

# Chilly Scenes of Winter Short Guide

## Chilly Scenes of Winter by Ann Beattie

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# Characters

Chilly Scenes of Winter has one protagonist, Charles, who pursues Laura in various comic or bittersweet ways. There are no real antagonists, however, nor even any mean-spirited characters, only a series of portraits of attenuated survivors of past emotional scars or disappointments. As Charles lives out his dreary coming-of-age, he seeks companionship primarily from Sam, an unemployed friend with a perpetual cold. Both are bemused at the passing of time and unable to come to terms with it.

The novel is filled with contrasts.

Charles is employed and has inherited a house which he barely occupies; Sam is an unemployed salesman. Charles's sister Susan has gone to college to find a doctor to marry; she dotes on her brother. His friend Pam is a lesbian in search of a soul-mate beyond the pale of conventional society. Charles's mother is crazy and suicidal, his stepfather obsessed with Turtle Wax, and Laura is a cipher. What plot tension the book contains depends upon suspense in the outcome of the romantic quest and in the way Charles will handle the relatively conventional demands made upon him by job and family.

But the novel is not so much climactic as it is episodic. Its loose linear structure in present-tense aptly illuminates characters who drift through life in a vacuum, largely without purpose once the passing of the 1960s takes from them whatever political or social adversaries of an authoritarian nature they once confronted or projected.

## Social Concerns

The way that this novel dramatizes the disjointed lives of the 1960s generation as they come of age painfully in the 1970s makes it an excellent novel for study, either as a sociological document or as a bittersweet valentine to a lost age. It is also an excellent example of the formless loosely structured contemporary novel which deemphasizes plot in favor of situation and maps of everyday moments exhaustively rendered.

Reviewers in the 1970s generally pointed out how effectively the book captures the despondency, aimlessness and resignation of characters forced to compromise with their social commitment of the 1960s in order to survive the transition into adulthood. Beattie claims that she went out of her way to say something in the book about the consequences of the end of the decade.

Chilly Scenes of Winter's central plot focuses on Charlie, who is waiting for Laura, a former girlfriend. She is married, although not happily, and Charles, twenty-seven, works at a tedious job, hangs out with his old friend Sam and otherwise kills time as he waits, increasingly obsessed, for her to return to him. Although Beattie fastidiously avoids symbolism and metaphor, Charles and the other characters through sheer accretion of detail become representative of their cohort, reflecting the passivity and alienation of a generation of overachievers faced with dwindling prospects and a need to submit to the careerism and the conventional values they had previously rejected.

Beattie's plain style, her method of accumulating detail without emphasis, works as an objective correlative of a consumer society in which personal whimsy and idiosyncrasy seem as superficial and aleatory as a previous generation's conformity. Her characters have no real values, only a sort of nostalgic consumerism of the icons of the 1960s — Bob Dylan lyrics, slogans, marijuana. (Significantly, marijuana, not cocaine, is the drug of choice even in the later fiction.)



# Techniques

Beattie's most noticeable technique is her plain style. She uses simple declarative sentences and an accumulation of facts and detail, presented in neutral tones at an unforced pace, to render how time passes without real significance or fulfillment. Her dialogue, flat, full of non sequiturs and whimsy, reinforces this sense of aimlessness and low-level depression. In addition, she is constantly dramatizing the ways in which the flotsam of popular culture become part and parcel of character in an age without moral or spiritual values which are shared. Characters use song lyrics, for example, as shorthand notations on their emotional states of being or intellectual lethargy. Often these lyrics serve to create mood and to contrast the glory of the past with the trivia of the present.

In Chilly Scenes of Winter her passion for detail can become mind-numbing, but her deadpan humor relieves the sameness of the prose and allows the whimsy of her characters to surface.

Charles's stepfather, for instance, is a big fan of Turtle Wax, and his attachment to the product comes to define him.

