Compromising Positions Short Guide

Compromising Positions by Susan Isaacs

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Characters

Judith Singer, the protagonist, is a I delightfully modern Pandora, motivated by insatiable curiosity in the face of strong deterrents but, unlike her literary forerunner, she is willing to endanger her comfortable world in order to learn about herself, and not just to discover a secret. Armed with the gift of repartee and the ability to analyze data and people, she probes the secrets of her community with flair and humor, testing her discoveries against her own notions of life and love. She is a three-dimensional, unique heroine of modern fiction, whose superficial similarities with other protagonists of women's novels ultimately disappear through her highly personal and witty observations.

One reviewer termed the heroine "the alienated housewife's fantasy of action." Clearly, Judith Singer is a breakthrough as modern feminist-cum-detective heroine.

Since this novel is at once a detective story, a light comedy of manners and a Bildungsroman or novel of development, all of the other characters, although well-drawn and three-dimensional, serve primarily as foils to the heroine's quest for self-realization. The family of the murder victim — stereotypical Long Island middle-class Jewish people concerned with appearances, upward mobility and assimilation — mirror what the heroine could become if she were not the questioning, restless individual she is. A militantly Catholic neighbor who busies herself with local politics, the anti-abortion movement, making bread and sewing her children's clothing is a model of the mother-as-saint role that Judith rejects for herself; a Southern woman free-lance journalist and friend of the protagonist who indulges regularly in casual extramarital affairs provides Judith with a certain model of happiness and enables her to come to intellectual and emotional terms with her sexuality. Her husband — a genuinely bright, ambitious man whose priorities have shifted from the study of comparative literature to the wooing of clients for his family's public relations firm, at the expense of communication with his wife at all levels — symbolizes the lost dreams of the heroine's youth as well as the bewildered post-1960s man struggling to deal with the ramifications of women's liberation. Finally, the investigating officer and love interest — not the uncouth gorilla whom Judith expects, but rather an articulate and sensitive man who happens to be a policeman — serves as a catalyst to Judith's long-denied needs as woman and individual. At the same time as these characters advance the surface plot (the detective story), they illuminate various facets of the heroine's personality and provide her with a wide variety of choices.

Social Concerns

In this, her first novel, Isaacs touches on a variety of issues which are paramount to many contemporary women writers' works. Foremost among these is the theme of female autonomy and self-realization. The novel's spirited protagonist, Judith Singer, is a bright, intellectual woman who abandoned pursuit of a Ph.D. in American politics when she married, and now finds herself ten years later a bored, Long Island housewife. When she becomes involved in trying to solve a murder in her community, she encounters the steadfast opposition of her husband who, as the novel unfolds, seems less a tyrant than a man deeply troubled by his wife's choice of fulfillment. The detective aspect of the novel is therefore both a metaphor of the heroine's quest for fulfillment and autonomy, as well as the vehicle of this process.

Other typical "women's" themes include the right to sexual happiness; the importance of friendship, particularly with other women; and the joys and constraints of motherhood. Concerning the latter, Isaacs goes to great lengths to avoid condemning motherhood as a trap (in fact, she has contributed numerous nonfiction articles to Parents magazine, and is described by an interviewer as "committed to fulltime motherhood until her children [are] grown"). Rather, she devotes lavish detail to the suburban mother's day, ranging from shopping and meal preparation to play and conversation with the children, often with an eye to nonsexist upbringing. Despite certain positive aspects of the routine, she is quick to underline that women, even when they choose motherhood, need adult conversation and interests to avoid becoming children themselves.

As Judith becomes more involved with detection, her husband worries that she is endangering the children; what she is endangering, however, is his own comfortable world in which the wife tends to the home and children, allowing him to retreat to the office and return to a haven of tranquility for morale boosting and ego-stroking. As the division between his two worlds narrows, he must begin to think of the children as his responsibility and not hers alone, and, more discomforting, he is forced to view his wife as an autonomous partner who can and does make choices that conflict with his.

On another level, Compromising Positions is a humorous indictment of the American Dream as represented by suburbia and the nuclear, one-career family. Career ambition and financial security are shown to be hollow if unaccompanied by self-realization. In this respect, Isaacs portrays the dilemma of the Yuppie generation: financial security and family responsibilities have not erased nostalgia for the freedom associated with the past; political conservatism has not entirely obliterated liberal idealism; the coming of age of the children of the 1960s has been accompanied by nagging doubts about the value of success and the fear that past dreams have been betrayed. As the heroine penetrates the facade of her clean, suburban community and discovers the sordid realities that convention has masked, she realizes that she too has been guilty of accepting her life without question, that within the perfect wife and mother there lives a person with deep needs and desires that her present life cannot fill. Although at the end she is uncertain about her future, she is optimistic because she has learned to make

choices as an autonomous adult, even at the potential expense of commitments to others.

