; see separate entry). But Adams brought a new look to California characters by highlighting the growing recognition of a specifically female psyche rooted in relationships and contexts rather than individualism and autonomy, especially among older men and women with vibrant spirits.

Related Titles

Although Caroline's Daughters is not part of a sequel, it does mirror many of Adams's familiar themes and motifs. The celebration of a happy marriage between mature individuals appears in Second Chances, along with the themes of aging, life's losses and rewards, and the importance of friendship. Caroline's Daughters explores the mother-daughter bond fully, and is a departure from most of Adams's women, who are typically child-free and alienated from their mothers. Here, however, the strength of the family across generations is celebrated in the face of a culture which devalues the past and scoffs at traditional bonds, especially in contemporary California where everyone comes from somewhere else. Caroline's Daughters continues to develop Adams's recurring themes of change and self-discovery as her women break free of paralyzing fixations on money and success, and revitalize themselves through new work, relationships, and self-discovery, as reflected in Caroline's growing independence after Ralph's death. As in Superior Women (1984; see separate entry), which follows four friends over four decades, Caroline's daughters grow simultaneously as they are drawn to, then separated from one another.

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