Charles is, only himself, and his unmetaphorical treatment suggests a world where larger meaning does not exist. The bits and pieces of information which give substance to Charles, however, come to be representative of his peers, who live equally unanchored lives under the constant bombardment of popular culture. Beattie's use of the present tense emphasizes the unanchored nature of these lives.

Such unobtrusive techniques undercut Charles in his adolescent certainty that getting Laura will make everything all right, that he will now be able to settle into an ordinary life with her.

Beattie concludes the novel, as she does so many of her short fictions, with a summarizing image rather than a resolution or denouement. This image of a snowflake, given voice by Laura, suggests the impermanence of their relationship and its inevitable waning.

# Themes

Beattie maintains that her work is about chaos. In those terms Charles is controlling the disillusionment of his life and times by engaging in a romantic quest. Chaos is the consequence of overexpectations created by too much personal freedom and not enough historical awareness, stereotyped characteristics of the members of the 1960s generation. Charles has never really wanted anything until he wants Laura.

In the 1970s his cohorts have lost all sense of common purpose and have few traditional ambitions, but love is still a worthy goal. Once it is achieved, however, the need for freedom asserts itself, and therefore *Chilly Scenes of Winter* ends on an inconclusive note, despite the fact that Charles does win Laura.

Two symptoms of underlying chaos are dislocation and displacement. The idea that these are inevitable consequences of the Baby Boom generation's roller coaster ride through the 1960s is one of Beattie's recurring themes. In *Distortions* (1976), for instance, a wife in "Four Stories about Lovers" no longer talks to her husband but gets up from beside him late at night to mail him letters. In "A Vintage Thunderbird" from *Secrets and Surprises* (1978), her second collection, the commitments made to lovers and friends are as superficial as the emotional affection projected to an automobile. Charles, Sam, and Laura in *Chilly Scenes of Winter* all have a sense of living in a media-saturated world where everything is of equal value. Charles manages in his bewildered way to shake off his inertia and passivity to pursue Laura, but even his romantic quest is curiously resigned to antic melancholy.

# Adaptations

Chilly Scenes of Winter was made into a motion picture in 1979 and released under the title *Head Over Heels* (directed by Joan Micklin Silver, released by United Artists in 1979). In 1984 it was re-released under the original title in a newly-edited version (directed by Joan Micklin Silver, released by United Artists Classics).

The original version was an attempt to make a popular although bleak novel into an upbeat comedy starring John Heard and Mary Beth Hurt. To that end the title was changed to *Head Over Heels* and the ending was revised.

Instead of the tentative inconclusive image which ended the book, the movie tags on a happy-ever-after hug between Laura and Charles.

Happily, this misguided version was fixed. Ann Beattie made a brief cameo appearance in the movie and thoroughly approved of the re-released version, which became a comedy about depression and was textured to mirror the whimsical and inconclusive nature of the book. Joan Micklin Silver, the director, had control of the edited version, and commentators were nearly unanimous in their praise of it.



## Key Questions

Those who like Beattie's work tend to like it very much but also tend to be unsure as to why they like it. Those who dislike Beattie's work tend to detest it. This should make for lively discussions of any of her works, as well as *Chilly Scenes of Winter*.

Those who are unfamiliar with the social issues of the early 1970s may find this book tough going; this problem could be alleviated by presentation of the background of the era, particularly noting the youth rebellion of the 1960s and general disillusionment felt by many people as they came of age as adults in the 1970s. In this context, Charles's pursuit of love is not just sad or even pathetic, it represents an effort to define oneself in a positive way in an era in which social definitions were vague or contradictory.