Techniques

As a detective story, Compromising Positions functions well as a "straight" story and as a gentle spoof of the genre. The straightforward plot centers on the question: "Who murdered Bruce Fleckstein, the Long Island periodontist whose income was greatly enhanced by blackmail and pornography?" The spoof focuses on the same question so, depending on whether one reads for the superficial plot, or chooses to stop to laugh at the witty barbs that pepper the novel, it can be either or both. The title, which derives from the "compromising positions" of many of Fleckstein's photographed paramours, underscores the humorous thrust of the novel and, at a deeper, more serious level, points to the moral dilemma of its heroine. In her use of a double plot — the detective story and the heroine's quest for fulfillment — Isaacs avoids the trap of having produced a shallow, best seller page-turner; by her massive dose of humor, she addresses serious issues without becoming maudlin or didactic. In short, Isaacs proves that anything can be serious or comic, depending on the writer's, the narrator's or the reader's point of view.

Adaptations

Compromising Positions was made into a motion picture in 1985 (a Warner Brothers Production, directed by Frank Perry). Susan Isaacs wrote the screenplay and, although she could not render the complexity of her novel, she turned the detective story into a fastpaced and humorous film. The movie starred an impressive array of quality actors and actresses, with Susan Sarrandon as the protagonist, Edward Herrman as the husband, Raul Julia as the detective, and Judith Ivey, Deborah Rush, Mary Beth Hurt, and Anne De Salvo in strong supporting roles. The film received enthusiastic reviews and was even rated "extraordinary" by the Screening Committee of the National Board Ratings.

Key Questions

In her focus on ordinary people caught in extraordinary situations — and coming out ahead — Susan Isaacs's novels present a generally optimistic view of life. She is also a sharp observer of contemporary mores and typical problems of an era. For this reason the books hold up a provocative mirror to each of the decades that they're set in, as well as to concerns in some readers' lives.

1. In Compromising Positions, Judith Singer's new ventures provoke uneasiness and complaints on her husband's part. At book's end, the future of their marriage is still in doubt. What do you anticipate will happen between them afterwards? If we could look at Judith ten or twenty years later, what would she be doing with her life?

2. Susan Isaacs's success with her novels has not been repeated in her movie-related projects. Is she just the victim of bad luck on the latter? Or are there crucial elements in her fiction that do not translate well to the screen?

3. Isaacs's novels have been grand commercial successes. Critics tend to disparage Susan Isaacs as just an author of popular tales with pretensions to being a serious writer. Does it matter where a novel falls on the continuum between "formula fiction" and "real literature"? Where would you place Isaacs's works on this scale?

Literary Precedents

Compromising Positions is an excellent example of how an author can combine such disparate genres as the detective story and the Bildungsroman or novel of development. As a detective writer, Isaacs has been likened to Chandler, and her heroine labeled a mature Nancy Drew as well as "Sam Spade in pantyhose. Three parts Bloomingdales and one part de Beauvoir . . ." In fact, there is much to be said for Isaacs' choice of genre. As the great detective writer Dorothy Sayers has pointed out, few professional female detectives populate the genre, but the amateur detective holds a respectable place.

Many women protagonists, from Christie's Miss Marple and Tuppence Berensford to Josephine Tate's Miss Pym to the contemporary Kate Fansler created by Amanda Cross, have been interested in crime solving because they have a genuine interest in and ability to understand people. It is significant that none of these women is particularly drawn to "technical" aspects of a case (although they are capable of understanding them) but rather focus on psychological analyses of others, much in the French tradition of the detective novel. And, although not professionals, their amateur, unorthodox methods yield results that are often more satisfying than those of professional (male) protagonists.

Within modern women's fiction, the "quest for identity" novel is also a well established genre. Starting, perhaps, with Doris Lessing's "Martha Quest" series, this genre embraces such writers as Erica Jong (Fear of Flying, 1973), Marilyn French (The Women's Room, 1977), or Rita Mae Brown (Rubyfruit Jungle, 1973), to name but a few. All of the heroines of these novels are set against the intellectual backdrop of modern feminism (in this respect, one reviewer refers to "an occasionally strident note of knee-jerk feminism" in Compromising Positions) and, as fictional representations of the somewhat confusing situation of modern women, they each contribute interesting and unique solutions.

Related Titles

The issues addressed in Close Relations (1982) are, in many ways, the perfect counterpart of those raised in Compromising Positions. Whereas the first novel focuses on the situation of the bright suburban homemaker/mother who is bored and restless because she has so few outlets for her needs and talents, Close Relations concentrates on the multitude of problems that the single career woman faces. Among these are career pressures; the difficulty in maintaining a positive self-image and feeling pride in one's achievements when these are belittled by one's family; strong sexual drives that are often denied a satisfying outlet; the fear of rejection and loneliness that compels some women to settle for "second best" in a love relationship, particularly as they reach their midthirties; doubts about one's physical desirability; and family pressure, not only to marry, but to marry the "right" man; that is, a man from one's social or ethnic background.

These themes are continued in Almost Paradise (1984), Shining Through (1988), Magic Hour (1991), After All These Years (1993), and Lily White (1996).

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