1. What are the costs for growing up in *Chilly Scenes of Winter*? Do different characters pay different prices?
2. Was the youthful social commitment of the 1960s exaggerated?
3. Is *Chilly Scenes of Winter* a self-indulgent portrait of a 1960s existing more in the imagination than in reality?
4. Where is chaos at work in this novel? What is its importance?
5. Is everything of equal value in the world of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*?
6. Getting your hands on copies of both versions of *Head Over Heels* (the motion picture version of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*) would probably be difficult, but a comparison of the two endings of the motion picture and the ending of the novel could make for a lively discussion. Why do motion picture makers often change sad or inconclusive endings in novels and other fiction into happy ones for their movies? Would you have done what the motion picture makers did if you had made *Head Over Heels*? Which of the three endings in the case of *Chilly Scenes of Winter* and *Head Over Heels* is the best one?
7. How do love and freedom relate to each other in the novel? Are they at odds?
8. Are events in *Chilly Scenes of Winter* too slow?
9. What purpose does Beattie's technique of accumulating details serve in the novel? Do they help define any issues or any characters? Do they slow the novel down too much, or do the novel's humorous passages make the details easy to absorb?
10. Does *Chilly Scenes of Winter* falsify history? Is its portrait of social history accurate in its details?
11. Can you make a case for categorizing *Chilly Scenes of Winter* as a comic novel?



## Literary Precedents

Donald Barthelme developed the art of transposing cultural artifacts from a fragmented society into ironic commentaries on the contemporary world, and Thomas Pynchon turned surrealist juxtapositions and breakdowns of narrative into fictions which suggest that the world operates according to random mechanisms. Like them, Beattie in *Chilly Scenes of Winter* suggests that contemporary life is determined by forces beyond the control of her fictional creations. In her case she uses a super-realism or minimalism, an accretion of flat statements and non sequiturs. Unlike traditional determinism, this minimalism implies that these forces are chaotic and random, more the consequence of Madison Avenue and pluralization than of any natural selection or economic law.

In subject matter several commentators see similarities between Beattie and John Cheever, John Updike, and J. D. Salinger. All four of these writers have created characters who inhabit a particular region, the suburban habitats of northeastern United States, and who suffer from free-floating anxiety. Their lives embody a contrast, either directly stated or implied, between the way things are and the way they were in an imagined Golden Age. These characters are restless and unhappy with no material reason for their sadness. They are unable to articulate their pain. Charles, for example, has the materialistic goodies and the security promised by the American Dream — a steady if unsatisfying job, his own house — but it means nothing. Beattie's characters have been cut loose from any hope of moral or communal significance. They live in particular places but these places have lost the power to signify, even superficially, so that her characters, after "time off" for the imagined euphoria of the 1960s, become the resigned heirs of the cultural emptiness embodied in the work of the older writers.

## Related Titles

Because *Distortions* was released simultaneously with *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, several commentators have regarded it as a companion volume.

Both the novel and most of the stories are written in the present tense in a deadpan declarative style; both render characters nostalgic for the 1960s and resigned to the 1970s; both rely on non sequiturs to convey a whimsical and essentially passive attitude towards contemporary life; both doggedly maintain a cool (occasionally frigid) persona which avoids sentimentality (and sometimes sentiment); both display a dispassionate control which subordinates individuality and story to mood and nuance.

Where commentators distinguish between the two books, they generally prefer the novel to the stories, citing, first, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*'s sustained narrative which incorporates disjointed details rather than isolates them and, second, the deadpan humor which accumulates in the service of character in the novel, of aesthetic doctrine in the stories. The stories annoy commentators who find them static rather than profluent or simply absurd in their use of non sequiturs. Critics more sympathetic with *Distortions* point to the cool style and flat sentences as Hemingwayesque, and claim that a sympathetic center lies beneath the dispassionate style. The understatement and distrust of over-emotional statement become a means of ordering confusion and chaos, a way of solving a classic aesthetic conundrum: how to render confusion and boredom while avoiding confusing or boring the reader.

Even this disagreement, however, is as often as not a generational one.

Younger commentators or those sympathetic to the experience of the 1960s generation believe that in both books Beattie has refused to falsify experience by imposing upon it the traditional climactic structure of fiction.

# Copyright Information

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